Sound The Bugle

by Acherona, trulywicked

Summary

He's now a soldier. Fighting in a secret battle to free himself and his son from the web of a madman holding all the cards. It's a fight that might get better once Harry realizes the truth and shoves Sirius' nose in it.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Here we have the start of a new collab between me and the amazing Acherona. This is an EPIC length fic. Though most chapters will not be as long as this first one. And just so you know, **WE FUCK CANON OVER MASSIVELY.** No really, canon has very, very little application here. Mostly we just used our favorite bits as guidelines.

**WARNING:** Angst, lots of it, Male Pregnancy, torture, unlawful imprisonment and experimentation, infant in peril, Evil Dumbledore. Does Snape having a heart require a warning?

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Now hold onto your hats people, it's gonna be a bumpy ride.

"Excuse me?" Remus stared at Madam Pomfrey, vaguely aware that his jaw was somewhere along floor level and his entire body shaking. It couldn't be true, it just couldn't be. Unconsciously a scarred, long fingered hand went to his flat stomach and pressed over it.

"I said Mr. Lupin, that you are around eight weeks pregnant." Poppy repeated in her no nonsense tone as she continued to look the young man over. He'd come to her when his stomach flu wouldn't go away since St. Mungo's would find out about his...situation if he went there and then they'd refuse to treat him. No dark creatures were allowed treatment at St. Mungo’s hospital. Poppy didn't mind, she'd cared for and patched up Remus Lupin since he was a scrawny shrimp of an eleven year old boy and she wouldn't stop now if he needed her.

Remus looked at her with wide eyes. Yeah, the news didn't sound better the second time around, he still found it almost impossible to believe it. He was a twenty-one year old werewolf living in the midst of war. He'd seen James and Lily do it. Harry was a wonderful baby and Remus loved him like he was his own but he still saw how hard it was for them, living hidden and raising a child.

Eight weeks, well that was probably the last time he and Sirius'd had sex. These days they were just living in the same apartment, no one could really call what they had a relationship, not anymore. It was late October now and the amount of missions Dumbledore sent him on only increased. He hated that he wasn't allowed to tell Sirius about his orders to infiltrate the werewolf packs around Britain; he hated the look of disappointment and suspicion he saw in those lovely gray eyes every time he came home still reeking of dark magic and death.

Still it wasn't like Sirius told him what he was up to either. Always out on that motorcycle of his, only coming home after Remus was already in bed pretending to be asleep.

"How is it possible?" Remus flushed as Poppy raised an eyebrow. "I mean I know how it's possible but how can I carry a child? How will it survive the change each moon? How will I know I won't just rip into myself and tear it out when I'm the wolf?"

"Oh my sweet boy." Poppy moved to sit with him on the edge of the hospital bed. "You and I presume young Mr. Black are both very, very gifted wizards. You each have magical supplies most wizards only dream about. This babe has already survived one change and as long as you are careful the rest of the month, eat right and stay out of harm’s way there is no reason it shouldn't..."
survive the rest either. And don't worry about the wolf on this account, no wolf would hurt their cub, it won't happen."

Remus nodded and got dressed in a daze as Poppy went on about diet and prenatal potions he should drink to stay healthy. His mind was in chaos, the world around him was in turmoil, Voldemort's shadow growing longer with each day and Remus had no idea how to tell Sirius.

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When he got back to their small apartment in London's outskirts it was empty as usual. Remus walked around the small rooms, taking in their crates and plank coffee table, the worn couch they'd gotten from Lily's parents and the narrow bed. For a short time Remus had been so happy here. He and Sirius had loved, laughed, argued and lived in these rooms, sharing everything but these days it was just empty rooms, silence and suspicion here.

Remus tried to floo Lily and James, needing someone to talk to but of course their floo was blocked, Remus didn't know what he'd been thinking. The Potters were in hiding, there was no way they would have an open floo. He couldn't get a hold of Peter either and just as always Remus had no idea where Sirius was or when he would come home.

Feeling worry and fear coil in his stomach Remus curled up on the old couch and closed his eyes. Wishing he could turn the time back to when he'd been happy. It wasn't that he was unhappy about the baby though he still found it difficult to believe. It was just that with a war being played out in silence and a relationship on the rocks Remus felt like he was drifting in space. There was nothing to anchor him to the ground anymore and it scared him to death.

Not long after he'd fallen asleep the door opened and Sirius stepped in, he leaned back against the door and studied Remus, taking in the worn, tired look even though he was sleeping and the fetal position he was in. Remus hadn't looked that bad in years, not since the Marauders had all gone for their first full moon run together. He longed to go forward and scoop him up into his arms but he couldn't. Not when Remus would disappear for days on end and come back smelling like a Death Eater. There was a spy slipping information to Voldemort's merry minions and Sirius had the awful feeling it was Remus. What else could explain the disappearances and lingering air of dark magic around him.

He slid down the door, sitting with his back against it. How had they come to this point? When had it all gone pear-shaped? Maybe if he could put his finger on the right point that things started changing for the worse he'd be able to stop the slippery slide because just the thought of really, eternally losing Remus hurt like someone reaching into his chest and digging claws into his heart. He wanted the fun and happy times back, when Remus would be baking in the kitchen and he'd try to sneak in and ended up with a bag of flour in the face and they start wrestling until it turned from wrestling into an impromptu lovemaking session. He wanted that back but every day he felt like he was losing his Moony to the wilds or worse to the Death Eaters.

His own tasks didn't make it any easier. Every day he was in on a raid against petty little Death Eaters who weren't worth the time it took to process them. Rarely did any of the big fish like Malfoy or his loony cousin Bellatrix surface to be caught. He kept hoping they would be, just one high ranked Death Eater to reveal the location of Voldemort's hidey hole was all they needed but they stayed out of the net. He wanted to share his frustration with Remus, to groan and whine about it and have competent fingers stroke soothingly through his hair as Remus just let him unload but again he couldn't risk it. Dumbledore warned him that if Remus was the spy then they'd lose even the little tiny fish they netted, they'd be forewarned and run or worse, set up an effective counter to
a raid and they'd lose Aurors in the fight. He wished there was something, some way to know the truth so he didn't have to ride himself to exhaustion to avoid coming home to questions he couldn't answer and things could go back to how they were.

When Remus woke up it was dark, the tacky neon sign across the street cast blue and green tinted shadows across the floor, reminding Remus sickly about the color of the killing curse. He felt his stomach roll and this time it wasn't because of the life growing inside him. At the reminder of that Remus hand went to his stomach even as his eyes slid to the horrid coo coo clock on the wall. The one Sirius had bought at a garage sale just because it was so ugly. Remus took in the time and then his own scarred hands. It was funny, for someone so beautiful Sirius surely liked to surround himself with the ugly and the broken. It shouldn't be that way, Sirius should be with people and things as beautiful, as shining as he was.

It was close to four in the morning and since he was still on the couch Remus had no idea if Sirius had come home at all. Since he was already awake, he might as well get his patched and worn bag out of the closet and get himself ready. Dumbledore had owled him the new pack he was to visit a few days ago. He couldn't not go just because of the news he'd gotten. Remus didn't want to go, he didn't want to see the blood and the hurt and the darkness, didn't want their children near it even when protected inside him but he knew he had to. Dumbledore assured him that he was playing a key part in the war even if he had to do it in secret and silence. Remus watched how this wore tore at Sirius and James, creating shadows in their eyes and when given a chance to help, even in a small way Remus had jumped on it. Because of his wolf he couldn't be an Auror, or much of anything really but he could do this and so he would see it through even though he cringed at the thought.

With a groan he hoisted himself up from the couch to pack his bag. First of all though, he needed tea so he padded toward their little kitchen nook and their beloved kettle.

Sirius looked up from where he was already sitting with the paper and tea of his own and studied Remus. Even after getting sleep he looked like death warmed over. He flicked a thumb at the kettle, "It's already brewed and strong."

"Thank you." Remus tried to get over his shock at seeing Sirius at home and awake at this hour. It was difficult to remember when they'd actually spoken to each other. He went over and poured tea into a large clay cup knowing even before he took a sip that it would be brewed exactly as he liked it. "I didn't know you were home." Cautiously he moved to sit opposite Sirius at their small, square table.

"I got in around midnight." It was a short comment but more information than he'd given Remus in some time. "Having trouble sleeping?"

"Yeah." Remus wanted to say that the bed was too big and empty without Sirius next to him, that the couch was easier because at least there Remus didn't expect or wait for Sirius to roll over and wrap his arms around him like he used to. "You too?"

He nodded. He always had trouble sleeping these days. It was too cold in the bed and he had nightmares about the things he saw Death Eaters do when Remus wasn't there to help chase them away. "It's been a while since we've been out and had an actual meal, feel like hitting the Chinese place tonight?" Maybe he could start mending the rift that had bloomed even if he couldn't really put complete trust in Remus.

"I'd love to." And he really would. Remus wanted to go eat with Sirius and have the chance to talk
to him...Tell him about the baby more than anything. "But I can't. I have to leave this morning; don't know when I'll be back. Maybe we can do it then?" He tried to keep both his despair and hope out of his voice.

Sirius' hands tightened on his cup but he didn't snap or snarl, it was a rain check, he told himself, not a complete rejection. "Alright, when you come back from, wherever then."

"I want to have that meal with you Sirius and when I come back we do need to talk. I have something I need to tell you." Please don't give up on us... Remus didn't say it but he hoped Sirius got it anyway. He finished his tea and spent a few extra moments just looking at him...Lover? Burning his features into his mind before he stood, went over to the sink and rinsed his cup out and then went to the closet to get his bag.

Sirius' fingers trembled on his cup and he hoped that whatever Remus had to tell him was good news, not what he was dreading. He got up and met him by the door, "Be careful?"

"Always." Remus replied and then before thinking any further he grabbed Sirius and pressed his lips against the other man's. "You too, you're rash and hotheaded but please, please be careful." Remus hoisted the bag up his shoulder, released Sirius and slipped out the door.

Sirius braced a hand on the wall and hung his head, his lips tingling from the kiss. "Please Moony, please don't let me be right about what I'm thinking, please let me just be an idiot for even considering it." It was a whisper that fell onto no-one's ears as Remus was already long out of earshot. He should probably go and take a shower then try and get a little rest. Who knew what the next day would bring.

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Remus was bone tired, tired and disgusted by the things he'd seen. He didn't know exactly how but it was clear that Britain's werewolves were on Voldemort's side. He had promised them rights, freedom and a life without shame or hiding. If Remus didn't have Sirius and his friends, if he hadn't seen the horrors of Voldemort's ideal up close he might even have fallen for it himself.

Remus hoped Sirius was home that he would have the chance to tell him about the baby, during the week he'd been gone he had come to terms with his pregnancy and now the life inside him was the most precious thing in the world. If Sirius and he sat down and really talked things out then they could patch things up couldn't they? Remus hoped so. He would tell Dumbledore he couldn't go on anymore missions. His baby was more important to him than wolves that didn't want to be saved. It was the day before Halloween and the weather certainly fit the mood, misty rain and dreary darkness. Remus sighed as he turned the key and stepped into the apartment. Sirius sat bolt upright on the couch where he'd been dozing after a truly hellish raid. They'd lost two Aurors and it tore at his heart and made his reflexes jittery, his wand was out and pointing at the figure in the doorway before he even registered being awake. He blinked twice, "Moony?"

"It's me." Remus replied and tried not to let it get to him that Sirius didn't lower his wand instantly even when he'd identified himself. "I'm sorry if I woke you." He tossed the bag on the floor and tore at his blood stained and reeking clothes, not wanting them to touch his skin for a minute longer.

"What did James put on as a dare in third year at Hogwarts that had us calling him Nelly for three months?"
"Alice's school uniform complete with lacy knee high socks, miniskirt and kneazle printed knickers. Peter didn't realize it was James at first and asked him out on a date to Puddifoots." Remus continued to peel his clothes off with distaste as he answered Sirius' question. It hurt but he supposed it was a necessary action in this times.

Sirius dropped his wand and got up to just close his arms tightly around Remus, burying his face in the other's shoulder, "Welcome home Moony."

"It's so good to be home Pads." Remus leaned into the embrace even though he was still dirty, unclean, hugging Sirius back and running his hands up and down Sirius' leanly muscled back.

"Gods," he clung hard to Remus, ignoring the stench of blood and dark magic and taking comfort from the solid presence of his Moony. He'd remember to be suspicious tomorrow; right now he needed what had felt real and sane all through his youth and start of adulthood.

"Shh, it's okay Pads, things will be okay." Remus really didn't know if things would be okay because at the moment nothing seemed okay but he said what Sirius needed to hear. Sirius was so warm and solid and real against him and it made Remus' throat close up and his eyes prickle. Right here, in his arms was the reason he fought, that he went on these shitty missions and tried to cling to a sliver of hope that this darkness would lift soon. Remus loved his friends, of course he did but Sirius was his everything.

Sirius turned his head and caught Remus' mouth with his. He needed this. One of his comrades had exploded before his eyes and now he needed to connect with his lover. Not sexually, he was too tired for that but he needed a connection. Desperately. "Moony, my Moony, my Remus, you'd better be able to deliver on those words."

"My beautiful, brilliant, wild Padfoot. I'll do anything to make them come true for you." Remus kissed him back, holding back his desperation for Sirius and what they'd had and tried to offer as much comfort and reassurance as he could. Something must have happened, something bad and Remus just wanted to try and make it easier on Sirius, if only for a short moment.

Sirius returned the kiss intensely before pulling back a bit and searching Remus' eyes, placing one hand over his heart, "Mine right? You'd never leave me for anything?"

"Never Sirius, you've got me, all of me forever and always." It was true, Remus couldn't imagine life without Sirius, not even now when things were so messed up between them.

He nodded and held tighter, "Shower, I think we both need one." He pulled Remus with him to the bathroom, not letting go for one instant, and turned the water on magically before tugging him into the stall with him. He soaped a wash rag and began running it over Remus' skin. "Tomorrow night we'll talk and hammer out...whatever needs hammering but for now, we just take care of each other."

"Yes." Remus returned the favor, gathering soap in his hands and running them all over Sirius' body, feeling soft skin and strong muscles as much as he was washing him. "We'll talk tomorrow night, I do have something I need to tell you, something I hope will make you happy." He relaxed under the warm water and Sirius touch, the filth and darkness seeming to run off him and down the drain where ever Sirius touched him.

"If it doesn't, do I have permission to kick you in the bum," he nuzzled Remus' neck affectionately.
Remus felt something thaw and warm inside him at the return of his affectionate Padfoot. "Kick it, lick it...I'll give you free range to do whatever you want to my bum then." They finished their shower and cuddled up naked beneath the sheets of their bed, still entangled as tightly as they could be. "I've missed you Siri, missed you so much."

"I've missed you too. I've been twisting my brain trying to figure out what's gone wrong or when so I can fix it." He squeezed Remus gently, "I still don't know but maybe we don't need to know to fix it."

"Somewhere we lost sight of what's really important and the fact as as long as we have each other we can weather anything." They still needed to talk, to sort out their trust issues and what had torn them apart in the first place but right now they were together and for the first time in months Remus felt complete and like he would be able to sleep without nightmares.

"Well, shame on us." He pressed a kiss to the hollow of Remus' throat. "Wake me up if you have to get out of bed? I don't want the bad dreams tonight." He didn't want to see his friend explode over and over again in his mind's eye.

"Okay, right now though it feels like if I could stay here forever, shut the rest of the world out and for it to be just you and me here in our home, our bed." Remus fingers were tangled in Sirius' long hair and he had legs entwined with the others, lying as close as he could get. "Love you Siri." His voice was thick with sleepiness and he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer.

"By Merlin I love you too Remus." Sirius held tightly to his lover. He did love Remus more than his own life and possibly his morals, so much it was painful.

Humming softly against Sirius' hair Remus let himself be lulled into sleep, comforted and calmed by his lover's body close to his.

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The next day Remus had been to Hogwarts to deliver his report to Dumbledore, smiling a bit at the students' obvious glee with the date and Hagrid's monster pumpkins, carved and burning with magical light. Remus had never really liked Halloween but he had to admit that Hogwarts really put on a show to celebrate the day.

Remus hadn't told Dumbledore about wanting to stop with the missions or about the baby, he wanted Sirius to be the first to know. He both looked forward to and was incredibly nervous about the dinner they would have that evening to talk things out.

When he disapparated back to London late afternoon there were four Aurors already waiting for him. Remus could see that they weren't from James or Sirius' squad, these Auror had old, stern faces and very rough hands as they declared that he was to be brought in for questioning. Sitting at the small room in the Ministry Remus couldn't make sense of anything. James, Lily and Peter dead, Sirius a traitor, Sirius killing Peter and laughing about it. That couldn't be true! Sirius wouldn't do anything like that no matter how angry he got. Sirius loved James, James was his brother and he would never do anything to hurt him. Oh god and Harry...What would happen to Harry now?

Remus' tongue stumbled when he was to answer all the questions fired at him. No he couldn't say where he'd been for the last week, no he didn't know what cases Sirius had been working on or where he disappeared to at nights when he heard the motorcycle roar to life.
All his requests to see Sirius, to talk to him were denied.

When Remus finally asked for an Arguer after hours upon hours of questions and silver shackles he was only laughed at.

"You're a Dark Creature Remus Lupin." One of the Aurors leaned across the table, grinning at him. "You don't have the rights to an Arguer and we can keep you for as long as we want. You may look like a man and talk like a man but you and I both know what kind of monster you really are. You and Black were in this together, secret Death Eater scum and I will prove it." The Auror's eyes narrowed. "If I have my way then you and that sick lover of yours will be kissed together."

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Sirius raged and struggled against the hands restraining him, taking him directly to Azkaban without even a trial, his fury incandescent. How could he? How could he?! How could Peter do that? How could the little rat just toss Lily and James to Voldemort? He kicked himself as well for letting the weedy little bastard get the better of him as well. He struggled and shouted and demanded a trial and an Arguer but he was only laughed at and kicked into a transport. Fucking Crouch, forgoing trials in exchange for political gain. He'd get out, get his trial and see to it that Crouch got a kick in the pants. Gods he just hoped the bastard didn't do anything like this to Remus.

His breath shuddered and he was suffused with guilt. His Moony, if they'd only talked sooner they might have been able to avoid all this and now he could only guess what they were doing to his werewolf lover. His hands clenched. He should have known better, should have known that Remus would never betray them, they were pack after all. How could he have ever thought his Moony would work for the scummy big evil bastard? He was a twat that was how. But maybe there was a sick silver lining, if Remus wasn't charged then there would be at least one Marauder to take care of Harry. He slumped in exhaustion against the transport wall and sent a thought to Dumbledore. With luck he'd get Remus out of whatever mess the prejudiced Ministry had put him in. His eyes closed as he wondered just what Remus had been going to tell him tonight that was supposedly good news.

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The days were beginning to blend into one and other. Remus got used to not seeing sunlight, got used to the small room and narrow cot, he even started to get used to the silver shackle around his left ankle, keeping him chained to the wall even though every day it burned through his skin. The silence was not as easy to get used to, he missed the sound of Sirius' voice, of Harry's giggling laughter and James' deeper one as Lily scolded them for diving into the biscuits before supper. He missed the high pitched tones of Peter as he trailed behind James, admiring his latest endeavor and he couldn't understand how any of this could have happened.

Sirius was sent to Azkaban for life without trial, it was wrong. Everything inside Remus screamed that Sirius hadn't done this, couldn't have done this. Remus didn't care what sort of evidence they said they had. Remus himself was in limbo. They still tried to work a confession out of him and he still stayed silent. No one had been to see him except for the Aurors questioning him and Remus couldn't help but wonder if there even was anyone left out there who cared what happened to him or wondered where he was.

Remus curled up on the cot and tried to rest his leg in a way so that the silver cuff wouldn't touch
skin. He startled when the door opened and two people stepped inside, the Auror who always did the talking and a woman he'd never seen before.

"So Dolores," The Auror turned to the woman. "It seems our little bitch here is with pup, what do you think we should do about that?"

Remus' hands went to shield his stomach as he saw the glint in the short, corpulent woman's eyes.

The toad like woman smiled and tapped her chin, "Why I do believe this is an excellent opportunity to study such a creature's gestation and of course we'll have to see exactly what the spawn is capable off after he whelps."

"No! You can't do that, you're not allowed to do that! Keep your hands and eyes to yourself. You can't experiment on a child." Remus' eyes flashed and a crawled further up on the bed.

"You still don't get it do you? We're allowed to do anything we want, you are less than an animal, you have no rights and neither does the spawn inside you." The Auror grinned and turned to Dolores Umbridge again. "Where do you want to start? There's a full moon next week, that should be interesting."

"Excellent suggestion dear. We'll study how a pregnant werewolf shifts but first I think a full physical examination is called for to create a baseline."

"You're the expert Dolores dear; I will follow your lead." The Auror looked at Remus with contempt. "I will call for a mediwitch, I rather not get my hands dirty touching it."

Remus closed his eyes tightly and leaned his head against the wall, his hands still on his stomach. He kept his eyes closed and called up Sirius' image before his eyes, trying to escape into memories of his loved one.

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Dolores Umbridge hummed cheerfully as she gathered the reports on her new little pet project. Remus J. Lupin, what a cheerful little plum to fall into her lap. She'd always wanted to experiment on a werewolf and its life cycle and now she had the opportunity. Nasty beasts no matter the advent of that new potion Wolfsbane, they were monsters and should all be put down and if they could learn how a werewolf gestated, and birthed and what vulnerabilities the young had they could create something to destroy them once and for all. Her little project was only a few weeks away from pupping and then she'd have the final piece of the puzzle. She couldn't wait.

Remus was still in the same room, sitting crouched on the floor, cradling his large, round stomach. His whole world revolved around the baby inside him now, there was nothing left. He was not even sure the man Remus Lupin existed anymore; he was certainly not treated as a man here.

He had to get out, had to find a way to get out before his child was born. He'd overheard that they would take the baby away from him the second it was born and Remus had no doubt that once he'd outlived his usefulness he'd be put down as a feral dark creature, no one would question it. The silver manacle was finally gone; it had been removed when it became clear that the silver wasn't good for the baby. Being taken to and from the different rooms they conducted the experiments in Remus had memorized the outlay of the floor he was on, he'd always had an analytical mind and it was time to put it to use.
When the hated Auror who he'd never learned the name of came in to take him to this day's torture session, Remus was ready. He really didn't feel any remorse as he snapped the man's neck and let the body drop to the floor. Remus had never used his werewolf strength against another on purpose before but he was surprised at how easy it was. He really wanted to kill the bitch of a witch in charge of the experiments on him as well but he couldn't risk going in search of her, the baby was everything.

When it was done Remus really couldn't remember how he got out, he could only smell the fresh air and fell droplets of rain on his face as he ran, ran as fast and as far he could get, knowing without a doubt that he would be chased.

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Albus Dumbledore sat outside Hogwarts greenhouses, facing the forbidden forest, and sipped at his tea as he thought of all the little threads that were coming together exactly as planned. Harry tucked safely away from the wizarding world at his aunt's, who conveniently hated magic, the two Marauders who would try to rescue Harry from the Dursleys effectively detained, though he wasn't sure why Remus was still being detained as it went against all the new laws passed for werewolves since the advent of Wolfsbane potion, Tom Riddle's spirit floating about the world searching for a body, and the entire wizarding community building up unrealistic celebrity around an infant so that by the time Harry did enter the wizarding world he'd be bombarded on all sides and desperate for a trustworthy adult around. Things were going very well indeed.

Remus had given birth in the woods on his own and he'd been sure he was going to die. There had been so much blood and at first the baby hadn't made a sound. After all that had happen Remus hadn't known he could still feel fear like that, nor the relief that followed when a thin angry wail finally rose from the tiny little body. Now he was making his way to the only place he could be safe in. He had to have faith that Dumbledore would help him. Remus had wrapped his son, little Jonathan Orion, named after his and Sirius' fathers, in his shirt and he carried him carefully as he walked through the forbidden forest. Every step hurt but the goal was in sight now and Remus wouldn't give up.

As luck would have it he caught sight of the Headmaster himself when he made it out of the trees and Remus hobbled over, so very grateful that salvation was within his reach, finally.

Albus nearly bobbled his teacup at the sight of a ragged and bloody Remus carrying a bundle came out of the trees towards him. He'd not have been as surprised even if his sister had appeared hale and whole to turn him inside out. He recovered admirably however and set his teacup down to stand, reaching Remus and putting a hand on his shoulder, almost gaping at the babe in the other man's arms. "Remus, my boy what in the world? Where have you been? What happened?"

"I've been kept at the Ministry's holding house all this time, thought you knew." Remus sunk down to his knees in front of the older wizard, unable to take another step. "Experimented on me, on Orion...My son. Please Albus, please you have to help us. Don't let them take him...Please." Remus pressed a sleeping Orion closer to his chest. "I-I escaped, hunted...Please."

"There now my boy," Albus' mind was whirring at light speed, rearranging plans and plots and creating new, "come, let's get you in to Poppy. I thought you'd have been released not long after Sirius was sent to Azkaban. New laws were passed for werewolf rights," he began leading Remus into the castle, "experimenting on or holding someone afflicted with Lycanthropy without just cause is now illegal. Don't worry; I'll take care of everything. You need rest however."
"Promise me that we'll be safe here, that you won't take Orion away." Remus got back on his feet only by pure strength of will, not letting go of his son. He couldn't believe it, werewolf rights...How could they have kept him if it was illegal? Why hadn't anyone done anything? He wobbled after Dumbledore into the castle, and up the stairs to the infirmary. Poppy he trusted, she would never hurt Orion.

Albus pat him on the shoulder gently, "Of course my boy. You have my word; I'll not take your son from you." There would be no point in that. If he was to have a 'leash' to hold Remus by, the babe would need to remain in the werewolf's care. "Tell me, do you know the name of the one behind your imprisonment?"

"Only a first name." Remus was so exhausted that he was beyond seeing double, his vision was in the triple and quadruples now but he felt like he could finally relax. He was at Hogwarts, Dumbledore would keep his child safe, he trusted the older wizard. "Her first name was Dolores, short, squat woman, demon in a woman's disguise." It came out as a growl, filled with hatred.

"Ah, that would be Dolores Umbridge. Don't worry my boy, I'll take care of it," He guided Remus into the infirmary and called out, "Poppy, we've someone here you need to see to."

Poppy bustled out of her tiny office room and almost dropped the journals she was carrying when she saw Remus and the babe. "Oh dear Merlin, well come on then Albus. Help me get these dear hearts into bed so I can examine them." She made a shooing motion that put a smile on Remus' face despite everything. "I wondered where you went Remus, tried looking for you but there was no trace, your apartment cleaned out and rented out to someone else." She herded the exhausted werewolf into bed and took the baby, casting diagnostic spells on the wee one to make sure everything was alright.

"You are both malnourished but we'll fix that in a jiffy. Sleep now Remus and I'll have some Potions ready for you when you wake...I'll make sure to keep the wee one safe." She petted his hand, resting on the bed until his eyelids closed and his breathing evened out.

"How could this have happened Albus? Poor boy looks like he's been to hell and back."

Albus knew he'd have to bide his time to get hold of the babe and set his strings to biding Remus in place. It was better not to use the spell he had in mind until they baby was completely healthy in any case. He pat Poppy's shoulder, "Dolores Umbridge arranged for him to be experimented on after he was detained for questioning after Sirius' arrest. I was told he'd been released but I should have investigated more thoroughly."

Poppy gasped. "That's horrible; she should be arrested or at least dismissed from her position." She rocked the baby. "It's not your fault though Albus, we should all have done more to find out where Remus went, it's not like him to just disappear no matter what had gone down." She looked down at the little sleeping face. "Oh this poor wee one, can you imagine what they would have done to him?"

"I'd honestly rather not." Albus knew what Umbridge would have done and he saw no need to dwell upon it. "I will look into having Dolores charged for her actions Poppy. You do what you do so well and take care of our boys here hm?"

"Of course I will Albus, the absolute best care they can get now is rest and nutrition though." Poppy ran a finger over inky black baby down. "Would you please send up professor Snape? I have a few potions I need him to brew for me, he is young but brilliant, and after he started brewing for
me sick days have gone down considerably.”

"I'll have him sent for right away Poppy and I will return later to visit them." He stepped away and went to get Severus up to the infirmary, certain that the animosity between the two men was sure to be at an all-time high, which would only further his plans along really.

It didn't take long for Snape to enter the infirmary, his severe black robes and extremely pallid face making him a study in contrast. "The Headmaster said you needed to see me Poppy?"

"Yes Severus, I need two different nutrient potions brewed. One specialized for an adult werewolf and one for an infant." She motioned to the baby in her arms and to the sleeping Remus. "Did you hear from Albus? He's been kept by the Ministry all this time, experimented on, this little one too."

Severus stiffened at the sight of one of his old tormentors, at first seeing nothing but the berk who stood by letting others bully him, a situation that had led to his joining the Death Eaters and the loss of his only friend, but then the words Poppy spoke registered and he saw clear to the skinny, worn body lying unconscious on the hospital cot. Lupin looked worse than he ever had before and he felt a slight twinge of sympathy. Very slight. His gaze went to the infant in Poppy's arms, "Lupin's child I presume?"

"Yes." Poppy nodded. "His, and most likely, Sirius Black's. Here hold him for a moment while I go get a basin of hot water and clean blankets, the poor dear hasn't been cleaned since he came into this world, I doubt Remus has either." She handed Severus the baby before he could protest and disappeared in a swish of long skirts.

His eyes widened in utter shock and he looked down at the little bundle down in his arms, the little face napping and a tiny tuft of what was probably black hair stuck down by dried birthing fluids. The infant was scrunch-faced and thin for a newborn and so tiny he could probably hold it in one hand if he chose. It was, in some odd way, almost cute.

Poppy returned after a while, carrying a large pewter basin filled with lukewarm water, clean towels and a clean white blanket. "Okay Severus, hold on to him and wash him carefully with this." She handed him a soft, herbal scented washcloth. "I'll clean daddy up." She moved the screen so that Remus' bed was covered and pulled the blanket off as well as Remus' blood soaked clothes, wincing at the damage. "On second thought clean the babe up and then I need you to come assist me as I stitch Remus up, poor little one is torn open."

"What?!" It was a horrified squeak. "I can barely stand him and you want me to-" he heard a warning sound from Poppy behind the screen. "I hate you quite a bit right now Poppy." He moved to the basin and started to wash the baby carefully and very awkwardly, jumping a bit with the babe squeaked and opened newborn blue eyes irritably at him. If the little brat started crying he was going to hand him off to Poppy and run back down to the dungeons, the medi-witch's wrath be damned.

Remus groaned in pain and blinked amber eyes opened, glazed over as Poppy manhandled him.

"Shh Remus, it's alright. I'm just going to clean you up and fix things down here, no need to be worried. No one will hurt you here." Poppy's voice was soothing as she reached into her apron for the sleeping potion she'd brought.

"O-Orion?"
"Is that the babe's name? Orion is safe too, being cleaned and bundled up like a snug little bug. When you wake up properly you will have him with you. Now drink this like a good boy." She lifted his head and tipped the potion into his mouth, making sure he swallowed it. "That's it." Poppy watched as he drifted off to sleep again. "This will hurt so it's good you won't be awake for it." She smoothed matted and greasy brown hair back from a scarred face and went back to carefully clean the affected area. "Are you done with the babe Severus?"

"How in the bloody hell do you diaper a baby?" His voice was an irritated whip, "or swaddle one when it comes to that. Pediatrics and Obstetrics are not my specialty Poppy."

"Oh really now..." Poppy wiped her hands on her apron and walked around the screen to take the baby from Severus, frowning when it let out a wail at being taken from the young man. "Watch closely now because it sounds as if little Orion here has taken a shine to you." She expertly put a cloth diaper on the now clean baby and swaddled him tightly, handing the wrapped bundle back to Severus. "I'll get a bottle; I think you need to feed him before we continue on with his daddy."

"Me? Why me? Why in the name of all that's holy would that...infant take a shine to me?" It was half panicked and all 'do NOT want' in tone even as he studied the way she diapered, swaddled and prepared the baby bottle. If he was going to be forced into caring for someone's sprog he might as well know how to do so. He grudgingly allowed Poppy to show him how to hold the babe for feeding and gave him the bottle, quirking a brow when the infant latched on nigh desperately and guzzled the milk down as if it would disappear before he had his fill.

"That's it; looks like you're a natural Severus. Bless is little soul he's hungry, that's good, if he hadn't eaten on his own then we would've had a problem." Poppy watched Orion feed greedily then yawn and promptly fall asleep. "You can put him down in the basket over there and then come and help me." She pointed to a small wicker basket next to Remus' bed.

Severus set the baby down gratefully though he didn't particularly want to see Remus' kibbles and bits. "What precisely do you need me to do that you're not capable of doing yourself then?"

"Don't worry Severus; I won't scar your sensitive mind." Poppy answered dryly. "I just need you to hold his leg up and hand me things when I ask for them." She raised Remus' leg, frowning again when she saw the state of his ankle, that would have to be dealt with next. "Just hold here and hand me disinfectant swabs when I need them." She threaded a needle and dove down behind the screen, leaving Severus to hold Remus' leg up and away from his body. He kept his gaze well away from what Poppy was doing and it caught on Remus' ankle. His thumb traced over the acid burn appearance and he murmured, "Silver poisoning, what were those fools thinking?"

"Hmm, what was that dearie?" Poppy poked her head up and followed Snape's gaze. "Ah yes, complete folly." She eyed the ankle critically. "Prolonged exposure too, that will be another scar he won't get rid of, keeping him in silver and while pregnant. It's inhuman, no creature, animal or man should have to suffer through something like that. Look at him Severus; his legs are like sticks, almost no muscle tone left. It's a miracle he made it here." Her hands were still working as she spoke and she looked back at her handiwork. "Swab please."

He passed her the swab and inspected the silver burn critically, wrapping his mind around the condition and the possible consequences, "I'll have to brew a potion to clean the lingering traces out of his system and perhaps the babe as well, unless the prolonged exposure while gestating gave Lupin's son an immunity to it."
"There's no way of knowing how much of the Lycanthropy virus that has been passed on to the wee one, he can be perfectly free of it and it can be so bad that he too changes with the moon. Also we have no idea of knowing just what's been done to him, to alter him." Poppy threw the bloody swab in a small metal basin and continued her neat, precise stitching. "Look at the needle marks on Remus' arms; something has definitely been injected in him." She shook her head sadly. "Any potion you can brew that will help will be greatly appreciated, I don't think we should start any tests on the baby just now, it could be the thing to push Remus off the edge. Okay one more swab please and we'll be done here."

He handed it to her, "I had no intentions of doing so. I'm not suicidal. We will have to find out before administering a potion to clean out silver poisoning though, as I'm certain you know. Ask Lupin about it when he wakes." He tapped a foot, mind already going to his lab and potions to treat Lupin and son, "It is times such as now that I'm reminded of why I loathe the Ministry so deeply."

Poppy nodded, tied the knot on the thin thread she'd been stitching with, swabbed the area and straightened her back. "I don't know when things went so askew at the Ministry, it happened long before You-Know-Who gained any power, probably a reason why he could get so many to follow him, the promise of change you know." She shook her head again, with a sad faraway expression on her face. "You can let go of his leg now dear, thank you for your help and I won't keep you from your lab any longer." She smiled at the severe young man, Poppy had liked Severus even as a student, and despite his standoffish nature she knew he was a good man. "Good luck with the potions and don't be surprised if I call for more help with the wee one."

"You hate me don't you?" He buried the sting the reminder of the Dark Lord and that folly brought up under a mountain of potion work waiting for him, "I for one am just relieved it's still June, an entire two months and one week until the school is swarmed by miniature barbarian hordes."

"Believe me Severus Snape, if I hated you, you would know it." Poppy managed to sound very dark and ominous as she said that before she gave him a rather motherly smile. "Go work your brilliance in your dungeons now and I'll finish cleaning up Remus here. I do agree with you that it's nice that it's still summer, hexes and potions gone awry can be quite tiring you know."

"I am aware. Let us hope Lupin is on his feet by the time we're invaded." He inclined his head in farewell and headed for his lab to brew the potions on his list and the ones needed for Lupin and his child.

Poppy kept her word, when Remus woke up several hours later, Orion was lying in a basket next to him, making tiny noises of discomfort that Remus had learnt would soon result in a full out wail. He winced as he shifted his upper body to lift the baby out of the basket and into his arms, looking in marvel at the tiny pink face and tufty wisps of black hair. Even now he could still see so much of Sirius in their child, especially something about that perfectly bow shaped mouth screamed of his lover and it made Remus want to cry. He ran a finger over a soft cheek in wonder. He would never fail to protect this one as he had failed his friends and lover. To keep Orion safe he would do anything, even sell his very soul if that was what it took.

"Oh joy, you're awake." Severus paused in the doorway, a small case of potions in hand. "Where is Poppy?"

Remus' head whipped up and he sniffed the air just like a wolf, his eyes widening when he saw Snape of all people standing in the doorway. "I-I don't know, I just woke up and we were alone." He brought his knees up higher, closer to his body and curled around the baby in his arms as best he could to keep him protected if Snape was going to do something.
A sardonic black brow rose, "If you tear your stitches Poppy will have your head and then I will be roped into assisting patch you up again. Relax, contrary to popular and Marauder belief I am not evil incarnate."

Now that Snape mentioned it he felt the pinching in his skin that suggested stitches and he forcibly relaxed his muscles some. "I don't believe you're evil incarnate, I've spent the last six months looking evil in the eye and believe me Severus, you're not it. That still doesn't mean I trust you though."

"Good, you show better judgment than your bratlet then," he set the small case down on a cot a couple meters away, "I presume that the child's sire is Black?"

"Yes." Remus' voice was very small and he didn't take his eyes off of Snape and what he was doing, his eyes flashed a lighter shade of amber at the sight of the potions bottles. "I didn't even get a chance to tell him, he doesn't know. He doesn't know he has a son and I don't know if I'll ever get to tell him."

"You believe he's innocent then?" He sat down next to his case on the cot, catching Lupin's reaction to the sight of the potions.

"I do, no matter what went down I know that Sirius would never betray James, he would die himself before he ever did that. Things changed, got dark but that is something I'm absolutely sure of. Sirius lived for his friends, for Harry." Remus tensed. "Where is Harry? Do you know? Is he safe, does he have anyone to take care of him?"

"I know he is alive, anything beyond that you should ask the Headmaster." He studied the werewolf, "You're suffering from silver poisoning."

"Funny word that...suffer...But yeah, I thought as much." He shifted Orion in his arms and pressed a kiss to his downy head as the baby started to fuss. "I think Orion might have it too, the only reason they removed the chain was because the silver was starting to affect his health." His eyes bore in to Snape's. "Can you help him?"

"What, precisely, do you think these are," he nodded at the potions at his side, "Two nutrition potions, two to clean the sliver from you and possibly your son's systems, and a pain potion for you. I also have testing strips as I would imagine you'd rather confirm the contents of the bottles yourself."

"If you don't mind yes...And even if you did mind then still yes." Remus was done with being the trusting idiot; Orion couldn't defend himself so Remus would do it for him. It was a bit awkward but he managed to shift Orion to one arm and take the testing strips Snape handed him with the other, free hand. "Can you drip please?" He held out the first strip, silently cursing the fact that potions had always been his weakest subject.

Rather than respond verbally, Severus unstoppered one potion bottle and placed a few drops on the first strip. It was the adult nutrition potion and should turn a bright red on the strip.

Remus eyed the strip closely as it changed color and then nodded in satisfaction, holding out the next strip for Snape to drip a potion on and repeated it with all the potions. They all seemed to be what Snape said they were and Remus couldn't smell anything off with them. "Okay...Okay, let's help Orion first." Remus breathed deeply and held his son out so Snape could reach him, it was
such a hard thing to do that his arms trembled with the effort to not just yank him close again.

Snape took the baby carefully, "I need to cast a specialized diagnostic test first to be certain if he
does or does not have silver poisoning. If he doesn't then the antidote for it would kill him."

Narrowing his eyes, Remus' gaze dropped to Snape's wand. His fingers flexed as if his claws
wanted to pop out regardless of the lunar cycle. He couldn't take the chance to hurt Orion though.
"Fine, do it but say the spell out loud."

The other man waved his wand carefully over the infant, "Venenum intus revelat," and hummed
when the baby glowed a bright, cheerful blue for a few moments before it faded. "He doesn't need
the antidote to silver, not a trace of any sort of poisoning in his system at all."

"Really?" Remus' eyes softened and he nuzzled his cheek against Orion's head gently. "My brave,
strong boy. I was so worried." He murmured quietly. "Good, that's brilliant." A shadow of a smile
flashed across his features before it was gone again.

Severus added the infant nutrition potion to a baby bottle full of milk then handed it to Remus, "For
him the only problem is the malnutrition, so get to work on that."

"I'll do my best sir." Remus' voice dripped with sarcasm but he was still so happy that his son
wasn't poisoned. "...Thank you Snape, for being willing to help him, despite who his parents are."
Strangely enough the thank you didn't get stuck in his throat as he thought it might.

"I only hated Black completely. You I merely despised due to the fact that you could have done
something yet you never did. Half tolerable genetics are reason enough to assist your bratlet."

"Still I thank you." Remus didn't come with explanations or excuses, he couldn't turn back the time
and to be perfectly honest with himself he didn't know if he would act differently than he had done.
"So there was another potion other than the antidote for Orion right? Better get it all done at once
before I pass out again."

"No Lupin, the rest of the potions are for you. Pain," he pointed at the red bottle, "antidote," the
green, "and nutrition. Best to take them in that order."

Remus eyed the potions, even though he knew what they were it still felt like a battle to lift them to
his lips and drink them down but he did it. He had to get better to be able to protect his son, had to
grow strong again. "There, done." He grimaced slightly at the bitter taste. "Any reason why they
have to taste so incredibly foul other than that you'd get jollies out of it?"

"The antidote, yes. The others," he smirked, "no."

"Figured." There was a sardonic smile on Remus' lips.

"Oh good you're up and awake." Poppy came into the room with a bottle that she handed Remus so
he could feed Orion. "And Severus dear, thank you so much for brewing these potions so quickly."

Remus tuned them out as he watched his son suckle the bottle greedily, his tiny little hands flailing
and holding the bottle next to Remus' larger hand. It was amazing that something so incredible, so
beautiful had come out of him.

Snape studied the besotted expression on the werewolf's face and shook his head. He had a bad
feeling that the peace Lupin was currently enjoying would be shattered soon enough.

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Albus had everything all ready. It was a simple ritual and was almost complete, the only thing left to complete it was for a drop of the right being's blood to be put into the potion in the goblet on his desk. That should be done as soon as Remus arrived with his spawn. He knew that the werewolf had been getting impatient to go and get Harry from Lily's relatives since he'd been exonerated of any crime. Officially Remus had been an innocent wrongfully detained who acted in self-defense. Albus had had his hands full convincing Remus not to go charging off just yet but he'd managed it and as soon as he and Orion arrived he'd not have to extend the extra effort into being convincing.

Remus soothed his son as he made his way to Dumbledore's office. Albus had asked to see him; Remus hoped that he would decide a time for them to go get Harry. He didn't understand why Albus continued to draw it out. James and Lily wouldn't have wanted Petunia and her husband raising Harry, that much Remus knew. He wanted to get Sirius investigation re-opened too, that whole thing had happened way too fast and Remus couldn't believe Sirius had done it, killed Peter and all those muggles without a very good reason.

Orion kept crying as he walked up the spiral staircase and Remus kissed his downy head and rocked him gently, not knowing what was upsetting the baby. He knocked on Dumbledore's door and waited until he got permission to enter before he did so. "You wanted to see us Albus."

"Yes do come in my boy." He waved Remus further into the office. "Poppy told me that Orion had recovered from the malnutrition but I wanted to see for myself." Blue eyes twinkled, hiding the ill intent behind them, and he held out his arms, "May I?"

"Yes of course." Remus handed his son over, feeling a knot in his stomach over the fact that Orion was still crying. "He's a little out of sorts today I think, he won't stop crying." He ran his finger over Orion's cheek, feeling the love he felt for his son well up again. Orion was the reason he still moved forward, woke up each morning to face a new day.

"Perhaps colic?" Albus cautiously took the screaming babe, making sure he was securely in his arms before sitting in his chair, the goblet within reach. "Some babies suffer from it quite early from what I understand." He ran a finger over a tiny fist and wondered if perhaps Orion had inherited the Lupin talent for sight and knew what he had planned. That would certainly make him even more useful a tool.

"Perhaps." Remus agreed, he didn't know very much about babies and their ailments but he was learning more with every passing day. Poppy was an angel when it came to teaching him. "It started this morning." His arms ached to take Orion back from Albus and comfort him as best he could but that would be rude, Albus only wanted to check on him and Remus should be happy he cared enough to want to make sure Orion was alright. "He's been sleeping and eating really well, Poppy is impressed with how sweet tempered he is for a baby." Pride shone through in Remus' voice at that.

Albus chuckled, "Didn't inherit his father's temperament then. Though he certainly will look just like him it seems." He shouldn't dawdle any further. He could already see Remus' fingers twitching to take back his son so with a swift move that seemed out of place for his age, he pierced the baby's skin with the needle he'd concealed and had the blood dropping into the goblet in an instant. A bright flash of magic and green tendrils of light wound around himself and the babe. he held his wand ready and pointed at Remus to forestall any lunge.
"What in Merlin's name are you doing?" Remus was on his feet, looking for a way to get to his now absolutely screaming son, eyes changing into the wolf's and nails elongating. He couldn't understand what Albus was up to, why he was doing these things. "What have you done? Why?" Remus' voice was deeper, on the edge of a growl as panic prickled against his skin. He couldn't attack Dumbledore, not while the older wizard was holding his son. This was supposed to be a safe place, he trusted Albus, had placed his son right in his arms. "Tell me!"

"I cannot afford to have you destroy my carefully laid plans or the world at large due to your bond to James and the obligation you feel towards his son nor your feelings for Sirius." He would feed Remus a mix of truth and lies, concealing his true reasons behind those that the world would come to believe. "Voldemort is not gone. He is weak and incorporeal now due to the rebounded Killing curse but he will grow stronger. A prophecy of Harry and Voldemort was made before Harry was born and he is the only one who holds the power to vanquish Voldemort forever. His mother's sacrifice, tragic though it was, is what protects him so long as he lives with his mother's blood, his aunt. You would not leave him there, nor would Sirius, and you would push for Sirius' release without something holding you back." He gestured to the strings of green light threading through himself and Orion, "And so this shall hold you back. Your son's health and life are held within the palm of my hand. I have tied his life to my whim and only my death could sever the tie and I would kill him long before you could kill me should you try."

Remus could feel an invisible noose tighten around his neck as betrayal slammed into him with such force that it almost brought him to his knees. Only his son, lying in Dumbledore's arms kept him standing. He felt crushed under the knowledge that there wasn't anyone he could trust, nowhere that was safe. He didn't want to leave Harry with the Dursleys and he certainly didn't want to leave Sirius in Azkaban but what choice did he have? Orion looked so tiny in Albus' arms and his cries had weakened to sobbing hiccupping noises that broke Remus' heart. "If I behave...If I am your good little lapdog...Will he be safe? Healthy? If you keep Orion from me Albus, then I will kill you, consequences be damned, I won't have anything to live for anyway then." Amber eyes were lit with disbelief and disgust that the man he trusted with everything had turned out like this.

"I have no need to keep him with me." The strings slowly faded from sight though he knew Remus would always be aware that they were there. "You will never forget that his life is held in my hand. So long as you do as I ask, and leave Harry and Sirius where they are, he is safe." He set the babe down on his desk and moved away, lowering his wand to allow Remus to go to his son.

He practically yanked Orion from Albus and held him close, whispering soft apologies and words of love in a tiny little ear. "You have shackled me completely and I will do as you say, you know I will. I will never believe a word you say from here on out though and one day I will find a way to take you down and keep my son safe." Remus' eyes glowed. "You aspire to great heights but remember it will be a long way to fall."

Albus didn't raise a hair. He was not worried in the least as he'd planned far too carefully to 'fall' as Remus had put it. "We shall see Remus."

"I suppose we will. Are you done with us now? I will leave the castle as soon as I can. Go to mother's cottage. I'm not stupid enough to believe you won't monitor me but I won't stay under the same roof as you." Remus breathed deeply and fought to remain calm. He needed to be strong for Orion's sake. He couldn't afford to fall apart.

"Oh for the time being yes." Albus settled back into his chair, "Do close the door behind you please?"
It took every ounce of willpower but Remus managed to not slam the door as he left, he refused to give Albus that satisfaction. He took the stairs several steps at a time as he hurried down to the dungeons. He needed to persuade Severus to make some potions he could take with him for Orion and he had a huge favor to ask of the other man.

Snape looked up as the door to his lab flew open and clanged against the stone wall and lifted a brow, "Lupin is there a reason you felt it necessary to abuse my wall?"

"I'm leaving, I've stayed here long enough and I need to go before the students arrive. I can't stay."

Remus was still holding Orion close, his heard pounding. "I came to ask if you could please brew some more nutrient potions I can take with me until Orion doesn't need them anymore." He took a deep breath. "Severus, we're not close and I know you probably hate me. You have reason to do so but I need to ask. Can you take Orion during the moons? Keep him out of Dumbledore's beard? I don't...I don't have anyone to ask." All his close ones were gone; Remus didn't have anyone at all to lean on.

Never let it be said that Snape wasn't sharp as a razor. His eyes narrowed on Lupin, "What happened?"

"I've over-stayed my welcome, that's all." Remus couldn't trust anyone, no matter how much he wanted to. "I need to leave, build some resemblance of a life for myself and Orion. I can't do that here. Too many memories, too many distractions."

"You're an abysmal liar Lupin but very well, keep your secrets. Why though, in the name of all that is holy, ask me to watch your infant?"

"I told you, I don't have anyone else to ask and despite the bad blood between us I know that you are a good man, no matter how much to try to deny it." Remus replied, grateful that Severus didn't push. He didn't want to drag anyone else into the mess Albus had created.

"We'll leave your illusions to the side for a moment. Poppy is much better quali-" he trailed off at the violently opposed look on Lupin's face and sighed, "Very well but if I wind up with an irritable werewolf on my doorstep during a fullmoon because he's looking for his cub I will come back to haunt you."

"Thank you, thank you so much." Remus meant it too, at least Severus had always been honest and upfront about his loathing and strangely enough that was a comfort to him now. "I will take precautions during the moons, be locked up. I won't be a bother other than Orion and I'll come back for him as soon as it's safe."

"Hm," Snape stirred some fennel seeds into the potion he was making, "How do you intend to support yourself and your child may I ask?"

"I have a contact at Oxford, he'll send some translations my way. Ancient Greek mostly. Hopefully it will be enough to get by on. As long as they don't have to look at me or be in the same room having a werewolf on the payroll is acceptable, especially when he's willing to work for minimum wage." Orion's shudders finally stopped and he fell asleep, Remus stroked him across his back lovingly as he rocked him.

Severus twitched just a hair. 'Enough to get by on.' That was a line he'd heard many times, from his own parents, and he still loathed it. Affecting an air of unconcern he said, "If it is not, contact me. I
can always use someone willing to test variants for the Wolfsbane potion and other lycanthropy related potions. You won't be turned into a mutant I can assure you."

A corner of Remus' mouth kicked up in a sardonic smile. "I'll keep that in mind. Thank you for everything Severus, I really mean that. I should go pack the few things I have here. I'm going to the cottage Mum left me, it's a muggle house but I think we'll be safe there."

"I would advise you wait until dinner while Poppy is occupied, unless you favor the idea of an interrogation?" He lifted a brow and poured in some dittany.

"Eugh no, I think I'll do just fine without an interrogation. I'll do my best to apply my sneakiness until she is busy. Thank you again." Remus nodded and moved to leave Severus to his brewing.

"Lupin, whatever happened I would suggest you make plans to be assured, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that should you mysteriously disappear your son will find his way to someone you trust completely." He met the honey amber eyes, "and not into a certain flamboyant old man's choice of caretaker."

"Believe me I'm already on it. I am going to keep my son safe." Remus straightened his back and walked toward the door, calling over his shoulder. "If I should disappear...You'd better invest in some baby things Severus." Remus walked out before Severus could come up with a reply.

Snape muttered irritably, "By Merlin if I'm subjected to that I'll kill the old bastard myself."
As The Seasons Change

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Enter the Trio. Meet Orion as a cute little booger of a first year. Dementors on a train. Remus and Severus friendship and snark. Hexing of a Malfoy.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry shifted his things into the compartment, listening with half an ear to Hermione and Ron arguing. Since Hermione's cat kept after Scabbers it was more venomous this year than ever before. He couldn't really side with Ron on this one because well, cats ate rodents. It was a natural thing. Not that he'd say that to Ron, he'd get the silent treatment if he did. He glanced at the sleeping man in the shabby robes, "Is he really asleep do you think?"

"Based on his breathing and relaxed muscles I say yes. He seems to be as heavy a sleeper as Ron here." Hermione sent the redhead another glare and petted Crookshanks who was in her lap, staring at the quivering lump in Ron's shirtpocket with green unblinking eyes. Really Ron could be impossible at times and he always refused to listen to reason.

"Oi!" Ron glared at her and the savage beast she was cuddling like it was a plush toy.

"Ron don't wake him up. I have something I need to tell the both of you," Harry sat down and ran his fingers through his messy mop of hair, "You know the escaped wizard? Sirius Black? Mr. Weasley told me that he might come after me."

Ron dropped his glare at Hermione and whipped his head around to stare at his best friend.

"What?" Hermione forced herself to keep her voice down and not screech in alarm as she first wanted to. "Why Harry? Why would a convicted murderer come after you?" As if Harry didn't have enough madmen out after his blood, couldn't her friend ever catch a break? "What did Mr. Weasley tell you Harry?"

"I don't really know why, Mr. Weasley didn't go into that but probably for the same reason Malfoy's Dad would like to dance on my grave. Since Voldemort died, according to popular opinion, because of me, well he lost his big powerful boss didn't he?" Harry sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, "Before his escape people heard him saying over and over in his sleep that 'He's a Hogwarts. He's at Hogwarts.' and there's me and there's Dumbledore at Hogwarts that he might be after and no one thinks he's crazy enough to go after Dumbledore so that leaves me. It was weird though, Mr. Weasley asked me to promise him I wouldn't go looking for Black."

Ron choked, "Why would Dad think you'd go looking for someone who wants to kill you?"

Harry's lips kicked up, "That's what I said."

Hermione nibbled on her bottom lip as she went things over in her mind, the first thing she would
do after they had settled back in at Hogwarts was to do proper research on this Sirius Black. Know your enemy and Harry certainly had plenty of them. "It's good that you're going to Hogwarts, I mean it should be the safest place for you with all the wards placed on it. Plus Professor Dumbledore will keep you safe, he won't let anything happen to you Harry." She was trying to convince and comfort herself with that thought as much as Harry.

She frowned as the train jerked. "Are we slowing down?"

Ron looked out the window, "Can't be. There's no way we've made it to Hogwarts yet."

Harry shivered as the lights went out, the temperature seeming to drop and his breath could be seen in the low, dreary evening light coming through the window. He had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach and his head whipped around as the compartment door flew open revealing a boy, a couple years younger than they were, with amber eyes looking a bit wild. "Er..."

"There's something boarding the train, like...Creature something. Looks like freaks in moldy women's robes, made the cart witch cry." The boy looked both excited and apprehensive.

"Yes well, thank you for the stellar information." Remus stretched from behind his coat and got up from his seat, wand at the ready. "It looks like if dementors have gotten on the train somehow. Please stay here for now." He looked at all the children in the cart before moving to look out in the corridor.

Harry studied the boy as he in turn was studied by curious amber eyes. He was probably a first year and had the same sort of grace to his features that most pureblood's had without the added defects, like Malfoy's pointy nose and chin, that came from in-breeding, "Er, hullo. I don't suppose you happen to know what a dementor is then?"

"They are some sort of creatures, feeding on humans happiness, their memories...Their souls in a way I suppose. They are used as guards in Azkaban, why they would be here I have no idea." The boy's eyes shone and he looked around at the three of them. "Oh and hi, I'm Orion by the way, starting my first year. Are the train rides always this exciting?"

Hermione was silent, she didn't know very much about dementors but they shouldn't be allowed in a place like this with lots of children around.

Harry was reminded of a puppy as the younger boy moved further in and sat down, almost bouncing with excitement, "Well I'm not sure if the train rides are always exciting but the beginning of each year always has been though nothing like this has happened before. Last year I and my friend Ron here," he nodded at the grinning redhead, "flew a car to Hogwarts and crashed into the Whomping Willow."

Ron piped up, "It was wicked! Scary at the time but wicked." He offered his hand, "I'm Ron Weasley."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Orion shook Ron's hand. "I heard about the car meeting tree incident, I think everyone did and as I said it's nice to meet you all. I'm Orion Moonstar."

"Not muggleborn then I take it." Hermione smiled, oh wizards and their names, a source of constant amusement.

"Nope, just me and dad and he's a wizard."
Harry smiled, "You've probably already guessed about me but I'm Harry," he shook the boy's hand too before pointing at Hermione, "This is Hermione Granger, brightest witch in a century."

She leaned over the seats and shook the boy's hand with a smile. "Nice to meet you."

"I have heard of yes, I mean who hasn't? You seem a lot less...impressive in real life though. From the rumors I half expected you to be tall as a giant and fart gold." Orion eyed Harry who wasn't much bigger than he was. "I think I like reality better."

There was a called out enchantment from outside and a silvery white cloud burst past their window. Orion smiled knowing his Daddy was at work.

Ron was cackling too hard at the fart gold comment to notice but Harry did, blinking at the cloud of light as he wondered what spell that was. He looked back at Orion and gave a crooked smile, "I'm glad you're not disappointed. I hate those bloody rumors."

Ron managed to calm down a bit, "Yeah. I don't get it myself. I mean look at him, scrawny, underfed," he pinched Harry's bicep knowing that though his friend's arms were thin as matchsticks the muscle was lean and wiry and strong, probably came from the chores his ruddy relatives made him do, "looks like a good breeze would knock him over. Not exactly the silly hero baby everyone imagines taking You-Know-Who on and popping his head clean off."

"Rumors are almost never right and I've been taught all my life never to judge a book by its cover." Orion shrugged, not commenting on Harry and his twig like appearance. "I like to make up my own mind about things and people. I'm sure you're all great though."

Hermione chuckled the little first year certainly wasn't shy but he seemed to have a good head on his shoulders. She took a firmer grip on Crookshanks as the cat was trying to sneak his way toward Ron's pocket.

Harry grinned, "Sounds like your Dad's a good guy. What ho-" his eyes went wide and his voice came to a halt when he felt the temperature drop again and suddenly a dark form was opening the compartment door. He heard a scream, saw a flash of green light, and then knew nothing as everything went black.

"Will he be okay? What happened?"

"He'll be fine Orion, give me some room please, go sit down." Remus kneeled in front of Harry's seat, dividing a large block of rich chocolate into smaller pieces. He'd already given some to the ones who hadn't fainted. He ran a hand through hair that looked so much like James' and felt regret and guilt well up in him again when he saw Harry. "Open your eyes Harry, and eat this." Remus placed the chocolate in Harry's lap.

Ron hovered in worry relaxing only when his best friend's eyes fluttered and he groaned as they opened, "Bloody hell mate scare us all to death why don't you?"

Harry frowned and blinked up at the people hovering over him, "What happened?"

"A dementor tried to get into the compartment, I'm sorry I didn't get here quite in time." Remus was still kneeling in front of Harry. "It's a usual development to feel like you do after a dementor encounter, there's nothing to worry about. Eat now."
Hermione's lips were white and she hugged herself. She felt cold and sad and she'd almost freaked out when Harry collapsed like that. It felt better now that he was awake again but she was still scared.

Harry looked at the chocolate, frowning, "Who screamed?"

"No one screamed mate."

"But...I could have sworn I heard a woman scream."

"The dementors feast on your memories, the worse they are the better they seem to taste to them. You Harry have a more gruesome past than most people.” Remus' voice was gentle. "So...wait you mean that Harry...mate what did you..."

"I heard a scream and saw a green light Ron that's it..." Harry's frown deepened and he raised green eyes to the people around, "was it...do you think that was my Mum's scream?"

"Oh Harry." Hermione sat down on the empty seat next to Harry and leaned her head against his shoulder, her arm wrapped around his back.

"As I said, you have a more gruesome past than most. I think it's likely that it was your mother you heard." Remus got to his feet. "I promise you that the chocolate isn't poisoned, it really will make you feel better."

"It does." Orion nodded. "Chocolate helps for almost any ailment."

Harry leaned into Hermione and gave a weak smile, "With that philosophy you and Ron ought to get on famously." He lifted the chocolate to his mouth though he didn't much feel like eating it, and nibbled the corner, surprised when it actually helped.

"Hey mate chocolate does solve most of the world's problems. Maybe Malfoy suffers from a chocolate deficiency?" Ron sat down. It was awful seeing Harry so pale and even worse to know that his best friend likely just relived his worst memory.

"The dementors have left the train and it won't be very long until we're at Hogsmeade. I will talk to the faculty at Hogwarts, try to make sure that no dementors come close to the students." Remus tried to be reassuring but he ached for his best friend's child. Remus wanted to do so much for him but he wasn't allowed to.

"I'll go by boat. Has the giant squid ever eaten a first year? My uncle said he used to sniff out the most useless and eat them before they arrived so the poor professors wouldn't have to bother with them." Orion began to bounce again at the thought that Hogwarts was looming closer.

Remus sighed. "The giant squid has never eaten a student, first year, useless or otherwise."

Harry couldn't help but chuckle. It was impossible to stay morose when confronted with such cheerful, friendly, bouncing energy. He turned to give Hermione a squeeze, murmuring a thank you for her support, then turned back to Orion, "Sounds like your uncle is a bit morbid. Why would he say something like that?"

Orion tilted his head to the side. "I'm not sure, he just talks like that...I think he's kind of like a
blowfish. All puffed up trying to be mean and menacing but really kind and caring behind everything."

Remus hid his grin behind his hand, wondering what Severus Snape would think about described like that.

Ron smirked, "Sounds like my Great Aunt Muriel. So Orion, what house do you think you'll be in?" He jiggled his foot, feeling loads better now that Harry was chuckling and the dementors were gone.

"I don't know and it doesn't really matters to me. My parents were both Gryffindors but I'll be what I'll be and do my best to do my house proud." Orion pulled his shoeclad feet up on the seat but put them back on the floor after a stern look from Remus.

"Oh crap!" Everyone startled at Hermione's shout and saw her shoot up from her seat and grab Crookshanks who had somehow managed to get up on the overhead compartments and tried to get to Scabbers from an above attack.

Ron glowered, "Hermione control that evil beast! Scabbers is already in a delicate state!"

"He's a cat Ron, it's what cats do!" Hermione held the large ginger cat and walked back to sit down next to Harry. "And I am controlling him aren't I? I didn't let him eat your rodent." She glared back.

"He should still be in that ruddy carrier not out and about to terrorize Scabbers!"

Harry hung his head and gave Orion and Professor Lupin a sheepish smile, "Don't mind them, they do this all the time."

"Okay." Orion nodded and then turned to Ron. "Why don't you put a shield spell around your rat? You could still keep him in your pocket but he would be protected like he was in a cage or box."

Ron blinked, "Er...shield spell?" He'd never heard of them before, not anything other than the protego that his mother occasionally used when they got into a food fight at the breakfast table.

Orion nodded again. "I don't know how to cast it, just got my wand a week ago." He waved his wand in the air happily. "But I know it's real. My uncle used it on Walnut once when our neighbor's German Shepherd tried to eat him."

"It's a seventh year spell, I can show you once we all have settled in at school if your interested." Remus added, trying as best as he could to hide the love and pride he felt for his son.

Harry grinned, "Absolutely!" A shield spell sounded like the best idea, especially if he could use it to keep Malfoy from tossing random bits of things into his cauldron. "So who's Walnut?"

"My owl." Orion beamed. "He's a pygmy owl and he was an itty bitty baby owl when I got him, his mother had died, and he looked like a small feathered walnut so I named him that."

The train slowed again and this time there were no dementors that were the cause. Remus stomach knotted. He didn't want to be close to Dumbledore and he didn't want Orion anywhere near him really. He knew he had to be there though and he hoped things would go well. "Looks like we're in Hogsmeade, you should all get your luggage ready."
Harry and the others did as suggested and soon enough they were all filing out of the train and he heard Hagrid's booming voice calling for the first years. He looked over at Orion and on impulse ruffled the kid's hair, "Tell Hagrid I said hello and don't fall into the lake."

"Ah don't worry, I'm not useless." Orion grinned and started to walk toward Hagrid. "See you around I hope." He turned on his heel and ran, school robes flapping around him.

Harry chuckled and grinned, as he joined Ron and Hermione, "He's a nice kid. I hope, if he winds up in Slytherin, that Malfoy won't co-opt him into his group."

"He seems to have a good head on his shoulders, Malfoy's group shares one brain between them so I don't think Orion will fit there. And if he becomes a Snake then we'll look out for him, lionise him a little." Hermione opened a door to one of the carriages and scrambled inside, waiting for her friends to join her. "What are your thoughts on the new DADA professor?"

"Well he's not a coward and he's not a pumped up prima donna, I'd say he's a big improvement over the last couple of years and if he teaches us that shield spell he will officially become my favorite teacher. Just think, no more surprise ingredients in my cauldron." Harry grinned.

Ron nodded, "He's got a right good head on his shoulders from what I could see."

Hermione nodded. "If he teaches his class like he was on the train then I think DADA will get very interesting this year. Also I'm curious as to what he used to repel the dementors, I've never seen anything like that before."

The carriage jerked forward and started its travel up toward the castle.

Harry nodded, "Think he'll be teaching that to us too? I'd definitely rather not hear my Mum screams again."

"We'll ask him, he seems reasonable." Hermione pat Harry's hand gently not wanting her friend to have to go through that again either.

"Yeah mate. I'm sure he'd be willing to give teaching us a go."

Harry smiled at his friends, just glad to be back home as that's what Hogwarts was to him and would always be, home.

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The Great Hall looked as grand and inviting as always as Remus slowly moved to the head table and sat down next to Severus, away from Dumbledore. He might be forced to be here but he wouldn't have anything to do with the old wizard if he could help it. He'd lectured Orion again and again that he wasn't to be alone with the Headmaster, that he should go get either him or Severus if Dumbledore asked to see him. The almost impossible had happened over the last decade and Remus was almost surprised himself that he now called Severus a friend and that he meant it. Without Severus Snape Remus doubted he would have managed surviving, raising a son that was safe and open and happy.

The students were piling in and Remus shrunk back in his seat, as always not really comfortable being in the spotlight.
Severus, as always, looked to Potter as soon as he entered the Hall. Contrary to popular belief he didn't exactly loathe the boy, he hated it when he reminded him of James and even more when he was reminded of Lily, but he didn't hate their son. There was, however, an image to uphold. He had to remain in his gray area so he would be trusted by Voldemort when it became necessary to play the loyal Death Eater once more. It was a fine and shaky line to walk thanks to the manipulative old bastard sitting in the middle of the table. The only reason he wasn't as venomous as he could have been was thanks to his role in helping Remus to raise Orion. That child was nigh impossible to remain unaffected around, just a bright, happy ball of sunshine with a quick and clever mind and puppyish enthusiasm. Speaking of, he watched as the first years were lead in, Orion, as usual, bouncing as he walked next to a boy who'd been shrouded in Hagrid's coat and talking a mile a minute.

"Looks like someone fell in the lake...Without being eaten for being useless. What are you teaching my son anyway?" Remus raised a sandy brow as Minerva carried the sorting hat out and placed it on its usual stool. He didn't listen as the hat sang its sorting song, instead he watched Orion. His son was getting so big, now he would be in school and no matter what house he'd be placed in things would be different from here on out, no longer would it be just the two of them, caring for each other. It was enough to almost make him a little bit weepy.

"How to weed out the unworthy." Snape's voice was deadpan. He'd been in a rare playful mood when he'd told Orion that during one of the potion making sessions he snuck in on the full moons. Remus had been adamant that Orion start off on equal footing as his peers but Severus had refused to let the child be one of the cauldron exploding dunderheads so he taught Orion what he could about potions on full moons when Remus was unable to do anything about it.

"Unworthy huh? Only you Severus." Remus shook his head and straightened up as Minerva started to call out the new students names, starting with Aberdeen, Lola. A tiny little blonde girl who had barely sat down on the stool before the hat called out Hufflepuff. He looked back at Severus. "Will you help me look out for him, I can't do it alone. He hasn't tried to make any contact and I don't know what to do."

"You should know by now that you don't even have to ask. Your brat has quite grown on me." He lifted a brow as the first Slytherin of the year was sorted then the dripping wet boy, another Creevy. Merlin save them all. "You do the job here, protect your son, and if the mongrel makes contact you handle that as best you can. Don't go looking." Minerva called out Orion's name and the boy bounced up to sit on the stool.

Slytherin! It was loud and clear and rather swift. Orion took off the hat with a wide grin, waved happily at his father and uncle and at his new friends at the Gryffindor table before bounding over to his new housemates and sitting down at the edge of that table.

"Slytherin, completely corrupted him haven't you?" Remus was smiling though, seeing his son so happy and eager.

"Oh yes I take full responsibility, never mind the Marauder sneakiness and the fact that his paternal lineage has been almost entirely Slytherin for years." Snape lifted a brow, aware of the less than pleased expression that flickered over Dumbledore's face. "Now who was it that taught him how to booby trap his footlocker again?"

"Hey, those are important skills that need to be handed down through the generations." Remus flashed his friend a grin. "I have a feeling he will do very well in your house." He tore his eyes away from his son and looked down at the table. "I suppose you heard about the dementors on the
train, they should never have been allowed near so many young children. They zone in on Harry because of his past. One more weight on his shoulders...I want to teach him the Patronus Charm but I'm not sure I will be allowed close enough to him for that."

"If Potter likes you well enough he'll seek you out. He certainly seeks Hagrid out often enough even when he's not supposed to. He's practically a magnet for detentions on top of that."

"Thank you." Remus said simply and quieted as Dumbledore rose for his annual welcoming speech. As much as he loathed the other wizard he was still forced to obey him.

Harry groaned and hung his head at the announcement of the reason the dementors had been on the train and resolved to ask Professor Lupin to teach him how to fight them at the earliest chance. Why did he have to be the one they liked?

Hermione grit her teeth in anger as snickers rose from the Slytherin table and Malfoy asked if it was true that Harry had actually fainted while pretending to swoon. Someday, someday she would shut that git up. She placed her hand on Harry's shoulder and squeezed in comfort. "It'll be alright."

Out of seeming no where something flew right towards Malfoy and smacked him in the middle of his forehead, leaving brilliant red lettering proclaiming 'twat' to the world and Ron started laughing, "I'll agree with that mate, especially considering that's the start of the year!"

Harry looked up to see a completely innocent looking Orion pretending to pay attention to Dumbledore's speech even as Malfoy began glaring daggers at him. "Yeah but I don't want Orion getting into trouble on my account," his lips curved, "though Malfoy's new look is lifting the spirits."

"Well it's the truth isn't it? Malfoy's more of a twat than I am despite my plumbing." Hermione said causing Ron to give her a shocked look. "Besides I think Orion is going to be fine, he's too strong for Malfoy to break him, maybe he can teach the pointy git a thing or two but that's probably asking too much."

Harry chuckled and shook his head, giving her a hug, "Probably and I think you just broke Ron."

"Nah, it takes more to break him even though he has that brittle, helpless appearance at times." Hermione grinned and shot Ron a teasing look.

Ron stuck his tongue out at her while wishing Dumbledore would hurry up and finish speaking. He was hungry.

Up at the head table Severus slid a look over at Remus, "And you say I am corrupting him?"

Remus adopted his most blank and innocent look, mirroring the one his son wore down at the Slytherin table. "Well even foot with the rest of the students or not he needed to know a good hex or two to be able to defend himself. And your godson deserved it. It will go away in an hour or so on its own."

Snape gave a noncommittal hum as Albus finally finished pontificating and food appeared on the tables. "I have this unpleasant feeling that your son will be sending my godson whining to me about being pranked and tricked more often than my sanity needs to bear."

"Probably yes and Orion will most likely knock at your door too, complaining about what an utter
git the little Malfoy is and try to wheedle more pranks and hexes out of you. Poor Severus, it's
difficult being in such demand." Remus rose quickly and gave a small bow as Dumbledore
announced him to be the new DADA professor, hearing the scattered, disinterested clapping. "Aw,
I feel so loved."

"Yes well they've grown used to useless Defense teachers, they don't exactly have high hopes in
regards to your teaching ability or your chances to remain past the end of the year." He took a sip
of water as Remus sat back down then Hagrid was announced as the new Care of Magical
Creatures professor to thunderous applause.

Remus clapped too, watching the half giant blush and wipe his eyes with the table cloth. He had
always liked Hagrid, the man was as kind as you could get. "I will have to show them how
incredibly awesome I am then." Remus said lightly, knowing deep down that he didn't really
belong here at the head table.

"Just being competent you'll be wildly popular. It's pathetic how low expectations have fallen.
However you're more than competent so I can only imagine how much the brats will come to
adore you."

"Flatterer but thank you, I needed some encouragement. After having Orion this is the scariest
thing I've ever embarked on." Remus finished his meal one eye on Orion the whole time, feeling
warm when he saw his son laughing and making friends.

Severus hummed, "Just don't let the great manipulator see that. He delights in exploiting
weakness."

"I know, believe me I know. The less I'll have to do with Dumbledore the better any prolonged
interaction between us will end less than well." Remus took a sip of water and pointedly refused to
look toward the middle of the table.

Orion looked up at the head table and studied the Headmaster, a vague memory of a sharp pain and
uncomfortable binds flickering through him. His Dad hadn't ever told him about why he obeyed
the old man when he obviously didn't trust him but he knew, he'd heard his Dad and Uncle Severus
talking about it before when they'd thought he was asleep. So he knew and he had every intention
of figuring out a way to free himself and therefore his Dad from the old man's grasp as well as
maybe, just maybe, getting other people to question Dumbledore's 'goodness'. He hadn't been put
into Slytherin for nothing after all.

"Moonstar huh?" Blaise eyed the first year who had dared to hex Draco. "Have you ever heard that
name? The boy is obviously, if not a pureblood then close to it, just look at him." He poked Pansy
before looking back at the boy. There was something about him, about the cheekbones that seemed
very familiar.

Pansy drummed her fingers and eyed the first year who'd not only managed to hex Draco, but to
escape detection as the one who'd done it by McGonagall. "Absolutely a pureblood I'd say but no,
I've never heard that name before." She picked up a cookie and nibbled, "Then again he wouldn't
be the first pureblood child to be attending under an assumed name. I'm surprised he's in Slytherin
though, considering the bollocks it takes to hex an, obviously popular," she flicked a glance at the
girls cooing over Draco's forehead, "older student of one's house and the fact that he's already
befriended Potter and a Gryffindor first year as well."

"Surprised? Really? I think he shows perfect Slytherin attributes. He's shown that he won't be at
the bottom of the pack by hexing Draco and he's allied himself to the power trio of the school, all in a few hours. If the runt survives Draco's revenge then I think he'll be a snake worth keeping our eyes on." Blaise leaned back in a lazy sprawl, wishing the welcoming feast would come to a close already.

"True enough but I don't fancy hearing Dray's whining. I love him dearly but his voice," she rubbed her ear, "painful. And remember the trio there is only as powerful, socially anyway, as Potter and Potter's popularity is very very fickle."

"Fickle? Saint Potter turned his relative into a hot air balloon and didn't even get a slap on the wrist for it. My latest ‘uncle’ was one of those called upon to deflate and obliviate the woman." Blaise snickered slightly. "I think that he's got quite a strong hold on his popularity, at least for the moment."

"Ah but my own sources tell me it was accidental magic so he couldn't have been punished in any case. Do recall last year however, when everyone thought he was the Heir of Slytherin after he spoke Parseltongue. His name was mud. So long as nothing happens to put him in an unflattering light he's in the golden zone but the instant he's anything but the perfect ickle hero, it all collapses." She smirked. She was cold enough to enjoy when that happened though she did find the fact of such changeable views sickening.

"You've got a point there, sad and funny in the same stroke." Blaise's eyes flickered over to the Gryffindor table where the Weasley twins were doing something to make Potter laugh and the Weasel grumble. He didn't really have anything against Potter he felt neutral in the matter. "At least it's always interesting and amusing to see what Potter and his little gang will come up with. He makes the school year interesting."

"I'll drink to that." Pansy sipped and settled back, content to wait for the feast to end in patience. Time would tell just how well the new players fit into the game.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed the new chapter. Comments are loved.
Harry tapped on the doorjam to Professor Lupin's office hoping he could speak with the professor since classes for the day had ended a few minutes ago. "Professor?"

"Hm?" Remus looked up from the reports he was looking through, really what had passed as DADA the last few years? The kids didn't even know the basics. "Oh Harry, please come in. Is there something I can do for you?" He cleared the worst of the mess from his cluttered desk and motioned for Harry to take the free chair.

He stepped in, fiddling with his bag strap and jolted a bit when a watery hiss came from a tank in the corner of the office, "I er...I was wondering why you didn't let me take on the boggart."

"Oh Harry, it wasn't because I didn't think you couldn't handle it. It was because I thought the rest of the class would be scared to suddenly have the Dark Lord amongst them." Remus looked at Harry's expression and furrowed his brow. "Was I mistaken in that?"

"I...well at first I did think it would be Voldemort but then...I thought of the dementor on the train." Harry studied the violent red eyes looking at him from the tank in embarrassment.

"Ah, I see." Remus turned to the small Japanese teapot he had on a heating plate. "Tea? I know it may not seem like it but that's actually very perceptive of you. It shows that what you fear, is fear itself. I don't blame you, the dementors are very scary."

Harry scuffed his shoe against the floor, "Professor that spell you used to drive them back on the train, what was it?"

"The Patronus Charm. Essentially it's a burst of light, created by your happiest memories to dispel the darkness. Often when you've mastered it, it will take the form of an animal." Remus poured a cup of tea and pushed it toward Harry. "I'd be happy to teach it to you if you'd like."

Harry finally sat down as he accepted the tea, "I would, I really, really would. I hate that creepy feeling of drowning in darkness and I don't know how much more my manly reputation could take if they came near and I fainted again. I'm already getting Slytherins by the dozens making woo-woo fingers at me and pulling their robes up like hoods."

"Juvenile berks." Remus snorted. "I would like to see how they handled being confronted with the greatest horrors of their lives. You have nothing to be ashamed of Harry, I hope you know that. Everything about your life is larger and more exceptional than your peers, sadly most in a bad way. Be proud though, keep your head high because despite all the shit life keeps throwing at you, you're here, strong and brilliant and alive." Remus knew he had crossed a line but he couldn't help
himself, not when Harry was sitting there right across from him.

"Professor you cursed," Harry's eyes gleamed in amusement, "What would McGonagall say?"

"Ah, maybe we could keep that little tidbit to ourselves then. It would be nice to last a full month as a professor," Remus placed a long, scarred finger over his lips while his eyes glittered. "As for teaching you, I have some free time on Saturday if you can manage it. We can meet in the classroom."

Harry's face fell just a bit, "I've the time. Most everyone else is going to Hogsmeade so Ron and Hermione won't be round and I don't really fancy staying out and about where Colin can find me and blind me with his camera."

Remus' heart ached for Harry but he couldn't show it. "Yes the Creevey brothers are a bit excitable aren't they? I'm sorry to hear about Hogsmeade but I'll try not to bore you to tears."

"You'll be teaching me magic, that's never boring." Harry gave him a smile, "I app-"

"Look what I found!" Orion came barreling in, clutching something in his hand then froze when he saw Harry, "Uh...oops?"

"It's okay." Remus smiled and waved Orion in. "Mr. Potter and I were just talking. What have you found?"

Orion scampered in, shooting a beaming smile at Harry, "I was out by the lake looking for some itchweed and I saw this in some cattails," he held a wide eyed, feathered creature out that looked like a cross between a marmoset and a duck and was a brilliant purple color. "Do you know what it is? I've never seen something like it before."

Remus leaned forward looking at the critter. "That's a flappercad, very docile and friendly. Their feathers are used in calming potions and in old times their eggs were considered a delicacy. Now there aren't very many left of them so their eggs are off limits." He smiled at his son. "Please put her back later, they don't do well away from water and their nests. I'm not even going to ask what you wanted the itchweed for."

Orion grinned, "Okay!" He stroked a finger over the flappercad's head and went over to Harry, "wanna see?"

Harry nodded and tickled the creature under the bill even as he whispered, "What do you want the itchweed for?"

Orion leaned close, as if imparting a great secret, "A potion. Dennis bet me I wouldn't put itching potion in Malfoy's pants after the elves are done washing them."

The older boy grinned, that would make his day to see Malfoy squirming around desperate for relief. "You're a sneaky lad Orion," he ruffled his hair, "I keep thinking it's a shame Fred and George haven't met you yet."

"A blessing more like it." Remus ran a hand through his hair and gathered into a low tail, securing it with a ribbon. "I am going to pretend I didn't hear any of that." He pushed a plate of biscuits towards the boys. Liking the fact that they seemed to get on so well.

Orion grinned back at Harry before grabbing a biscuit, "Ah you know we'd make a great team, just like the Marauders of old."
Harry tilted his head, "Marauders? Who are they?"

"Only the greatest pranksters the school ever knew! Not a secret passageway they didn't know, not a git left unpranked, and all very dashing and popular with ladies and lads alike!"

"Come on Orion, you make the Marauders sound like some sort of superhumans which believe me is very far from the truth. They were troublemakers of the highest degree, nothing more and nothing less." Remus looked at his son with fondness, wondering if he had perhaps gone overboard then he told him Marauder stories at bedtime instead of fairytales.

"Exactly!" Orion grinned at his father, "and people like pranksters. Just look at Fred and George, they're super popular, even in Slytherin and the Marauders were like their forerunners!"

Harry chuckled, "I think these Marauders sound like people to have been friends with. If only to know when to dodge."

"Knowing them could be both useful and dangerous. Knowing them made it so that you were almost always roped into aiding them, knowingly or not." Remus grabbed a biscuit and nibbled on it. "And you." He pinned his son with a stern look. "Be careful, people might like pranksters but they don't like bullies. It's a fine line to walk and also it would be nice if you lasted a year without being kicked out."

Orion saluted, "No worries! Besides I'm only paying a bully back in spades." He waved, "See you Harry!" Before Remus could say anything he was gone, to put the flappercad back in her cattails and get that itchweed.

Harry got up, "I'd better go too, before Hermione and Ron send a search party. Thanks professor."

"You're welcome Harry, my door is always open should you need anyone to talk to." Remus smiled and watched the skinny messy-haired boy leave his office.

Harry wound his way through the halls and up to the common room then jumped as Scabbers just about rocketed up the outside of his trousers and onto his shoulder as soon as the door was open and that was soon followed by Crookshanks who tried to climb him to get to the rat. "Ow!" He grabbed the cat in one arm, grimacing at the claws that dug into him as he struggled, and held the rat to his shoulder with his other hand. "Mione could you please get Crookshanks before he turns me into shredded Harry?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Hermione hurried over and pried Crookshanks off Harry before he could do anymore damage to Harry and held him tightly, ignoring the angry flapping of the ginger tail and the pinned back ears. "I have tried to keep him in my dorm room I promise but I can't keep him locked up forever. He's a cat, he needs his freedom." She looked on the verge of tears.

Harry closed the portrait door and let Scabbers go running back up to the boy's dorm before giving Hermione a one armed hug. "It's okay Hermione. I know. I'm not mad but we really do need to get that shield spell learned to save Scabbers before Ron loses it." He eyed the now still cat that released a plaintive meow. "You know he sort of reminds me of the cats that Mrs. Figg has about."

"He barely speaks to me these days." Hermione still sounded miserable and looked around before letting Crookshanks down on the floor. "I don't understand it, it worked well last year but now it's like he's obsessed with Scabbers. I don't know what to do." Hermione walked over to the sofa where she'd sat studying when Harry walked in and sat down again, pulling her legs up underneath her.
Harry went to sit next to her, "Well even though he's always saying how Scabbers is useless, he is Ron's pet. Ron may not show it but you know he's got a soft heart and he's had Scabbers for a while now, known him since he was Percy's rat. He even lets Scabbers sleep next to him on his pillow." He rubbed Hermione's shoulder, "He's scared of losing him that's all Mione. He'll pull his head out...eventually."

"I know, I understand how he feels, I really do but it's not as if I want or let Crookshanks hunt and attack his rat. I'm doing the best I can to stop it." Hermione leaned her head against her best friend. "Do you think professor Lupin would mind if I ask him about the shield spell? I can't take much more of this."

"I don't think he'd mind at all. He agreed to teach me how to fend off the dementors, I don't think he'd mind teaching you how to cast a shield spell at all, especially since, as it's you, you'd master it faster than Ron can eat a chocolate frog."

She chuckled and rubbed her nose against his shirt before straightening up. Harry could always make her feel better. "Well I don't know about that, Ron practically inhales a chocolate frog in seconds but I'll do my best." She pulled out a thin book from the pile on the table. "Oh by the way, I've done some research. Did you know that Sirius Black is a relative of Malfoy?" She handed the book to Harry, it was about pureblood genealogy. "And he was in Gryffindor when he was at Hogwarts."

"A Gryffindor?" He looked at the book, frowning over the link to Malfoy, "well that's comforting knowing that it's not just Slytherins who go bad," the sarcasm rang clear, "but look proof that Malfoy gets his gittiness from both sides honestly."

"I know it's not a comfort but I figure it's best to learn all we can right? To figure out why he'll go after you in the first place and find some sort of plan to protect you." Hermione put her faith in research and books, the answer to almost everything could be found in between the pages of a book.

"Yeah I suppose so." He sighed, "I just wish sometimes that we didn't have to worry about needing to protect me."

"Oh Harry, I know. I wish for that too." She leaned into him again, offering silent comfort and wishing desperately there was something she could do to help him.

He gave her a squeeze, "Thanks Hermione. For doing all this and helping me even when I know you're stretched thin. You should be concentrating on the insane amount of classes you took on not on keeping an escaped convict from turning me into dog chow."

"Don't even joke about something like that." She put her elbow in his side and glared at him. "There's nothing funny about some insane murderer after you. And I would never put my studies over you or Ron, you're my best friends. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

He chuckled then oofed as Crookshanks jumped up, landing in his lap a paw jabbing something that really ought not be jabbed, "Watch the paws there 'shanks," he nudged the cat over, blowing out a relieved breath when he went to Hermione's lap. "I know Hermione and I appreciate it and you more than I can repay. If I was any real good at anything I'd offer to help you with your studies but you're better than me at pretty much all of it." He smiled crookedly, "And I know you hate to fly so I'll just carry the books when you need me to then?"

"Deal, though you may regret it when you lift my bookbag the first time." She smiled at him and scratched Crookshanks behind his ears as he purred up a storm and stretched out across her lap, his
hind legs trailing down on the sofa cushion next to her. "You do help me a lot you know, you and Ron both. Without the two of you I would probably never get my nose out of the books or leave the library so thank you for that."

"Well we need to get you in trouble now and again, a little trouble is good for the soul," he dodged her thrown pillow with a laugh, "speaking of trouble, our sneaky little Slytherin friend has some planned for Malfoy."

"Ooh, something better than Twat flashing across his forehead? Tell me please, I revel in that git's pain." Hermione was a forgiving girl, really she was but Malfoy and his mudblood comments were insufferable.

He grinned, "Itching potions in all his pants fresh from the laundry. Can't you just imagine it? Malfoy squirming and trying all day to get comfortable."

She crowed with laughter. "Brilliant! Oh I hope he succeeds and I hope Colin is there with his camera to immortalize it when it happens." She couldn't wait to witness that. "He's a little sneak Orion, I'm glad I'm not on his bad side."

"Same here. Can you imagine what it would be like if he was in Gryffindor? The twins would have immediately co-opted him."

"Oh the horror no one would be safe, ever!" Hermione chuckled as she said it. "I have an inkling they'll rope him in despite his scaly preference once they meet him."

"Forget meeting him, as soon as they see Malfoy twitching like someone poured spiders down his trousers they'll drag him in." Harry grinned widely, "How are your other classes going by the way? I know how it's been in the ones you share with me and Ron but you've also got Muggle Studies, Runes, Arithmancy, and that...what was it again um Crystal Theory?"

She nodded that he had gotten it right. "So far so good. We're not very far into the term so right now it's not much of a struggle keeping on top of things. Runes are rather boring this year, a lot of repetition but Crystal Theory is brilliant, I love it. You should have taken it too, I think you'd like it." Hermione was aware that she had perhaps bitten off more than she could chew with all her classes but she just wanted to learn it all, every subject was interesting in its own way and she lived to learn.

"Probably a lot more than I am Divination. I'm already sick of the death predictions."

"So far it's been bollocks. I keep hoping it will get better because right now it's a complete waste of time. It seems to me that professor Trelawney has sniffed the incense she's so fond of a little too much." Hermione rolled her eyes. "She's fixated on drama and death and it's impossible to take her seriously."

He nodded, "Yeah. I mean, I think it's a real subject, the textbook talks about real seers like Merlin and all, but not the way she teaches it. It's like she's desperate for one of her bad predictions to come true."

"It's definitely a real subject and true seers are highly revered. I just don't think Trelawney is one of them. She gets her kicks out of horrific predictions and the wide eyed wonderment of silly minded girls like Parvati and Lavender."

"Oh don't let them hear you say that," his eyes gleamed, "we don't need them trying to start a cat fight they're destined to lose before it's begun."
"I'm glad for your faith in me but no...I'll try to hold my tongue. I have to live with them for four more years after all." Hermione grimaced, she didn't understand girltalk, it didn't interest her at all. All the gossip and giggling, she just didn't get it. Maybe she was defective somehow.

"You have my sympathy." He looked up as Ron came in looking harassed, "you alright there Ron?"

"Yeah, Malfoy and his gorillas tried to block the staircase. Oddly there was this little zap that turned all their clothes pink. No one knows where it came from."

"I can guess though, boy he's not making himself popular with the goon-brood. I hope he's careful, I don't want him getting hurt." Hermione nibbled on her bottom lip again. She was all for Malfoy and his pets getting what was coming to them but she'd grown fond of Orion and didn't want anything to happen to him because he was overly cocky.

"Ah he'll be fine Hermione, he's a slippery little bugger." Ron glared at the cat on Hermione's lap before taking out his classwork. They had potions tomorrow and he'd still not managed to write his essay, "Who cares about all the properties of hagfish slime I ask you? I swear the greasy git comes up with these essays just to torture us."

"If you actually started on it earlier instead of the day before it's due it wouldn't be so hard." She noticed Ron's expression and sighed before holding out her hand. "What do you have so far? Let me read it and maybe I can help."

"Yeah? Thanks Hermione that'd be brilliant!" He handed his anemic essay over along with his notes. He took good notes it was translating them from the notes to the actual essay that was his problem. "What about you Harry? You finish the evil essay too?"

Harry rubbed the back of his neck, "Well I think so but we all know how Snape feels about me. I'll probably flunk even if it's the most perfect essay to exist."

"It's unfair is what it is." Hermione grumbled and pulled out a quill from the mass of bushy curls that was her hair and started to make suggestive notes for Ron. She wouldn't write the essay for him but she didn't mind helping. "You have gotten better at potions and he shouldn't be allowed to single you out or give you bad marks when you have done the assignments. It's abuse of power."

Harry lifted his shoulders in a shrug, "Well I save the essays if I ever have to prove that I really did do my work. Plus he doesn't grade our OWLS so I'll get by. It'd be easier if Malfoy would stop tossing bits that don't belong into my cauldron."

"Another reason to ask Lupin about the shield spell. Oh I would love it if Malfoy was to try that only to see it bounce, maybe even rebound back to his own cauldron...Hmm...An adjustment like that shouldn't be impossible, send the projectile back to the one throwing it. I'll have to research that more and talk to professor Lupin but it should be able to be done." Hermione scribbled a note in her own notebook to help her remember that before she returned her attention to Ron's homework.

Harry grinned and pulled out his transfiguration homework, pleased for the pleasant peace between his friends for once this year and the wicked mind Hermione occasionally exhibited. Not that he'd use that variation. If he did Snape would give him detention for it so he'd rather just have the plain shield. For class anyway. Nothing saying he couldn't use a modified one on himself and provoke Malfoy into throwing something at him.
Harry groaned and grumbled and kicked a stone along the path around the lake. Professor Lupin might be impressed with his first lesson in the patronus charm but he certainly wasn't. He'd fainted three times, three! It was not good for his self-esteem. He heard sloshing and looked up to see Orion, looking mighty grumpy and fishing sludge out of the lake with Snape looking over. He grimaced in sympathy. It had been monstrous fun to see Malfoy squirming and hopping about itching like mad but Orion had been found out and got detention. Of course Malfoy had gotten detention with McGonagall too for trying to hit Orion so it wasn't all bad.

"Come on Severus, it's sludge, it's supposed to be in the lake, why do I have to fish it out?" Orion looked over his shoulder at his uncle, this was ruining a perfectly good Saturday when the older students were away and he could have free range of the castle. "Besides, you have to admit that the itching potion was flawlessly made, that has to be worth something right?"

Walnut chirped as if in agreement and buzzed around his head like a little feathered ball. "How much longer? It's been hours."

"It has been precisely thirty minutes, it is algae, which as you know is valuable in potions, and you are to address me as Professor Snape in public Mr. Moonstar." Severus controlled the smirk he wanted to give at the comment over the flawless potion. Little did Orion know that he'd given Slytherin House seven points for that potion. It wouldn't do for the boy to get a big head after all.

"Sorry professor, I guess it only feels like hours then. It would go twice as fast if you got in here and helped though." He blinked amber puppydog eyes at his uncle and head of house. Orion didn't mind spending time with Severus but this job was boring him to tears and the water in the Black Lake was cold and muddy, he would smell like sludge long after he was done here. "We will be finished in time for dinner right? It's the only day of the week we can all eat together...Like before."

"We will be finished when the jar," he nodded at the jar on the shore which was a quarter of the way full, "is full to the rim. So it is up to you how quickly that happens. There are rules, you broke them, and were caught doing so. Why, may I ask, have you targeted Mr. Malfoy so intently? You normally spread your mischief among the masses."

"He's a bully who hides behind his family name and his goons. It's a cowardly thing to do and it has no honor." Orion gritted his teeth and moved faster. He would not miss family dinner with his dad on account of some pale git with a chip on his shoulder. "If he'd just own up to what he does then it would be different but he always finds a way to place the blame on someone else and he always goes after those who can't fight back very well. I just want to teach him how it feels to be on the receiving end of what he dishes out every single day without remorse."

Severus almost flinched. That had been very much the same way his own thoughts had been about James Potter and the Marauders. "I will have a talk with Mr. Malfoy, if you will ease back on the targeted pranks. I am aware that asking you not to prank at all would be like asking the tide not to turn."

"Fine." Orion wiped his brow with an algae stained hand. "If you can get Malfoy to see some sense then I'll...What did you call it? Spread my mischief among the masses...I have a lot of mischief to spread after all."

"Merlin save us all." It was a deadpan drawl. "You'll have a bath before dinner. I refuse to listen to your mother taking me to task for you being dirty."
"I almost, almost feel like skipping a bath just to see that but I have inherited dad's nose so I don't fancy smelling like an open sewer. It's your lucky day professor." Orion grinned and continued to fish out the greenish brown, slimy algae and place it in the jar.

"Brat." Severus ignored the cheeky grin and cast a baleful eye at the trio of giggling girls who were stomping on the red poppies as he shivered. He was no fonder of the chill in the air than Orion was of the algae so the sooner the boy finished the better.

"And they actually have blood pops for vampires!"

Harry poked at his dinner with his fork, "That's nice Ron."

"Are you alright Harry? I know you're upset that you couldn't go but it seems to be more than that." Hermione looked worried and wished that Ron would lay off the gushing. It had been great seeing Hogsmeade and the shops but Hermione had found that she couldn't really enjoy it when Harry was forced to stay behind. It just wasn't the same without him.

"It's just the spell for the dementors," he poked at his food some more, "I feel...pathetic."

"Oh no...Don't you dare go there." Hermione waved her fork at him. "You are the least pathetic person I know and even though the dementors have the effect they have on you, you still have the backbone to get up and do something about it. Learn something new, something to protect yourself. So your first lesson didn't go stellar...Big, bloody deal! At least you're on your way." Huffing she placed the fork back down by her plate as she kept her eyes on her friend.

He muttered so only she and Ron would hear, "I bloody fainted three times during the lesson."

Ron grimaced, "Ooooh no wonder you look like someone stomped on your kitten mate. Talk about manly pride slaughter."

"I'm sorry you had to got through that Harry." Hermione didn't give a hoot about the pride aspect but she was sorry Harry'd had to listen to his mother's screams three times today. "Still don't see why it has something to do with pride or being a man though, if anything it shows you're stronger for getting up and trying again, not just once but twice more."

"Eh you wouldn't get it Hermione," Ron pat her shoulder a bit condescendingly, "it's a bloke thing."

Harry shook his head, "Ron she's going to kill you one day."

"It's an idiot thing and you're right I don't understand it. I'm not an idiot." Hermione responded haughtily, her nose in the air as she looked at Ron.

Harry laughed before Ron could react and gave them both hugs, "Thanks you two."

"Er you're welcome mate?"

"Anytime Harry." Hermione gave him a smile. "Now eat up instead of playing with your food."

He did as she insisted, tomorrow was Quidditch practice after all.
Orion and Snape were making their way back to the dungeons after dinner. Orion felt warm, full and content and if he felt a little sad leaving Remus alone in his rooms he kept that to himself, he was eleven and quite grown up after all. "Hey Severus...I mean professor, do you know if there are any...Like really big dogs here at Hogwarts?"

Snape looked down at him curiously, "Well there is Hagrid's dog Fang, why do you ask?"

"No, I don't mean Fang." Orion furrowed his brow, he had these dreams almost every night and they felt so real, dreams about this dog and in the dreams there was such rage and such gutwrenching sadness and loneliness. "It's big and completely black, pointed ears."

Severus faltered in his step just a bit before recovering. "Orion have you seen a dog like that on the grounds?"

"Not with my eyes." Orion had admitted his dreams to Severus years ago, once he'd dreamt about his Daddy's change and been really scared before Severus and his Daddy had sat down with him and explained it to him. "I dream about the dog, all the time. It's mostly in the forest we're not allowed to go into. The other animals stay clear of it and it seems so alone, it hurts here." He pounded his fist against his heart.

"I see." Severus had come to accept and recognize Orion's dreams as a measure of sight and his sight worked best with people or things he was connected to which meant that Orion was seeing his father. It was confirmation that Black was indeed here. "It's a Grim. Look it up in that book I gave you for your last birthday and keep track of the dreams and let me know if anything changes Orion."

"Okay." Amber eyes looked at his Uncle closely but he didn't say anything more. He had a feeling there was more to it than Severus said but he knew better than to push. He would look the Grim up in his book and maybe go to the library as well, learn as much as he could about the dog filling up his dreams. It did feel better now that he had mentioned the dreams though, like he didn't have to carry them all alone anymore.

Severus pat the boy on the shoulder as they reached the entrance to the common room, "Ignore Draco for this evening. I will speak to him tomorrow. Behave."

"I'll do my best but if he pushes I will push back." Orion looked around, making sure no one was in sight before leaning in and giving his Uncle a quick hug before stepping back again. "Goodnight professor."

"Brat," it was amused and as close to affectionate as Severus got. He saw Orion into the common room then headed for his own quarters. He did not intend to tell Remus about Orion's dreams. Knowing the werewolf he'd wind up in the forest looking for Black.

Harry landed with the rest of the team, grabbing the pepper-up potions they were given as Oliver went on about their strategy.

"And Harry as soon as you see the snitch get it! We don't need to be out in this longer than we have to."

"I can't see anything with these," he pulled off his glasses shaking the water off them.

"Here Harry." Hermione and Ron who was standing on the side of the pitch before going to their
seats, placed her wand against his glasses and uttered a water repellent charm on them. "I hope it helps, good luck." She pulled on Ron to get them going before they were yelled at to move.

"Hermione you're wonderful!" Oliver called out as Harry slipped his glasses on with a grin. "So you'll out fly the Hufflepuff seeker now right Harry?"

Harry nodded, "I wouldn't dare disappoint you Oliver."

"Good lad," he pat Harry on the shoulder then nodded to end the time out and have the team kicking off back up into the air.

Hermione and Ron made it up the bleachers until they found their seats at the Gryffindor stands. Hermione really didn't see the greatness of Quidditch but she was there to support Harry, she knew how much the sport meant to him and she hoped this would take his mind off the dementor business and his trouble with learning the Expecto Patronum spell.

"The weather is absolutely wretched, I can't believe the game is not cancelled." She looked at the beating rain and the clouds who were so low they almost touched the ground. It was difficult to even see the players zipping and zooming through the air and Hermione had no idea how they were supposed to see the quaffle and bludgers in this, not mentioning the snitch which was tiny. She waved at Orion who was in the Slytherin stand, waving a large 'GO HARRY' sign over his head much to his fellow Slytherins dismay.

He waved back at her, ignoring the groaning of his house members. Hey Slytherin wasn't playing so he could cheer for whoever he wanted.

Up in the sky, enjoying his new ability to see in the rain, Harry grinned at Orion's blatant support despite the daggers being glared at him. He dodged a bludger and swung to the left a bit, catching a glint out of the corner of his eye. He only paused long enough to be certain it was the snitch before going into a dive at the same time as the Hufflepuff seeker. Hermione would have probably called him a moron for the thrill he got out of the breakneck dive but it was one of his favorite moments when playing quidditch, something that never failed to make him happy. He was almost to the snitch when he felt the now all too familiar feeling of being sucked into darkness and painful memories and got a glimpse of a dementor before he heard his mother's voice again. "Not Harry! Please not Harry!" followed by the scream and flash of green light and then unconsciousness.

Hermione bit her bottom lip harshly to keep the distressed sounds in as she hovered over the hospital cot, waiting for Harry to wake up. She and the rest of those who waited were still dripping wet but she didn't even notice. It felt as if her heart had stopped when Harry slipped off his broom and fell toward the ground as if slow motion. Her wand had been out before she even could register it and so had plenty of others so Harry's fall had been cushioned but still, it had been horrible and Harry still hadn't woken up.

The sounds when the Whomping Willow had smashed through Harry's broom still echoed inside her and Hermione couldn't stop thinking about that it might just as well have been her friend being broken to pieces. She kept her gaze on Harry's white, still face and prayed he would wake up.

Ron was hovering in worry too. Seeing his best friend falling like that, he'd just about lost it completely. It had been as bad as when he'd thought Ginny was going to die. He didn't even care that Gryffindor had lost or that Malfoy was crowing like a rooster with a great hall full of hens, he just wanted his best friend to be okay.

"Nmmm," green eyes cracked open and Harry found himself staring up at almost the entire Gryffindor quidditch team, Ron, Hermione, Orion, and Professor Lupin, "Did I get the snitch?"
Hermione shook her head mutely, reaching out to run her fingers through his damp hair.

"Sorry mate." George looked down at the floor. "The Hufflepuff seeker caught it before he'd realized you were falling. The Hufflepuffs were shocked too and would have agreed to a rematch but despite everything he caught the snitch fair and square so..." His voice trailed off.

Fred nodded, "Even Oliver admits he caught it fair so...they won."

Harry closed his eyes on a groan. Great just great. As if it wasn't enough to be so badly affected by dementors they just had to come and spoil his quidditch game making him fall off his broom. Wait, his broom! He shot straight up, "My broom! Where is it?"

"Um..." Hermione ached for Harry as Ron lifted a box from the floor and turned it upside down over Harry's bed making the sad remains of Harry's Nimbus tumble out and onto the blanket covering Harry. There were only splinters and twigs left and she knew how much Harry had treasured that broom. Something that was only his, not inherited, something gifted to him.

"I'm really sorry mate. The wind blew it into the Whomping Willow and...you know." Ron looked down, grimacing in sympathy.

Harry stared at the broken remnants and splinters of his broom, hearing his heartbeat rushing in his ears. He reached out and picked up a splinter, rubbing his thumb over it.

Fred shifted, "Sorry Harry. We tried to catch it b-

"It's fine," Harry cut him off and looked up, "Really. Tell Oliver I'm sorry though. Where is he by the way?"

"Ah well, he's in the locker room. Probably trying to drown himself in the shower." George shifted where he stood. "He doesn't blame you Harry, no one does but you know what Oliver's like, every game is deadly serious to him. He will be alright though, just needs a little time to himself."

Madam Pomfrey walked to Harry, carrying a cup of steaming hot chocolate that she handed to him. She placed her hands on her hips and gave the gathered Quidditch team a pointed look. "There, you've seen that he's fine, now shoo with you. I can't have you here upsetting my other patients and dripping water all over my floor." She turned to Ron and Hermione. "You two can stay."

Orion pouted, "I have to go too?"

Poppy sighed, she had a soft spot for Orion, ever since she'd cared for him when he was barely a day old and the little menace knew how to work his charms, just like his father. "You can stay as long as you behave...No pranks in my infirmary." She wagged a finger in his face.

He gave her a hug and a heart melting smile, "Of course not Madam Pomfrey."

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He gave her a hug and a heart melting smile, "Of course not Madam Pomfrey."

She hmph'd but hugged him back. "Don't be too long, any of you. Mr. Potter needs his rest." She looked at Harry. "Do drink the chocolate dear boy or else I will have to bring you one of my strengthening draughts and you know how they taste."

"Not anywhere close to chocolate unfortunately." Harry took a sip to mollify her and looked at his friends, "I really need to get that spell down."

Poppy hovered long enough to see that Harry really was drinking the chocolate before turning in a swish of skirts and going back to her little office.
"Yeah, I want you to learn the spell too...I want you safe Harry and seeing you fall today scared twenty years off my life." Hermione was still petting his hair gently.

He smiled at her and reached up to squeeze her hand, "Sorry Hermione. I don't think anyone was expecting the dementors to come to the pitch."

Orion nodded, "Oh yeah you should have seen Severus and Professor Lupin! I thought they were going to breath fire!"

"It's true." Hermione nodded. "They were like a two man army, wands blazing and spells flying." She tried for a smile but suspected it came out shaky. "And don't you dare apologize for getting hurt Harry, I'm just relieved that you're well and safe." Hermione chose not to comment on Orion's informal use of professor Snape's first name although it made her wonder.

"I'm not apologizing for the fall, I'm apologizing for scaring you." He leaned back into the pillow propped up against the bedframe, "What about Professor Dumbledore? What did he have to say about it?"

Ron bounced to sit up on the end of the bed, "He looked plenty torqued himself, even snapped at the Ministry guy sent to be the dementors' handler he did. Never seen him like that before. It was a bit scary."

Hermione nodded. "I don't think I've ever seen him look that angry...Or yell at someone else like that." For a moment the Headmaster had seemed like a completely different person and Hermione didn't like it. She supposed he'd been scared and worried too.

Orion didn't think Dumbledore had looked worried at all, just annoyed as if someone had insulted him but he kept his mouth shut.

Harry blinked, "It is a little weird. He just doesn't seem like the kind to yell at all."

Ron nodded, "He's always just like the nice old grandfather to all of us. It's scary just to see him frown."

"Granted I've only been here for a little while but I'd find it scarier with someone who twinkles and smiles all the time. It'd make me wonder what they want to hide behind such a cheerful mask." Orion dragged a chair over from another bed and plonked down on it. "I mean no one can be happy and nothing but nice every single day, just look at your own mood, it's not normal."

Harry blinked and looked at Orion, "I guess you're right about that."

Ron jiggled his foot, "It's probably just because he wants to keep us all from worrying or anything. Being the Headmaster is a big job. He has to keep the staff happy and also make sure everything runs smooth for us students. Plus he'd the Grand Warlock and Supreme Mugwump. Mum says he's a wonder cause he takes on so many stressful jobs and does them all with a smile. Dad says a smile makes it easier for people to feel good about their leaders."

Orion shrugged. "You know him much better than I do and you know us Slytherins, suspicious about everything and always watching our backs."

Ron made perfect sense and Hermione had seen how much Dumbledore cared about his students and about Harry but she couldn't shake Orion's words, they had taken root in her constantly working mind and she had a feeling she would watch the Headmaster more closely from now on whether she wanted to or not.
Before Harry could say anything McGonagall had stepped into the infirmary.

"It's good to see you awake Mr. Potter. Miss Granger, Messrs Weasley and Moonstar you should go back to your dorms for the evening, it's very late." Her tone brooked no refusal.

As his friends scrambled up Harry studied his head of house and his mind began drawing comparisons between her and Dumbledore and he was a bit ashamed that in his eyes Dumbledore was coming up short. Maybe Orion was right, maybe there was more to Dumbledore than there appeared.
Harry walked down the corridor to the Charms classroom. Something Hermione had said when he’d been griping about his problems with the spell to repel the dementor had reminded him that it wasn't just a spell, it was a charm. As good as Professor Lupin was at teaching, he wasn't the school expert on charms. Flitwick was. Maybe he'd be willing to give him some advice on casting the patronus.

Filius was in his classroom gathering up charred, melted and broken feathers. He shook his head, it was incredible what the students could do to a poor feather as they tried to levitate it for the first time. He straightened as the door opened and he stood on his tippy toes to be able to see over the tables and see who’d entered. "Mr. Potter? Is there anything I can help you with?" The tiny professor moved around the desks until he came into view.

Harry smiled at the small professor. He always did like Flitwick, the classes and the cheerful nature of the professor. "I hope so professor. You know how the dementors...well they seem to rather like me," he grimaced, "Professor Lupin's been trying to teach me how to do the Patronus charm so I can protect myself but I'm having trouble with it. I just...can't seem to find a happy enough memory to bring up more than a little puff of silver. I was hoping you might have some advice."

"Hmm," Filius scratched at his wispy hair with his wand, sending out a shower of rainbow colored sparks as he did so. "Well professor Lupin has the right idea, a happy memory will definitely help but there is more to it than that. Come, come." He motioned for Harry to move further into the classroom. "Do you remember the feeling you got when you managed your very first charm? How it felt to watch that feather float?" He sent up one of the feathers in his grasp to float around them. "You need that feeling, that confidence that you can do it to cast a successful Patronus. You can do it Mr. Potter and once you know that the rest will fall in line by itself."

Harry watched the feather float and flitter, "So to cast a Patronus I have to know I can do it?"

"Basically yes." Filius nodded. "Think of it this way. When you kick off the ground on your
broom, do you worry about how the broom flies, if it will hold you in the air? You don't, you know it will carry you, that it will make you fly. It's up to you though to control it, to make the broom go the direction you want it to. It's the same with your magic, it's there and it will take shape into any charm or spell you want it to, just trust it and point it in the direction you want it to go."

Harry tilted his head, "So, why the happy memory then? How does that help?"

"Magic thrives on emotion and the Patronus is basically magic and light in corporeal form. Happiness channels your magic, makes it brighter and easier to point in the wanted direction." Filius reached up and grasped the feather out of the air and placed it back with the others again.

Harry thought about it, thought about how much easier it was to practice the spells he learned when he was in a good mood as opposed to just how badly he tanked when he was angry or sad. "And the dementors eat all your happy emotions leaving you with only the bad...so thinking of the happy memory is so you can have the good feeling to channel the magic right?"

"Exactly right Mr. Potter, always a bright one you are." Filius smiled and placed a finger to his nose. "Also clinging to a happy memory keeping it clear and strong in your mind gives you sort of a second shield against the dementors, keep them from gaining deeper access to your mind."

The compliment had Harry smiling and his nodded in understanding, "Thank you professor. This helps, a lot."

"You are welcome Mr. Potter, it's what I am here for after all, to teach. Nothing makes an old professor happier than a student wanting to learn." The tiny little wizard leaned in with a smile on his face, whispering to Harry. "The key to this classroom is placed underneath the witches hat...If you would like to practice in peace and quiet." He pointed toward a small statue just outside the door.

Harry grinned broadly, "Double thanks then professor. I'll let you get back to what you were doing. I have to get to the library to find some more reference material for one of my essays." He waved cheerfully at Flitwick then went to meet Hermione in the library. Since the Hols were coming up soon along with the Hogsmeade weekend for the students to do their shopping, the homework load had expanded to bursting and they were all shagging their asses to keep on top of it, especially Hermione.

Hermione was in the library already, surrounded by a wall of books and several open scrolls of parchment that she was scratching things onto as she read. Her hair was in a messy bun and both her wand and an extra quill were poking out of her curls. She fiddled with the golden chain around
her neck with one hand and turned a page with the other, brown eyes scanning the text for usable information.

"Hey Hermione. How's it coming?" He peered over her fortress of books, smiling at the quill in her hair.

"Oh hi Harry." She looked up at him briefly and shoved some of the books to the side to make room for him. "It goes I suppose, it will be better as soon as I finish some of the essays. How did your meeting with Professor Flitwick go?"

"Brilliant actually. I've got an idea of how to be getting better now. It's still going to be hard though." He wrinkled his nose. He knew himself well enough to know that the confidence bit was the problem. He'd just spent too long telling himself that he can't or that he shouldn't in order to avoid a beating that it was an automatic assumption that he would fail. He'd need to push past that. He set his bag on the desk and wound up knocking a book over. "Ah," he caught it before it hit the floor though he wound up losing Hermione's place in the book, it opening instead to a chapter on mind magics. "Mind magics? I didn't know there were that many that they need a chapter in a book."

"Huh?" Hermione tore herself from the thrilling ogre battles of 1146 to pay attention to Harry. "A chapter? Harry, there's a whole shelf in here about mind magics, different types and what you can do with them. Do you want to read someone's mind? Control it? Place your own suggestions in someone else's brain? Of course most of the practices are banned but you can still read about them and how they were used in the past. The most commonly practiced these days are Legilimency/Occlumency, reading and shielding your mind."

"Yeah?" Curiosity getting the better of him he flipped through the chapter finding what Hermione had named and reading about Legilimency. It was a disturbing thought, that if he looked someone in the eyes they could read his mind without him knowing. "I guess this is why I never see any of the purebloods meeting the professors eyes. Bloody hell Mione this is a creepy thing. I never even knew someone could do this."

Hermione nodded. "Oh I agree with you there Harry, mind magics are nasty business. And you're right, most pureblood families drill their spawn from an early age to avoid eye contact with anyone not immediate family. Wizard politics is a slippery slope and trust isn't even a word used."

He read the short passage on Occlumency and decided that once he got the Patronus down he'd look into that. Until then he'd start avoiding eyes. "I think that's true with all politics really Mione." He smiled at the chuckle that got from her and set the book back down before pulling his essay materials out. He was almost done with Transfiguration and Charms and then it was on to his least favorite. Divination and Potions. It was sad when something managed to beat out Potions for least
liked subject in his mind. Then there was Care of Magical Creatures, "How's Hagrid doing by the way Mione?"

"Not all that great." Brown eyes filled with worry and guilt. "Lucius Malfoy pressed for Buckbeak to be executed, the board hasn't decided yet but Malfoy holds a lot of sway. I've been trying to read up on things that could help him but I've so much to do and the days just keep wooshing by and I'm not sure what to do."

He reached over and pat her hand, "Ron and I haven't been much help I know. There anything I can do? Look up? I've got more time than you do after all.'

Hermione smiled crooked smile at that and turned her hand so she could squeeze his fingers lightly before pulling back. "No, thank you for the offer but you should concentrate on getting the Patronus charm down before the next Quidditch match. Use your spare time on that instead." She nibbled on the end of her quill. "Hey Harry...Is it just me or had professor Lupin behaved a bit strange lately, after the thing that happened on Halloween?" She had already figured out Lupin's other secret, it wasn't that much of a mystery after all but that wasn't what she meant. Lupin seemed jumpy and...sad? Disappointed maybe, she couldn't explain it.

"It's not just you. He's...I don't know almost depressed. Like he was expecting something different to happen. The look on his face when he saw the Fat Lady's portrait...it was like someone had taken something and jabbed him in the heart."

She nodded. "It almost hurts to see that look on him." Lupin had turned out to be a great professor and Hermione had grown to care about him. His intelligence and dry humor fitted hers and she felt they understood each other. Still the man had secrets and Hermione couldn't help but wonder what had made such secrets necessary and what had put that hurt in his eyes.

Harry nodded, "I kinda hope the Hols will maybe lift his spirits. We need him to stick around before we get another Lockheart!"

"Hear, hear." Hermione said with feeling. She was still embarrassed about the stupid little girl crush she'd had on the useless berk who'd been their professor the previous year. "Lupin actually knows what he's doing and I don't want to lose that."

"Nor do I. He knew my parents too." Harry scratched down a note about the properties of fluxweed.
Hermione looked up in surprise. "Really? Has he told you anything about them?" She knew Harry was starving for any kind of information about his parents and what sort of people they'd been.

He smiled and nodded, "Yeah. Says I got Dad's talent for finding trouble and getting out of it. He really liked my Mum, not like a girlfriend but a precious friend. He said she saw the good in everything and everyone, even if they didn't see it in themselves. That she was kind and brave and bright," He looked up at Hermione, "and that Dad and I were her world. Wish I could remember that."

Reaching over the mountain of scrolls and books Hermione took Harry's hand and squeezed it. "I wish so too, more than that I wish you still had them. They sound wonderful though, not that I had any doubts. They made you and look at how great you've turned out, despite being stuck in that horrible place." Hermione got so angry every time she thought about the Dursleys, Harry shouldn't have to be there, it wasn't fair.

There was an annoyed hushing sound and Madam Pince was giving them the evil eye from her counter.

Harry's lips twitched, "Thanks Mione," he squeezed her hand back, "we'll talk more later. I don't want you getting in trouble with Madam Pince."

"Mmm, she's not that bad but she's right. I need to study anyway but we'll definitely talk more later." She gave him a smile and did her best to get back into the ogre wars and how many heads which ogre chief collected.

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Harry swept his invisibility cloak around himself and started sneaking down through Hogwarts. He wasn't sure yet how he'd get past the dementors but he was not going to miss out on Hogsmeade any further just because he had the aunt and uncle from hell.

Standing in wait George gave his brother a brilliant and somewhat wicked smile as their prey moved past them. Smooth after years of moving like one being the both grabbed the little rabbit under his right now invisible arms and dragged him around a corner. "What's the rush Harry?"

Fred grinned at the struggling and slight yelping sounds Harry made, "Surely you don't want to leave this bastion of safety and learning."
"Guys let me go. Come on, please." Harry tried ineffectually to wriggle away even as the twins manhandled him around the corner and out of sight.

"We'll give you points for effort Harry but-"

"Not even this fancy cloak of yours would be enough to get you all the way to Hogsmeade unseen." George leaned closer to Harry with a grin. "There's fresh snow out mate, any plans for that?"

Harry pulled his cloak back off and parked his bum on the stairs, "Oh and do the two second biggest rulebreakers in Hogwarts History have any suggestions for poor deprived me then?" His expression was vaguely disgruntled.

"Second biggest? Shocked and appalled we are!" George and Fred sat down on either side of Harry, both of them wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "Here we are, willing to help and aid ickle little Harrykins and slurs are what we get in return."

"Pained, pained we are mate. How can you say we're only the second biggest rulebreakers?" Fred laid a hand over his heart in scandalized injury.

"Talk to Orion, he's got loads of tales of rulebreakers that apparently put you to shame." Harry shook his head that their play acting.

Fred pursed his lips, "The new little snake that royally stuck it to Malfoy?"

"The itching potion was brilliant but he should work on his getaways." George rubbed his temple with a freckled finger as he spoke. Fred and he had their eyes on the little Slytherin to see what he would come up with next. "Just who is the Moonstar monster singing his praises too then? Who is supposed to be better than us?"

Harry shrugged, "Some group called the Marauders-"

"The Marauders huh?" George interrupted Harry while he exchanged a look with his brother. "Freddie, I think we and the wee snakey should have a chat. Imagine mentioning the Marauders
just now when we are about to gift you with greatness Harry, just out of the goodness of our hearts."

Harry eyed him, "Uh-huh, and what, pray tell, is this greatness supposed to be?"

Fred pulled a folded up parchment from his inside pocket, "This, Harry, is the secret to our success. When we were just ickle firsties-"

"We snagged it out of Filch's office, not knowing what a treasure we'd gotten away with. It took time and work but it finally revealed its secrets to us and Harry...Oh what secrets they are." George reached out and stroked the yellowed, blank parchment. "This Harry, this parchment has taught us more than all the teachers of Hogwarts combined."

Harry stifled the incredulous laugh that wanted to escape at the twins fondling an old bit of parchment, "Okay I'll bite. What's so special about an old sheet of parchment?"

Fred shook his head and tsked, "One insult after another, tis a good thing we like you Harry. Now watch carefully," he pulled out his wand, aware of George doing the same, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good!" and two wands tapped the map.

Lines began to bloom over the parchment and soon Harry could read, "Messers Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief Makers are proud to present THE MARAUDER'S MAP?"

"The secret of our success this is." George's voice was soft and almost reverent. "This is a map of Hogwarts, showing everything and everyone within the castle. Look at it." He held it out underneath Harry's nose.

Harry looked at a tiny dot moving about in Dumbledore's office tagged with the old wizard's name, "He's pacing? Bloody hell," he spotted Snape in the dungeons, McGonagall and Flitwick in what looked to be a teacher's lounge, "okay I take it back, this is brilliant. I may have to pay more attention to Orion's stories now."

Fred grinned, "Ah yes, Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs, we owe them so much. If not for them-"
"We wouldn't be half the men we are today, with all our successful pranks behind us." George's grin was a mirror image of his brothers. "See here?" He pointed towards certain lines on the map. "It shows all the secret passages in and out of Hogwarts...Some leading straight to Hogsmeade even." He looked at Harry, waiting for him to get it.

It didn't take long and a grin slowly spread over Harry's face, "I'd almost wish you were my brothers except I'd rather be a friend considering how batty you drive Ron. I take everything back. But...is it really okay to give me this? I mean what about you two?"

"Oh though it breaks our hearts to part with it, you've the greater need. We already know all the passageways after all. Now this one here," he pointed at a passageway on the fourth floor, "is caved in so no use in using that. And this one here," he pointed at another, "takes you right to the Whomping Willow."

"This one here, the faculty knows about so if you have to use that one be sure to be careful." George's finger traveled over a line on the second floor. "But this one Harry, this one will take you right into the basement of Honeydukes in Hogsmeade." He tapped his finger on a line that seemed to have its origin...Right behind where they sat in fact.

Harry turned round to see a humpbacked witch statue that was mimicked on the map and grinned wider, "Someone ought to name their first born after you two."

Fred chuckled, "Well you keep that in mind in later years," he ruffled Harry's hair, "Now to deactivate the map you just say 'Mischief managed' and tap it with your wand. If you don't anyone can read the thing. And only the phrase we used gets it to work. If someone tries a revealo or anything it'll just insult them." He snickered. That had been funny when the map had done it to them.

"Take care of it and use it well...And often," George winked before standing up and placing his hands on Harry's shoulder. "Now son, go forth and see the world, we wish you luck and joy on your travels." He fake sniffled and buried his face in Fred's shoulder. "They grow up so fast Freddie...What should we do now?"

Fred pat George on the back and winked at Harry as he lead his twin away, "Well Georgie I think we need to locate a certain little snake don't you?"

Harry grinned and swept the invisibility cloak around himself before heading to the statue of the witch. On the map a speech bubble bloomed out of his dot with the word Dissendium in it. He spoke the word to the statue and the witches hump opened. He scrambled into it and slide down
into the passageway. Casting a lumos he walked along the passage and after about an hour he was
sneaking into the Honeydukes cellar. He tucked the map into his robes and walked up the stairs
into the shop, spotting Ron and Hermione perusing the candy.

Ron hummed, "Not the blood pops, do you think Harry would like the cockroach clusters?"

"Definitely not." Harry's disembodied voice spoke into Ron's ear making him jump.

"Harry!" Hermione startled too and bit her lip when her outburst caused some people to look at her
funny. "What are you doing here? How did you get here? What if you get caught?" Her eyes were
narrowed as she hissed the words out into thin air, not knowing exactly where her friend was.

"Shopping, the twins, and I can't get caught if I'm not seen right?" Harry filched a fizzing whizzby
with an invisible hand and slipped it under his cloak.

"Hm." She did not find the situation or the explanation satisfactory but Harry was still here now
and it wasn't as if she wasn't happy to see him. "You are much too pleased with yourself but come
on then, let's show you Hogsmeade."

He grinned, "You're too good to me Hermione. You and Ron don't mind doing the actual
purchasing if I hand you the money do you?"

Ron was nearly vibrating with curiosity, "Course not but mate you've got to tell us just what my
brothers did or said to get you here."

"All in good time Ron. Now, let's shop?"

They finished their business at Honeydukes, coming out with heavy bags filled with all sort of
sweets before moving over to Zonko's. Hermione only shaking her head at her friends glee over the
different kind of joke objects available. She did not see the charm of fun in pocketful of puke or
choke me oranges. It must be a boy thing.

Finishing with the shops they slowly walked toward the Shrieking Shack to hear if there were any
haunted howls coming from there. Hermione looked to make sure that Harry was walking in Ron's
footsteps as to keep his own hidden in the falling snow. "It's just a shack, if it's haunted why not
tear it down?" She tilted her head and looked at the rickety old building.
Ron gawped at her, "Then the land would be haunted instead of the building! It'd be awful!"

Hermione just blinked at him. "Okay, it's none of my business. I just don't get it, if you have problem then you solve it but that's just me." She was about to say something more when a snowball smacked her on the side of her face.

"Well have you seen this boys, a Weasel and a mudblood out on their own." Draco wiped his furred gloves free from snow and smirked at Crabbe and Goyle.

Ron's face turned red, "Malfoy you little git. What you have to wait until you're not at Hogwarts to be the cowardly little twat you are now? I heard that Snape actually gave you a lecture! Oh the horror!"

Draco sneered, his lips turning white with anger. "You have no idea what Snape told me Weasel. What are you doing here then? Looking at an upgrade from the hovel you and the rest of your rodent family lives in? I'm sure this looks like a castle compared to what you're used to."

"Why you little-" Ron broke off blinking as a snowball hit Malfoy full in the face hard enough to send him staggering back a couple steps.

"Fuck!" Draco grabbed his nose, feeling both the impact and the sting of the snowball as he looked around wildly with eyes tearing from pain, trying to see who'd hit him with the snow ball. "Don't just stand there." He hissed at his goons. "Do something."

Hermione had to hide her smile at Draco's antics even as her cheek stung.

Before Crabbe or Goyle could do anything a flurry of snowballs came out of nowhere hitting Malfoy and his goons. Ron started laughing as Crabbe was pantsed and knocked into Goyle, the both of them sent sprawling into the snow, then Malfoy was knocked over and was dragged towards the Shrieking Shack.

Kicking, hitting and screaming Draco finally managed to free himself of the invisible hands holding him and dragging him towards the entrance to the Shrieking Shack. No matter what anyone said Draco wasn't a coward but he did realize the perks of a good retreat. So he scrambled to his feet and slipped his way down the pathway, not caring really what happened to Goyle and Crabbe, just concentrating on getting away.
Ron was nearly cackling as the trio of bullies retreated then he jumped as the ties to his hat began floating up and down in the air.

"Oh Harry." It was meant to come out scolding but her voice sounded more amused than anything else as Hermione pulled Ron's hat strings out of Harry's gasp and then tied them beneath Ron's chin in a fancy little bow, snickering to herself at the result. "What if Draco had seen you? You could have gotten into a lot of trouble Harry."

Harry pulled the hood of his cloak off, laughing, "But he didn't see me and I'm not in trouble. Little twat had it coming too," he reached up and ghosted his fingers over her cheek, "that was a hard snowball he threw."

Ron grabbed Harry in a headlock before Hermione could say anything, "Stop doing things like that! It's not funny scaring me mate."

Hermione's cheek burned but she firmly blamed the snow ball, it wasn't Harry's touch that had caused it...Absolutely not! "Come on you two, it's cold. Let's go to Three Broomsticks. Harry needs to try the butterbeer and you Ron want to show him the darling Madam Rosmerta right?" She grinned at Ron.

Ron spluttered, turning bright red, "W-well she's nice a-and all."

Harry swept his hood back up over his head, lips twitching, "Nice and all? What's the 'and all' part of that?"

"Front heavy." Hermione motioned to her chest. "And she walks as if she had fighting kittens under her skirt...Calls Ron handsome." Hermione's smile was teasing as they slowly walked back into town.

Harry had to bark out laughter at the way Ron nearly turned purple as they walked, him in between them. "Well by all means, anyone who can turn Ron that red I want to see."

Ron grumbled, "Oi! Quit picking on me, beside Hermione you're starting to get a little front heavy yourself."
There was a choked off half screeching sound half curse coming from Hermione as her cheeks caught fire and her arms crossed over her chest over her coat. "You... You mindless lout!" She moved until she was in front of him and kicked Ron as hard as she could on his shin before stalking off in front of them angrily.

"Ow!" Ron reached down to rub his shin, "That hur-OW!"

Harry had smacked Ron on the back of the head, underneath the cloak his own face was turning pink. "Ron that was a dumb thing to say even for one of Malfoy's gorillas."

"Well she is! It's hard not to notice when all the other girls in our year, even Lavender, don't look so much like a... girl..."

"Ron just stop before you choke on your foot."

"Er yeah... probably should do that. Oi! Hermione wait up! We have to keep people from noticing our friend!"

Harry shook his head and trotted after Ron, wondering what butterbeer was and why it was legal for them to drink it.

----------------------------------------

"Harry?" Hermione's voice was soft and tentative as she approached her friend. Harry had stormed out of Three Broomsticks after he'd snuck in the private room to listen on that conversation. Something was terribly wrong now and Hermione didn't really know what to do. She walked over and sat down next to him on the tree trunk, not caring about the cold or the snow. "What's wrong Harry?"

He was shaking in rage as she tugged his cloak away to see him, "He was their friend..." he balled his hand into a fist and slammed it down on the log, "He was their friend! And he betrayed them!"

Ron couldn't recall seeing Harry quite this angry before, not even at Snape or Malfoy, it was a little scary, especially seeing the snow actually melt a little around him from wild magic. "Who was?"
"Sirius Black! He gave them up to Voldemort!"

There was a twinge in Hermione's heart. She hated seeing Harry so...Broken. So angry and lost. What did you say to something like this? 'I'm sorry your parents friend betrayed then to the biggest evil and sent them to their deaths, trying with you as well?' Nothing she could say could make this right. "I'm so sorry Harry." She wrapped both her arms around him and held on no matter how angry he was.

He leaned into her, "I'm going to kill him."

"Harry, mate-"

"No. I don't care what anyone says! If the dementors don't find him I will and when I do I'm going to kill him! For my parents and for me!" Harry knew he was flying on rage and fury right now but he meant it, meant every word.

"And then what?" Hermione kept her arms around Harry. "After you have killed him, taken a life. What will change? Will your parents come back? Will it remove his betrayal? All that will be different is you taking a step closer to becoming like him." She swallowed around the lump in her throat. "I won't try to stop you...Hell I'll even help you if you're set on it but think about what it will do to you Harry...That's all I care about."

He turned and buried his face in her shoulder, "I don't know. I just know it hurts right now."

Ron swallowed around the lump in his throat and sat on Harry's other side to lay a hand on his shoulder in support. He knew Hermione was thinking of the best way to save Harry from what killing someone could do to you but he had a nasty feeling that nothing was going to save Harry from killing at least one person because until he was good and proper dead for eternity Voldemort would keep coming after Harry. "Whatever you decide mate, we're with you."

"Always." Hermione agreed and held him tight, hugging him close to her in an effort to offer all the comfort she could. "We're always on your side and we'll always have your back Harry no matter what you'll do or what will happen in the future we'll be there right along with you."

Harry just murmured a thank you and tried to get himself under control. He hated the fact of all this and really fucking hated knowing that someone they'd trusted more than anything, had essentially killed his parents.
Later that night Harry was lying awake, staring up at the ceiling his thoughts on trust and betrayal and the masks people wore. He'd already examined his friendships and just given himself heartache over it so now he found himself comparing his professors in his head, poking at everything he'd seen of them all to see if anything rang false. Only two brought up real questions. Snape of course was an enigma. Impossibly hateful towards him and then he went and saved his life, repeatedly, but as confusing as that was, you expected Snape to do something that seemed out of character. He also showed emotions, the full range of them from happiness, even if it was at failing a student, to fury to the very rare flickers of sadness you could catch now and again. So in a way Snape was trustworthy too. But, back to Orion's point about Dumbledore, the Headmaster was always smiling, always twinkling, always seemed to be the dotty old man and it just...didn't quite fit. How could someone be that soft, that gentle and silly really be the only one Voldemort honestly feared unless he was hiding a darker side?

Harry was starting to question what he knew about the man he'd credited with his annual rescue from the Dursleys and he didn't quite like it for all that it seemed necessary.

Chapter End Notes

TW's AN: For those who might be a bit mystified about Hermione 'looking a bit more like a girl' than the rest of the Hogwarts girls it's because of the time turner. She is effectively at least DOUBLING her age. While the rest of the world runs a normal timeline, she's going back but when she goes back she doesn't lose any age or experience she's already gained. So on paper she's only a year older than Harry and Ron but biologically, because of the time turner, by the time 3rd year ends she'll be closer to two.

We hope you enjoyed this chapter and thank you for reading. Leave a comment if it pleases you, they're always loved (and sometimes horded)
Orion was bouncing on his father's bed, happy that he got to be here for Christmas morning, "Dad, dad, dad, dad, dad, dad, dad, dad, dad, dad, dad, daaaaaaaaaaaad!"

There was a grumble and a head of gray streaked brown hair emerged from underneath the blanket. "Merlin Orion, what time is it and how can you possibly be this bouncy?" Remus tried to blink the sleep out of his eyes before grabbing his son, pulling him down and tickling him for all he was worth. Orion might be eleven but he was still Remus' little boy, always would be and he treasured every moment he could spend with his son.

Orion fell into a heap of giggles and squirming, "Da-a-a-ad! Stoooooop!" He managed to squirm away and hop to the end of the bed, "It's morning! The sun is up, the winter birds are singing, and it's Christmas morning! Present time!"

"Present time? Is that right?" Amber eyes were wide and innocent as Remus looked around. "Where could these presents be then?" Instead of the usual pile at the bottom of the bed Remus and Orion had always opened their gifts by their tree. So Remus had decorated his small quarters with a glittering Christmas tree and the usual pile of gifts rested underneath it. "We should go find them." He rolled out of bed, pulled on a pair of thick woollen socks and a knitted sweater since the castle wasn't exactly warm in the winter. "Come on then, hot chocolate and prezzies await. Later your Uncle will come for lunch."

"WooHoo!" Orion grabbed his dad's hand and tugged him towards the Christmas tree that was in the outer quarters. "I gotta bunch and you got more than from just me and Uncle Severus this year too!"

"It looks like it yes." Remus said with slight wonder in his voice, he couldn't think of anyone who would want to give him a Christmas gift, he wasn't close to anyone that way. He'd had some hopes...But they were dwindling. Sirius had been out for months and months and he hadn't even attempted to contact him. And Remus saw what he did to the portrait of the Fat Lady. It was getting clear that Sirius didn't miss him and didn't want to see him. It was time to let go and move on, one
day at a time just as he had been over the last eleven years. "Don't just look at them then Ry, open them." He smiled at his son and took the gift Orion handed him, opening it to find an expertly woven coat in dark brown followed by leather gloves and a pair of warm boots. There was no card attached to the gift and Remus had no idea who'd gifted him it.

"Wow! Look at those! dad they look really spiffing! Like something from one of the fancy shops! Santa must know how great a dad you are!" Orion handed his dad the other presents with his name on them, one from him and one from Uncle Sev and even one from Madam Pomfrey, then sat down to tear into his own presents.

"You are the great one Ry, all greatness is yours and maybe Santa wanted you to have a well dressed Daddy." Remus' eyes were filled with love as he held his presents in his lap for now, wanting to watch his son open his gifts and see the expression on his face as he unwrapped each gift.

Orion set the gift from his dad to the side, knowing that he always gave the best and, "Saving the best for last." Then he tore into the gift from Severus giving a hoot at the full set of reptilian potion ingredients, there was even boomslang skin! "Alright! Whoa I could even make polyjuice with this now," he grinned fiercely then turn to the next one, "Hey this one's from Harry!" He opened it and cackled at the muggle book of fairy tales and the red cloak. He'd made a joke a while back about sometimes feeling like little red riding hood. The cloak was warm velvet with satin lining and an inside pocket 'for any little tricks up your sleeve'. "Awesome!

"It's wonderful, you'll have to thank Harry later and you have your very own big bad wolf as well." Remus grinned and pointed to himself. The red cloak looked really good on Orion with his dark colors and hey as long as he wore that he would at least be easily spotted when he was up to his tricks. Remus opened the gift from Severus, smiling at the obscure book his friend had given him. Severus had made a thing out of finding authors and books no one had ever heard of in an effort to 'broaden a canine mind'. Orion's gift was a hat and scarf in royal blue and Remus quickly put on both the hat and wrapped the scarf around his neck.

"Looking good Dad! Too bad there aren't any cute single witches your age to coo over you!" Orion continued opening his gifts, a book on difficult potion interactions and one on transfiguration from Hermione, Ron sent him a box of Chocolate Frogs, which he held close to his chest and eyed his Dad, "Mine! You no touchy!" Then a lumpy package wrapped in brown paper. "Hmm fudge and ooooh a sweater and it's Slytherin Green!" He immediately put it on, giggling at the O on the front of it. "Awesome! The card says its from Ron's Mum," he tilted his head curiously, "I've never met her have I?"

The sweater had Molly's touch all over it and no matter that his son would now walk around as a living O it did suit him. Remus grinned as he looked at his almost too cute son. "No you've never met her. Not yet anyway. Now that you're friends with Ron, Harry and Hermione there's only a
question of time before you do I suppose. She's a very nice woman.”

"I'll have to write her a thank you letter then. Plus then she can hear about me from the source!" Orion picked up the next package, from the twins, and hooted when he opened it to reveal all the tricks and pranks within, "Wicked!"

He also got a journal from Dennis and a first aide kit from Madam Pomfrey then he set everything else aside and set to opening the gift from his dad. His eyes went wide when the gleam of silver nestled in tissue paper was revealed and he lifted out the set of scales carefully. They were in an older style but still more than he knew they could really afford and there were also real crystal vials and an onyx potions knife. "Wow, Dad..." he looked up, surprised amber eyes meeting Remus'.

"These belonged to your father when he was here at Hogwarts. Now that you're a student I figured it was time for you to have them." Remus looked at his son with pride and love and a tinge of sadness behind everything. "Severus tells me that you excel in his class, you should have tools that do you justice Orion. Happy Christmas."

Orion knew a little about his father. Knew that he'd been a big part of his Dad's life and that he'd inherited his father's penchant for playfulness and pranks and that the war had taken him away. He also knew it hurt his Dad to think about him. He carefully set the scales, vials, and knife in the box then leaped up to give his Dad a huge hug, "They're perfect. Thank you Daddy."

"I'm glad you like them Ry, use them well...No polyjuice potions allowed." Remus knew his son was smart enough to brew it and the havoc he could wreck with it. "I love you."

"Love you too. And I promise I won't brew any polyjuice potion to do a prank or anything." He bounced away grinning, "I'm gonna pack everything together then how about we go down to the Great Hall and I can thank everyone there and show them that I look like Christmas!" He spun in the cloak and green sweater.

Remus chuckled, how could he do anything but smile when he had the most wonderful child ever? "Sounds like a plan. I would change out of the pyjama trousers though, kind of draws attention away from your Christmas look." Remus nodded towards Orion's pyjama trousers covered in bouncing puppies. "I shall change as well and then we can go."

"Okay!" Orion scampered off to find an equally Christmassy pair of trousers to go with his shirt and cloak. Maybe Dennis' brother would take a picture of him all dressed red and green that he could send to Ron's Mum along with his thanks for the sweater?
It was a much less merry Christmas out in the Forbidden Forest for a certain canine as he pounced on a guinea hen and proceeded to eat it. The Grim better known as Sirius Black ate the scanty meal with bitterness curling in the back of his mouth. For so long he'd been locked up in Azkaban, dementors ripping precious memories and emotions from his head while Peter ate and lived well, as a rat true but well and poised to take action against the only thing left worth caring about.

He growled in a deep, dark snarl as his mind tried to tell him he had more to care about in Remus but that bloody bastard hadn't done anything when he'd been taken away. He'd not fought for him, not tried to get him at least a proper trial, and worse he'd left Harry to rot with the Dursleys. Oh he'd inspected those rotten, foul muggles right enough. Right until they'd tossed Harry out and he knew exactly what they'd done to his godson, could smell the blood that came from that perfect little cookie cutter house and it made him want to gag.

And his supposedly 'loyal' wolf had left Harry there, to be abused by those people. He could forgive Remus for leaving him in Azkaban, it wasn't as though he'd trusted his lover the last few days so he could even understand it, but not for leaving Harry with Petunia bloody Dursley and her fat walrus of a husband.

Reckoning was coming though. He'd get hold of Peter and rip him ratty limb from ratty limb, and he'd make bloody well certain that Remus understood just how low he thought he was for abandoning Harry. It wouldn't be long now.

Harry scowled and poked at his Christmas dinner, aware of Ron sniping at Hermione. He was trying not to do the same because he did understand that she'd just been worried about him and that it would be an ingenious plan to send him the broom of brooms only to curse it to kill him. But it still had a bitter taste. A Firebolt, the fastest broom in the wizarding world and McGonagall was going to strip it down. He hung his head and groaned. And with his luck it would turn out to be cursed. "Ron stop please."

"But mate she-"

"I know, okay? I know and I'm not too happy but Hermione's just concerned about me okay?" He look at his two bickering friends, "So I'm just going to beg Professor McGonagall to work on
making sure it's safe as fast as she can with as little damage as she and Professor Flitwick can manage. I'll just practice on the school brooms until I can't put it off any longer."

Hermione fisted her hands inside the sleeves of her knitted cardigan. She was feeling absolutely wretched but she was sick and tired of Ron tearing into her. "Look, I'm sorry that the broom was taken away but I'm not sorry I told...I'm not!" Her jaw was set in a stubborn line as she glared at them both. "Harry's safety means more to me that anything so if that means you being angry with me then so be it. I can take it. I just thought his safety, his life meant more than some silly sports broom and a little boy game but I guess I was wrong." She got up from her seat and hurried toward the girls dorm. She would not give that redheaded berk or Harry the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

"Bloody hell," Harry shot out of his seat after her, "Hermione stop!" She kept going so he used the speed honed in countless games of Harry Hunting to catch up to her just outside the portrait and snag her arm, pulling her round and he didn't even half mind the attempted kick to his groin but as he avoided it he pulled her close to keep from another attempt being made. "I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you...well not hardly but more...the circumstances. I mean what kind of life do I have when even a Christmas present is suspect? A Christmas present for Merlin's sake."

Sniffing she stopped trying to cause him bodily harm and buried her face in his shoulder, clutching the back of his sweater tightly. "I'm sorry Harry, it's unfair and you don't deserve it. I wish you could have a life without any worry and mountains of Christmas gifts that you never had to be suspicious over. I really do wish that. But you don't, as wretched as it is you don't and if I have to be an arse to keep you safe then I will."

"You're not an arse," he hugged her back, "Just a bit of a tattle tale but your heart is in the right place. I'm just being a pouty berk."

"Not pouty...Just a berk." Hermione gave a teary laugh. "I really am sorry, you know I don't want to hurt you." She pulled away. "I'm going to wash my face but I'll be back, not trying to kick your private places."

"Thank Merlin for that. I'll be here waiting on you then." He kissed her cheek. "Then we'll gang up on Ron how's that sound?"

"Always fun to gang up on him." She hadn't quite gotten over the front heavy comment yet, especially since she had to get all new shirts to have room for the...Growth. "I'll be back shortly." She leaned in and hugged him before climbing through the portrait.

He leaned on the wall looking up at the ceiling as he waited for her. He hoped McGonagall
managed to inspect the broom without messing it up and that she finished before the game with Ravenclaw. He could just get another Nimbus but then what would he do with it once he got the Firebolt back?

Quickly washing up and running a brush through her hair Hermione deemed herself ready to go back to her boys. Mostly she'd just wanted a few minutes to herself. She loved Ron and Harry they were her very best friends and she wouldn't trade them for anything in the world but sometimes, sometimes they were just so...Male. Taking a deep breath she put on a smile and walked back to where Harry was waiting, oh how she hoped that blasted broom wasn't cursed and that Harry would get it back quickly.

He looked at her and smiled, "Feel better?"

"Yeah, sorry about the moodiness." Hermione smiled back and walked with Harry back to where Ron was sitting, still brooding by the sight of things.

Harry exchanged a glance with Hermione then brought Ron into a weak headlock, "Alright enough being gloomy. It's Christmas after all."

Since Harry was holding him down, even if it was weakly, Hermione used the opportunity to plonk down on his lap and flutter her lashes at him. "I'm sorry Ronnikins, please, please forgive me." She used a little girl voice because she knew how much it freaked him out.

"GAH! Geroff! Now and please don't do that Hermione!" He struggled and flapped his arms until Harry released him and he nearly went flying backwards.

Hermione giggled but got off him as well and straightened her clothes. It was so easy to get to Ron and it never ever got old. "Come on, it's Christmas and plenty of sweets still uneaten. Just don't tell my parents."

He grumbled and straightened his clothes, "Mental, you're both mental!"

Harry sat down, "Oh don't be like that. Just think, if I don't get the Firebolt back in time for the Ravenclaw game when I do get it back I'll have an extra broom just mouldering away."

He stuck out his tongue, "Now that you said that you'll get the broom back just in time you know."
"Here's for hoping." Hermione crossed her fingers and grinned, she didn't want to upset Ron but she couldn't help but tease if only a little. She wished she had money to buy Ron a broom and she wished he wasn't so prideful and accept it.

He gave her a two fingered salute before stuffing a berry pastie in his mouth, "You learnt 'at 'ield 'ell 'et?"

"Excuse me?" Hermione looked slightly disgusted. "Why don't you actually chew the whole bloody pastie you stuffed in then try to speak. Gods Molly would box your ears if she saw you."

He glared and swallowed, "I said did you learn that bloody shield spell yet?"

"As a matter of fact yes I have. Professor Lupin was kind enough to teach me even with fall term exams to grade and everything." Hermione pulled her wand out and showed them the rather simple spell. "You have to say the words of course but it's more about the intent you have when you cast it that determines how it will turn out." She saw the look her boys exchanged. "Oh don't look like that, do you want to learn it or not?"

Harry nodded, "You bet your curls I do. No more exploding cauldron? Absolutely."

Ron agreed, "Plus I'd like to keep my rat alive."

"Yes, Scabbers is priority number one." Hermione agreed. Maybe with this shield in place she wouldn't have to keep Crookshanks locked up as much, the girls in the dorm were getting sick and tired of having hair scrunchies and knickers shredded. "Okay then, look and listen closely. Remember the swish at the end and that it's all about intent." She guided them through the simple steps of the spell.

Harry followed the steps and, testing what Flitwick said about magic working better with happiness, focused on how it felt to have Hermione and Ron as friends, to actually have friends as he cast it and then in a blink there was a shield around the plate of treacle tart.

"That's it Harry, perfect!" Hermione praised and really, honestly she was only a tiny little bit annoyed that Harry managed it perfectly on his first try. It had taken her about five before the shield had worked as it should.
He smiled at her and leaned in to murmur, "I'll tell you a secret Flitwick told me later okay?"

She shot him a curious look, as always willing and wanting to learn something new. "Thank you." She whispered back and turned to look at Ron. "Feel like giving it a try Ron?"

He scrunched up his nose and gave his wand a swish and tried the spell, his eyes going wide and ducking his shoulders when it sent a cinnamon bun flying and sticking to the wall. "Oops."

"Don't worry about it, happened to me too. Well not with a cinnamon bun but with Professor Lupin's tea pot...the Japanese one." Hermione flushed red. "Thankfully he managed to snatch it in air before it shattered. Just try it again." She moved behind him and adjusted the wrist movements a little. "Now give it a go."

He tried again and this time a cinnamon bun only scooted a few centimeters, "Oh look, improvement."

"It *is* improvement. Don't whine, it doesn't suit you." Hermione continued to stand behind him, placing her hand over his. "Think of the intent. Like this is your bun, only yours but Fred and George are after it, wants to eat it right in front of you. Protect it! Show them what's what."

A couple seats down Fred grinned and drew his wand, "And if you'd like a little incentive Ronniekins-"

"We're always happy to lend a hand. Learning is important after all baby brother." George grinned as well and tilted his head, his wand twirling on the table.

"See, protect your bun Ron." Hermione smothered her laughter as best she could.

"Bloody prats," Ron grit his teeth and put a little more force into protecting the cinnamon bun for himself before Fred or George could get their greedy hands on it. A swish of his wand and there it was, a shield keeping Fred's levitation spell from working, "Ha!"

"Knew you could do it!" Hermione bounced a little in glee and hugged Ron tightly from behind.
George was openly grinning. "Ronniekins has always been overly fond of his buns. Remember when he was ickle and couldn't fall asleep unless he was gripping them? Afraid they would run away without him he was."

Ron hissed at them, "Shut up!"

Harry had to turn his head to keep from laughing even as Fred started to join in.

"Oh yes. I remember, especially after All Hallows one year, remember Georgie, he asked mum for-"

"OI! Mione make them stop!"

"Alright enough you two. Or else I won't hesitate to use a nifty little spell to make you air out all of your secrets...I'm sure there's plenty of disturbing things you want to keep to yourself." Hermione glared at them but the corners of her mouth were twitching.

Fred held up his hands in a surrender motion before turning back to George and starting to talk in undertones, clearly plotting something.

Ron bowed to Hermione, "Thank you so so much!"

"You are very much welcome but have no doubts, I will use this against you the next time you're being pissy." Hermione pulled on a strand of red hair. "Now, let's go protect that rat of yours shall we?"

"Please lets, before your tiny lion manages to escape and sneak a snack." He got up and was nearly bouncing on the balls of his feet waiting for Harry and Hermione to get up as well.

Smiling at Ron's enthusiasm, Hermione got up and followed Ron and Harry toward the boys dormitory where Scabbers was being kept so he'd be safe from hunting cats. It was quite amusing really that girls were allowed in the boys dorm but not the opposite. What kept a girl from sneaking into a boy's bed if the mood hit them? Shaking her head at her own thought she continued to walk after them.
Ron tugged down the mound of sheets Scabbers had made his nest, "Hey Scabbers, I've a way to-" his brows knit when the dismantled nest showed no Scabbers. He bent down to look under the bed, "Scabbers?"

Furrowing her brows, Hermione started looking as well. Checking the floor and behind Ron's bedside table and trunk. "Scabbers?" She turned to Harry. "Is he in your bed?"

Harry looked and shook his head, "No."

Ron started tossing the room like mad, looking through Neville, Seamus, and Dean's beds and trunks calling for his rat. "Scabbers where are you?!" He got an idea and spun round, "Harry, would Scabbers show on the map?"

"Er maybe, probably. I mean Mrs. Norris and Crookshanks do so he should as well." Harry pulled out the Marauders map and activated it, scanning over everything looking for Scabbers.

Hermione looked over Harry's shoulder as best she could but she could not see a tag with Scabbers on it anywhere on the map. "Crookshanks has been locked up tightly in my dorms for days. I swear it Ron."

Harry nodded and pointed at the map, "Crookshanks is still in the girl's dorm on here too. But...no Scabbers."

Ron moaned and flopped down to sit on his bed, "He's run away!"

"We'll find him Ron, get him back." Hermione went to sit next to Ron, wrapping her arm around his back and leaning her against his shoulder. "We'll look for him and lure him back with his favorite treats. Somehow we'll get Scabbers back to you. I'll help you look...Maybe there's some sort of location spell we can use."

Harry nodded, though he knew that this would push Hermione too far past her endurance. She was already stretched thin as it was. "I'll talk to McGonagall. I'm sure she'll know of some way we can find him. We will find him Ron, don't worry."
Ron shrugged, "If he's even alive. Hagrid said he's really old for a rat. What if all the stress was too much for him and he slipped off to die?"

Hermione's arm tightened around him. As much as she dreaded it she was afraid that Ron might be right. Scabbers was really old for a common rat without any powers. "No, don't think like that, let's try to find him and talk to Professor McGonagall first before we assume the worst. Maybe he's just gone into hiding or made his way to the twins room for something. Don't lose hope Ron."

"He hates the twins, they always try to use him for experiments," it was a sullen mutter. He wished he could really blame Hermione but he couldn't. Scabbers was acting off even before she'd gotten Crookshanks. "You'd better go let your cat out of the dorms now. No reason to keep him shut in."

"Crookshanks' fine where he is for the moment and if you think I'm going to walk away from you now Ronald Weasley then you're even more of a berk than I thought you were." Hermione lifted her head so she could look at him. "We're family here and I am going to be with you and help you look and if you protest in any way so help me but I'll hex your freckles so that they twinkle."

That got a half-hearted half-laugh out of him, "Light me up like a Christmas tree Mione?"

Harry pat Ron's shoulder, "Come on, let's look round the grounds and ask McGonagall if there are any spells to find Scabbers."

Ron nodded and got to his feet, "Right. Not like we've never done the impossible before then."

"You know it, we scoff at the word impossible." Hermione squeezed him before letting go, moving downstairs to the common room. "Hopefully Professor McGonagall can help, I don't think there's anything that woman can't do. I hope I'll grow up to be just like her."

Ron smiled wanly, "You'll grow up to be better."

Harry nodded, "Agreed, now come on. we're wasting time before curfew." He pulled his friends out the portrait door and into the search for Scabbers.
Chapter 6

Harry was up late, studying the map, hoping to see Scabbers on it so they could cheer Ron up. The Hols had passed without much incident and now the game with Ravenclaw was looming, Hermione was looking more and more frazzled trying to get material together for Buckbeak's appeal and looking for Scabbers on top of her already insane workload. Harry just didn't know where she found the time to do it all and get any sleep. He followed the moving dots on the map, checking the names, and then jolted when he saw a name that shouldn't be there. Peter Pettigrew. In a flash he was out of bed and out in the corridors to find the person that dot was and get an answer to that name.

Remus was out walking the dark and empty corridors. He couldn't sleep; Orion was tucked away safely in his dorms and Remus' quarters felt so empty without him there. He'd been thinking more and more about Sirius lately, hurting that he was somewhere out there all on his own. Remus couldn't blame Sirius for not contacting him. Remus had left him in prison; no matter he'd been locked up himself for almost seven months. Sirius didn't know that. Still after all these years and all that had happened, Remus still loved him. Always would most likely. He turned a corner and saw a soft glowing light in the hallway in front of him. Remus hurried his steps some to find out where the light was coming from.

Remus heard the hushed, whispered phrase and almost chuckled. Was their map still here and in use? Somehow it felt somewhat good to have left a legacy that wasn't about betrayal or pain. "Harry Potter, what are you doing out of bed at this hour?" Amber eyes slid down to the parchment that hung halfway out of Harry's pocket. "Delivering love letters," Just because he didn't use it much as a professor didn't mean his teasing streak was dead.

"Eugh no!" Harry shifted and rubbed the back of his neck as he searched for a plausible lie, "I'm looking for Scabbers. I couldn't sleep and thought I heard squeaking outside the common room then went to look further. Since you know, rats can be pretty quick."

"Yes, I know all about the speed of rats." Remus nodded. "What were you going to do if you found him? Catch him in a paper cage? And you know the rules are here for a reason...Even for insomniac Gryffindor boys who are targeted by more than one big bad. You shouldn't be out on your own Harry, no matter how tempting the reason." Remus grew serious as he loomed over
Harry. He wished the boy would trust him but he didn't want to push either.

"Er well," Harry shifted and the map fell out of his pocket. He tried to catch it with a soft yelp only to have Professor Lupin get to it first.

Straightening up with the map in his hands Remus' hands stroked over it almost as if it was a long lost friend. He remembered months of research and long nights of laughter, squabbles and unbreakable friendship as they crafted their masterpiece. At least Remus had thought the friendship was unbreakable. As it turned out...Not so much, "I haven't seen this in a very long time." He whispered.

"Y-you know what it is?" Harry's eyes were wide.

"Oh yes, intimately." Remus replied, still stroking the worn parchment. "The question is how do you know what it is?"

"Fred and George gave it to me earlier this year. So...you know what it does then, how to work it?"

"I do know Harry. I know very well. Did you see Scabbers on it, is that why you're out here?" Remus was a coward, he both wanted and didn't want to activate the map and see the greeting message from the young Marauders. He feared it would break his heart though, what was left of it.

"I....you'll think I'm crazy. I mean even I know it's not possible, or shouldn't be, but...I saw Peter Pettigrew on the map. I know it's stupid and you probably think I was seeing something but he was there I swear!"

Remus grew completely still, losing all color as his mind was flooded with thoughts. Sirius as a traitor had never fit right, Remus had never believed it. Only thing found of Peter had been a finger. Peter the rat animagus...Oh that bloody useless bastard!!! Rage and despair filled Remus and he struggled to keep control.

He crouched next to Harry, gripping the younger wizard's upper arms and looking at the boy intently with almost glowing amber eyes. "Listen very carefully Harry, this is really, really important. What does Scabbers look like? Any detail you can remember. Take your time but please describe him as accurately as you can."

Harry's eyes went wide and his hands went up to Remus' elbows, "I...um well he's normally kinda of fat, brown though he's been losing his hair all this year, um really nervous even for a rat, er well he's a rat other than the missing toe there's not really much about him that's remarkable unless you count his age. Why?"

He was almost sure already, it made perfect sense but Remus had to be certain. "His age? How old is Scabbers really? And the missing toe, front paw or back paw?" Remus knew he was probably confusing and maybe even scaring Harry but he had to ask, had to know.
"Well...Ron's had him for two years but he was Percy's rat before then so...I suppose twelve or there about. And it's his front paw missing the toe....why does this matter?" Harry's brows drew down in a frown.

A growl wanted to rise but Remus did his best to smother it, he had freaked out Harry enough for one night. "I will tell you Harry as soon as I can. Some of it is not my secret to share. Go to bed, don't wander the halls or grounds alone and stop looking for Scabbers. Believe me; you don't want that rat back." Remus let go of Harry and stood up. "I'm sorry but I'm going to have to borrow this for a while." He waved the map in the air. "I promise I'll give it back to you...Go to bed." Remus made a shooing motion at Harry before turning on his heel and rushing down the hallway, he needed to talk to Severus and he needed to find Sirius.

Harry kicked the wall in anger and snapped, though he knew that Professor Lupin didn't hear him, "I'm getting really bloody sick of being treated like a bleeding mushroom." Instead of going back to the dorms he went to the Charms classroom knowing that sleep would escape him the rest of the night.

Severus was still very much awake and brewing a potion when the door to his lab slammed open and hit the wall. He lifted a brow at the sight of Remus, "Well this is a memory. What has you abusing my wall?"

"It's Peter sodding Pettigrew." Remus panted as he tried to regain his breath, he was so upset, so angry and so heartbroken. "He's the traitor. He set Sirius up and he's been living as the Weasleys' rat ever since." Remus looked wild, his wolf close to the surface. "I need to find Sirius, need to go look for him...Need to find Peter! Gods I should have seen it, I should have known and I should have done something."

"No what you need to do right now is sit your arse down," he left his potion, snagging Remus by the arm and guiding him to a stool, "and employ your brain. First let us say that you do find Pettigrew, then what? Kill him? Take him to the authorities?"

Remus looked up at Severus, devastation written clearly on his face. "I can't do that, you know I can't. My hands are fucking tied behind my back as long as things are as they are. I need to put Orion first...Always." He buried his face in his hands. "I need to do something though Severus, it's killing me to turn the other way and pretend that everything is sunshine and rainbows. It's tearing me apart."

Snape sighed and pat Remus on the shoulder, "How did you even find this mess out?"

That brought a small smile onto Remus' lips, albeit a bitter one. "Harry Potter who else? I found him roaming the halls with this." He placed the map on Severus' workbench. "At first he told me he was out looking for Scabbers which isn't a lie when you think about it. Finally he admitted he had seen a name on the map that shouldn't have been there, Peter's name. How does Harry even
Severus snorted, "He's been told that he's got an escaped convict after him and I do believe you have met Miss Granger, can you possibly imagine that she's not sought out every last available tidbit of information on Black and then proceeded to share what she's found with Potter? Of course he knows about Pettigrew's supposed death. Well," he gestured at the map, "let's see it."

Knowing he couldn't put it off any longer Remus brought his wand to the parchment and mumbled. "I solemnly swear I'm up to no good." He caught Severus' eye roll from the corner of his eye as lines started to spread across the paper like spider web. "There you are." It was silly, so silly but Remus still felt a sliver of pride to have been a part of creating it.

"I refuse to stroke your ego commenting on the magic in this," Snape tugged the map closer to himself, ignoring the various students out of bed and roaming the halls because he knew Remus would nag the hell out of him for it, and instead looking for Pettigrew's name. "He's not here."

"Of course he's not." Remus swallowed around his disappointment. "Peter was always smarter than we gave him credit for and he's stayed alive and out of sight for twelve years. If Harry was close to him when I found him then Peter probably saw and heard both me and Harry. He knows about the map and won't be in the castle now."

"Hm," Snape scanned the map, a brow twitching at the sight of the Charms classroom, "He'll need to eat however. Rat though he is he also has a weakness for good food. He was likely raiding the kitchens."

"Sounds like him yes. I'll keep an eye on the grounds but I won't hold my breath." He looked at Severus again, a brow lifted. "If I leave this map with you for now, will you be able to resist the urge to use it for your own devious means and take down poor unsuspecting students?"

"As I don't fancy you carping at me about it I shall refrain. If you'll get to the charms classroom and deal with Potter that is," he raised a brow at Remus.

"I do not carp, bite your tongue." Remus tried to look affronted but did not put much stock in his success. He was grateful he had gone to Severus; his friend had calmed him down without actually doing very much. Remus was so very grateful for the friendship he had found with the other man. "And okay, I will go by charms and shoo young Mr. Potter to bed...Thank you Severus."

"Hm, get some sleep yourself Remus. You have to deal with the little barbarians as well as your own issues. Now I have a potion to remake so be gone with you," he waved Remus away and looked towards the ruined potion that had turned a thick sludgy brown.

"I apologize for ruining your brewing; I'll get out of your hair...Though you should take your own advice and get some rest." Remus got up and walked out of Severus' room, making his way back up the moving staircases until he stood outside the Charms classroom. He could hear Harry's mutterings all the way out and despite everything it made his lips twitch, he could definitely
understand Harry's frustration but it was safer for him not to know everything. Remus opened the door and slipped inside. "I thought I told you to get to bed." He leaned against the doorframe.

Harry didn't register the voice as his professor's at first and had spun and shot a hex at him before he'd thought, a hex which Professor Lupin thankfully dodged. Since he was at Hogwarts and not the Dursleys where he couldn't retaliate against a threat he'd reacted instinctively. "Bloody hell don't sneak up on a bloke like that!"

"I apologize; it was a thoughtless thing to do." Remus lowered the protego he'd slammed up at the first sign of Harry turning around. "Still you are still out after curfew Harry, after being caught and told to go to your dorm."

Harry swallowed the scathing comment that rested on the tip of his tongue and folded his arms, wand still in hand, "And I'm not the only one either. There's Mulciber and his girl up in the Astronomy Tower, Chang and Diggory making use of the kitchens, someone named Lovegood roaming the seventh floor, Susan Bones in the library, and you had to pass the supposedly empty room where Colin and Dennis are developing photos to get here." He gave all them up without a qualm but he kept quiet about Orion sneaking about in the greenhouses. "So why me? I can't sleep. Professor Flitwick told me where to find the key to get into the Charms classroom so I can practice, and doing that's better than sitting in the common room staring into a fire and trying to figure out why everyone seems to want to lie to me all the time and treat me like a mushroom."

Remus sighed and walked further into the classroom until he was next to Harry. "Here's the thing Harry. Mulciber and whatever flavor of the week he has are already being discovered by professor Sinistra and believe me I wouldn't want to be in their shoes. About twelve house elves have already reported Diggory and Chang for doing 'naughty businesses' with their frosting and I sent Colin and Dennis to bed. Orion, the little shit that he is, will face detention until the end of his education here, believe you me but why you? None of the others have Voldemort after them or an escaped murderer looking to finish the job they started twelve years ago. Not telling is not the same as lying Harry and no matter how it pisses you off maybe it is done for a reason. Despite what you may believe you have people looking out for you and wanting what's best for you."

"A reason? Same reason you haven't told anyone that you're a werewolf?" At the shocked look on his face Harry shrugged, "I'm smarter than people like to give me credit for you know. Why would a grown man fear the moon? Why would he disappear being 'sick' every month? Amber eyes, claw mark scars, severe aversion to silver? Kinda obvious and I'm reckless, not stupid." He moved to sit on top of a desk, "You know a lot of people have an opinion about what's 'best' for me and each one is a different opinion. Who do I listen to? The people keeping secrets from me for reasons? I'm supposed to be safe in the castle but I've nearly died here more than once. Way I see it, no place is really safe." He rested his chin on a drawn up knee. "Why c-" A loud scream caught his attention, a familiar one, "Ron!" he was off the desk and running.

Remus was hot on his heels as they rushed through corridors. Part of him wanted to explain to Harry that yes there was definitely a reason to keep his lycanthropy a secret but right now that scream was more important. Finally having made their way to Gryffindor tower and the dorm room where the young Weasley slept they were met with chaos. Everyone was up and Ron was sitting in his bed with the curtains slashed through with sharp claws. Remus knew what'd happen, he could smell Sirius all over the room and it made him ache. Sirius obviously already knew about
Ron was babbling about waking up to Black hovering over him, a knife in hand as Harry made his way over to him. "Harry mate," Ron's hand gripped Harry's arm, "Bloody hell I was worried. I thought he might have snatched you! Where?"

"Bathroom," It was a handy lie and he squeezed Ron's wrist letting him know he'd give him the whole story later, "As you can see I'm fine. Are you okay?"

"Y-yeah but how'd he even get past the mad knight?!"

Harry pat Ron's shoulder and shot Professor Lupin a brief look, "Good question, he really shouldn't have been able to."

"No, he really shouldn't have been able to, unless someone has blabbed the password loudly, been remiss about security." Remus' tone was sharp and he knew it but couldn't quite reign in his temper. Damn Sirius, what was he thinking? No matter how badly he wanted to catch Peter he couldn't go around waving knives at students. One slip and he would be the murderer he was condemned as.

Professor McGonagall rounded a corner and came into view, a paper clenched tightly in her hand, lips white and pinched, and looking more frighteningly furious than ever seen, "What fool, what abysmally stupid fool wrote down a list of the Gryffindor passwords?"

Harry felt a surge of sympathy knowing exactly who it would be then winced as Neville raised a shaky hand. The poor boy had such trouble with his memory already and Sir Cadogan changing the password every time the wind changed directions had left him either waiting outside the portrait hole or facing ridicule from the other Gryffindors when he went to get someone to tell him the password.

Seamus, despite being freaked out of his wee Irish mind went to sit down next to Neville who looked as if he was going to pass out any second. "It's not his fault, not really. That crazed knight changes password every other minute, and he likes to make them as complicated as they can too. I never thought I'd say this but I miss the fat lady and her screeching." He looked up at both Minerva and Remus defiantly.

Oh yes, they were definitely Gryffindors, that much was clear. "No matter whose fault it was it was dangerous and it could have ended much worse." Remus felt like such a hypocrite, standing here talking about monsters when he was one. He wasn't the head of Gryffindor house so it wasn't up to him what would happen or if Neville were to be punished, but he hoped Minerva would go easy on him.
It didn't look likely though as she grabbed Neville's arm then pinned the rest of them with a look, "Back to your beds, Black is gone for the time being and the Fat Lady will be returned by the end of the day. Mr. Longbottom you and I will have a discussion in my office and then I shall send a letter to your Grandmother."

Harry grimaced hard then. He knew just how much Neville hated disappointing his Gran and this, oh this would be bad. He murmured to Ron, "Be just one minute," then trotted after McGonagall, "Professor McGonagall!"

She turned, "Yes Mr. Potter?"

He met Neville's eyes, "Please just...I know you're going to give him detention and take away points but please, don't put him with Snape?"

Her eyes softened just a bit and she nodded, "Very well Mr. Potter. Now return to the dorm if you will," she pinned him with a knowing look, "and stay there."

He smiled crookedly, "Yes ma'am." As she returned to taking Neville to her office the other boy turned and mouthed 'Thank you' before Harry did as McGonagall asked.

Remus was mending Ron's curtains with his wand, closing the rips making it look as if they'd never been there in the first place. He plucked out a small flask of calming draught out of his pocket and told Ron to take a sip. Being woken up by a wanted murderer standing above you with knife was enough to make anyone jittery. "Okay, sleep as good as you can guys...I'm not going to hold out hope that you actually do but please, please stay in this room." He gave Harry a pointed look. “Some extra wards will be placed at the portrait entrance just as an extra security measure and the ghosts will stand guard. Black won't be back this night so you're safe."

Ron snorted, "Sleep what's that? No way I'll be able to go back to sleep Professor but I'll stay here with Harry and talk about how he's going to slaughter Ravenclaw day after tomorrow...day after today? What bloody time is it anyway?"

Harry snorted, "Only you Ron. I'm glad you're okay."

"Yeah well someone's got to stick around and make sure you act right while still having fun you turkey. Mione would be all business."

He chuckled, "Don't let her hear you say that." He looked at Professor Lupin as the man finished mending the curtains, "Professor," when amber eyes turned to him he continued, "I get why you
keep that one thing to yourself, people are stupid and prejudiced after all, it's the rest that I don't get. How am I supposed to protect myself if I don't know everything about why I need to? I'm just saying."

Remus was silent a long while as he regarded Harry with calm eyes. "You are right Harry. If it was up to me I would tell you everything. Alas it's not, this whole thing involves much more than just you or me or even those after you. All I can really ask is that you're careful and that you use that good head you have on your shoulders." He was aware of the looks he got from the other boys but right now he didn't have the energy to care. "I'm going to leave you to it now, please have as good a night as you can." Remus nodded to the three boys and moved to leave.

"Hey Professor!" Harry called out with a grin, "I like you better knowing you're not perfect so you'd better stick around!"

He flashed Harry a surprised grin as he inclined his head to Harry. "I'll do my best. Be good." Remus ducked out of the dorm room and made his way to his rooms. He was exhausted and come morning he would have a very stern conversation with his sneaky son. It was one thing to roam the halls at night but to actually sneak outside to go to the greenhouses...No that was not to be had.

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Harry listened as Oliver gave orders not to catch the snitch until they'd scored enough points to win the chance to play Slytherin, his hand squeezing on the handle of the Firebolt that had been returned to him yesterday morning. He'd spent an entire evening getting the feel of the broom and now, he was confident that he could outstrip the Ravenclaw seeker. Cho Chang was pretty and her skills on a broom were just as good as her face was good-looking but she didn't have the instinct that Harry seemed born with. They were going to win and he was going to make sure that Oliver finally got to hold the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup. The team captain was one of those who'd always believed in his abilities, maybe even took them for granted a little and it gave Harry a blessed sense of normalcy and self-worth knowing that someone valued him for what he could do, not what rumors and old lies said he'd done.

He kicked off, waving to a pouting Orion who was almost shackled to Snape's side and getting a wan wave back, and then the game was on.

Hermione was chewing her nails on one hand and gripping Ron almost to the point of pain with the other. Watching Harry zoom around on his broom always made her stomach dip, almost as if she was up there with him but there was no way she would ever miss a game where he was playing. She was so happy that he'd gotten the Firebolt back in time, even if it meant she'd had to endure Ron's cackling that he'd known all along that it wasn't cursed. Better to be safe than sorry. Hermione still didn't regret that she'd told.

She gripped Ron tighter, ignoring his complaints when she saw a tall black clad creature moving toward the pitch, tattered robes flowing as it almost wobbled forward. "Look Ron."

"Oh bloody hell!" Ron shot to his feet and tried to get a professor's attention to get the bloody
dementor away while up in the air Harry didn't see it.

His attention was caught first by a glimpse of a big black dog that looked exactly like the Grim Trelawney kept going on about then a flash of gold from the corner of his eye that Chang immediately went for. He cursed and flew towards the snitch at full speed, buzzing past the Ravenclaw seeker like she was backing up. Then he spotted the dementor and grit his teeth, pulling his wand and casting the Patronus Charm. Then, assured the problem was taken care of he tucked his wand away and scooped up the snitch just after Gryffindor made a final goal.

"Did you see that? Did you see that?" Hermione was practically smothering Ron as she was clinging to him, bouncing and cheering for Harry at the top of her lungs.

"That's the weirdest looking dementor I've ever seen though." She looked over at the dark heap on the pale winter grass and watched as Malfoy and Goyle emerged from the crumpled cloth. "Oh I can't believe them; I am going to hex the worst case of bum boils you have ever seen on those sodding gits." Hermione gripped her wand tightly.

"Whoa Hermione, I think McGonagall is going to take care of that for you," Ron nodded at the infuriated head of Gryffindor house standing over Malfoy and Goyle obviously yelling, she even wagged her finger. "She looks angrier than she did at Neville."

Still gripping her wand, Hermione nodded. She was glad they were going to get punished but she still wanted to hex them herself. One day she told herself, one day she would and it would be brilliant. "Oh and look at Snape...You know, suddenly I'm very, very happy he's not our head of house."

Ron whistled lowly at the mottle cheeked potion master as his mouth moved in what was obviously cutting words that had even Malfoy flinching, "I'm a little surprised he's not standing up for the git but yes I'd have to agree. Never do I ever want Snape that pissed at me. Come on let's go congratulate Harry."

Harry was nearly bouncing. Not only had he caught the snitch and won the game so they'd be facing Slytherin, which they'd definitely win considering Malfoy's anemic playing, but he'd cast a Patronus, he knew he had.

Hermione let go of Ron to run over to Harry and almost bowl him over with the strength of her hug. "You were brilliant Harry, absolutely brilliant. The way you flew, the patronus and catching the snitch in the next breath."

"See Freddie, Harry gets all the praise and all the girls. I told you we should have gone for seeker. No one loves on the beaters." George slumped against his brother in mock depression. "Only bright spot was seeing Malfoy's face when he crawled out of that cloak...Wish I had a photo of that and that I could watch it over and over again."

Harry frowned, "Wait, what about Malfoy?"

Ron cleared his throat and pointed over at where Malfoy and Goyle were still being lectured, "They er...dressed up as the dementor."
"Augh you're kidding! And I thought I finally-" he actually growled and started for Malfoy only for two sets of freckled arms to hold him back, "Fred, George let me go! I'm going to turn that little twat into a cockroach!"

"Harry, Harry, look at me." Hermione cupped Harry's face even as he struggled to get free. "It doesn't matter that it was sodding Malfoy and his bum boys, the patronus was real and it was glorious. When Ron and I hurried over here we overheard Flitwick telling Lupin that it was one of the strongest patronus charms he'd seen. It was real Harry. Don't let Malfoy of all people take that away from you."

Harry slumped like a balloon with all the air let out, "Can't I just hex him anyway Hermione? He's a constant pain in the bum and Orion's already in hot water so he won't be making Malfoy miserable."

Fred let him go and slapped him on the back, "Buck up mate. If it's Malfoy misery you want then-"

"We're all ready and willing to help. For now though Harry boy, just focus on crushing him in the final game and leave the dirty work to us. You have better things to do than get caught and have to scrub cauldrons don't you." George was all for mischief and pranks but he and Fred weren't blind...Or deaf. They saw what their adopted little brother was going through.

Harry's mouth lifted a bit, "Yeah. Thanks you two." he looked up at Oliver as the captain came over and pat him on the shoulder.

"Brilliant catch Harry! Forget about Malfoy for now, you'll humiliate him in the match against Slytherin soon enough," he ruffled the seeker's hair, "for now let's celebrate! Just one more game and the Cup is ours!"

That did it; Harry laughed a bit and forgot about Malfoy. Besides if the look on McGonagall's face was any indication the little twat would be ruing this day for a long time.

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Orion groaned miserably as he scrubbed at something he really didn't want to know what it was. He was on his knees and the cauldron was bigger than he was. "When will this punishment end? It wasn't that big of a deal, I just needed something from the greenhouses."

Severus flipped a page in the latest potion's journal, "You went outside of the castle in the middle of the night when a dangerous man is roaming the grounds. You're lucky all your mother did was give you detention for two months. You know how he worries."
"I know..." Orion scrubbed harder. He didn't want to worry his Daddy, he loved him more than anything but sometimes it felt like he was living in a bubble and all he wanted to do was pop it. "Severus...are you and my Dad lovers? I mean I haven't seen him even look at anyone and you are always there and he smiles with you, he doesn't smile like that with anyone else...I wouldn't mind you know...If you are."

Had Snape been drinking anything he'd have spewed it all over the dungeon floor, and made Orion clean it up too, "No. What in the name of Mab gave you that idea? We are friends, an impressive feat in and of itself considering how little we liked each other in our youth. Your mother is still very much in love with your sire; for all that he tries to forget."

"Oh." Orion didn't know if he was disappointed or relieved. "I wonder what such love is like, the one that never ends. Still you all say that my father was lost in the war and I don't like the idea of Dad being alone or you for that matter. You should have someone. Besides Dennis says that if a man doesn't get loving regularly as an adult the you know what explodes. Is that true?" Amber eyes lined in pitch black, very long lashes looked up over the rim of the cauldron.

Severus ran his hand over his face, "No it is not. I don't know where your Gryffindor friend got that ridiculous idea but it is very much not true." He sighed and set his journal aside, "There are many ways someone gets lost in a war Orion one day, when you're a little older, I will explain exactly what happened to your father in its entirety. Perhaps your mother will move on but I would not go about trying to set him up with anyone if I were you Orion," he gave the boy a stern look.

"Fine, I'll leave Dad alone." Orion pouted but was silently plotting, his Uncle hadn't said anything about not setting him up and the idea of Severus being alone still didn't sit well with Orion. He wondered if his Uncle favored women or men. Maybe he'd throw a few of each Severus' way and see how it went. Also there was definitely something he didn't know about his father, something big and Orion was determined to find out exactly what that was.

"Good, now get back to scrubbing."
WARNINGS: Class switching. The prediction. Violence. Lucius Malfoy being an evil little arsewart. Basically the shite hitting the fan.

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Harry sighed as he looked into the cloudy depths of his crystal ball as Trelawney made yet another prediction of his untimely death. Really didn't she ever get bored with that?

"Yes, yes, unfortunately the signs aline very hazardly for you Mr. Potter. I'm afraid it looks grave and gruesome indeed." Trelawney sighed sadly though she looked rather pleased with herself.

"I don't see anything at all." Hermione complained. She had so much to do and these lessons were a complete waste of time. She hadn't heard anything useful in all the classes so far. Just Trelawney predicting new ways Harry would suffer and die. She was sick of it.

"No, that doesn't surprise me Miss. Granger. A limited mind such as yours often lacks the gift to read the signs and understand their message. No, not surprised at all." Trelawney made a tutting noise with her tongue as she shook her head.

Harry's jaw clenched, "No disrespect meant Professor but she sees things more accurately than you do. You've predicted my death once a week every week since the beginning of the school year but I'm still here, still alive, hale and hearty. I thought, I really did think, that I would learn something of worth in this class but you spend every lesson telling me more about how I'm supposed to die than teaching us how to read tea leaves or scry or any other Divination techniques. You didn't even fully explain the meaning of the Grim you said you saw in my leaves. I looked it up and every book says that a Grim doesn't necessarily mean death but more of an end. Could be an end to anything, not necessarily a life. I don't know why you're so fixated on someone dying but I'm tired of hearing about it."

"Well now Mr. Potter." Trelawney looked somewhat shocked but she quickly put herself together again. "Yes a Grim can be an ending but with your aura, poor little dear....With your aura I think it is quite clear what it means. And I suppose it's the negative and blocking energy that causes you to become this upset." She threw Hermione a pointed look.

"Oh really this is enough." Hermione slammed her crystal ball down on the table. "I may be pragmatic and logical but I came here with an open mind, willing to learn but I have have learned so far is that you are full of it Professor. Don't worry, I remove my negative and blocking energy from here because frankly...You couldn't pay me to stay and listen to more of this gibberish." She stood up from her seat and gathered her quill and parchment.

Ron's eyes were nearly popping out as Hermione stormed out, her crystal ball rolling off the table and out the trap door as well but his jaw actually dropped open when Harry stood up, calmly gathering his materials.
"I'll be leaving as well. I've faced three attempts by Voldemort," he got a dark sense of satisfaction from Trelawney's flinch, "to kill me. If there is death in my aura then that's what it's from. If I wanted to spend an hour each day listening to how I'm going to die, I'd visit Azkaban and say hello to the death eaters imprisoned there. Good Day Professor." He shouldered his bag and walked out after Hermione, scooping up his friend's crystal ball on the way. "Hermione wait up!"

Hermione looked up from the landing on the stairs, waiting for Harry to catch up with her. "You left too? Thank Merlin for that, I can't believe that woman is allowed to teach and grade students, it's obvious she's not all there." Hermione was aware that divination was considered an easy class but in her mind it was mental abuse.

Harry fell into step beside her, "I could stand that honestly. It's not like we've not had barmy professors before but her comments about you," he shook his head, "are really uncalled for.

Her steps faltered and Hermione stared at Harry before turning fully and glomping him. "Oh Harry, you have no idea how wonderful you are do you? You stay all through getting your death predicted weekly but leave because she calls me limited and negative?" She made some sort of cooing croon and hugged him more.

"Er...you're welcome?" He blushed a bit and pat her on the back. "Besides you're not limited, you're one of the most unlimited people I know, there's not a spell you can't do, and you're not negative either."

"Thank you Harry." She finally released him but walked close enough for their shoulders to bump occasionally. "Sometimes I'm not as open as I could be maybe...More of a see it to believe it kind of girl but I'm fine with that. I'm glad you left though, probably the only time I will condone you leaving a class but yeah, I'm glad. You are definitely not destined for suffering and death...You're not!"

"Well," he tilted his head, "not premature death at any rate. When I'm old and grayer than Dumbledore then I'll go on to the next adventure but right now?" He bumped her shoulder gently on purpose, "I'm enjoying this one, the company's amazing."

Flushing pink she bumped his shoulder back. "As I said Harry, you're wonderful and you're going to be around until we have to tie your beard up to keep it from sweeping the floor."

He grinned then looked at the crystal ball in his hands and grimaced, "We should probably go tell McGonagall that we've dropped Divination. She's not teaching a class right now."

"Yeah, we should." Hermione nibbled at her bottom lip. "I hope she won't be too disappointed in me...Or us. Ah well, regardless we did the right thing, let's go bite the bullet shall we?"

"Hermione, has Runes gotten any more interesting since the last time I asked?" Harry looked up at a portrait that was giving him the two fingered salute for planting his hand right in its face when skipping the empty step.

"Um, well yes I think so. It's really quite intriguing when you get down to it and it's bloody useful isn't it? Every old spell or curse are built up from Runes and if you know how to read them and build your own then you have an advantage to learning and understanding more." She gave him a sideways glance and sent the rude portrait spinning with a flick of her wand. "Are you thinking about taking it?"

"Yeah. That and Crystal Theory. I need something to replace Divination and, like you said, Runes are dead useful. I wouldn't have the patience or sanity to fiddle with Arithmancy I don't think. Plus
it's a good idea to have my options chosen before we get to McGonagall's office. Make it look like more of something I've been planning for a bit rather than a sudden fit of anger."

Hermione nodded. "Good thinking on your part. I told you before, Crystal Theory is absolutely brilliant and I think you're going to love it. You can tell Professor McGonagall that I have sung its praises to you and made you want to take it if you want to." She paused. "How mad is Ron going to be that we left him alone in Divination?"

"Er...not very I hope. I mean he looked like someone slapped him with a fish but I don't really think he'll be angry." Harry inhaled as they reached McGonagall's office door, "Here goes, you ready for this?" he knocked.

"No, but we should do it anyway." Hermione replied as she waited next to Harry and did her best not to fiddle with the chain around her neck like she wanted to. She hoped McGonagall wouldn't be too disappointed in her, McGonagall had placed a lot of trust in her and the last thing Hermione wanted to do was disappoint or abuse it. She just couldn't stay in Divination when her time could be so much better spent studying for the classes she cared about. She felt very small when McGonagall opened the door and fixed them with her knowing eyes.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, shouldn't you be in Divination right now?" McGonagall moved aside and waved them in a slight stress around her eyes, "Are you here because you already know about Buckbeak's appeal?"

"W-what? Has it already been decided? I have given some reports to Hagrid but I am still researching it." Hermione looked at her Head of House searchingly. "Um, we're actually here because we've kind of dropped Divination but please Professor, tell us about Buckbeak."

The bottom of Harry's stomach dropped out, if the stress lines around McGonagall's mouth were any indication it had not gone well. The Deputy Headmistress waved them to the chairs in the office and sat down herself.

"I am afraid Hagrid lost the appeal, not particularly surprising considering Lucius Malfoy's presence at the appeal. The executioner will be here along with Minister Fudge this afternoon to...well. Hagrid is, understandably upset." She brought her hands to fold in front of her mouth, "Now, what's this about dropping Divination?"

Hermione clenched her hands, feeling her nails bite into her palms. She should have done something more, tried harder. Poor Buckbeak and poor Hagrid, he must be so sad and so disappointed in her. She had promised to help him. She looked at Harry hoping he would answer McGonagall's questions since she couldn't get a sound out around the lump in her throat.

He reached over and took one of Hermione's hands, squeezing in comfort even as he met McGonagall's eyes steadily. "I felt, and Hermione agreed with me, that we just aren't suited for Divination and that it would do both us and the rest of the class better if we dropped it rather than make Professor Trelawney have to give more attention to students who aren't suited for her particular area of expertise and taking it away from the others who are."

McGonagall's lips twitched in amusement. Harry was certainly James' son to be able to spout such nonsense with a straight face. "I see. Well I can not say I am surprised as very few hold the temperament to appreciate Sybil's class. Have you chosen a replacement for that time slot Mr. Potter?"

He nodded, "I've been asking Hermione about her other classes and I think I'd like to take Crystal Theory in place of Divination and er...well Runes sounds like a good idea too. You don't think that
would be too much do you?"

She couldn't stifle her smile now, "No, you should be able to take both classes along with your current list now that you've dropped Divination. However, as you've left it so late in the year, you'll have to spend the summer catching up if you don't wish to be caught a year behind."

Squeezing Harry's hand tightly Hermione spoke up. "I would happily tutor Harry over the summer both through owls and over the telephone if need be to help him catch up." She looked up at McGonagall still very upset about Buckbeak but wanting to help Harry as well. "As for Divination I thought I could tweak my schedule to accommodate the gap."

Knowing eyes met Hermione's, "Of course Miss Granger, time is very valuable after all and I didn't doubt you would be helping Mr. Potter catch up. You are one of my most reliable and helpful students as well as a very good friend. Hagrid wanted me to convey his appreciation to you for taking so much time to assist him in research for the appeal."

Hermione was torn, she wanted to beam at the praise from the person she admired the most but she felt wretched about Hagrid. "He shouldn't thank me, I should have tried harder. Researched more, put more time into it. If I had tried harder than things might have turned out differently."

"Miss Granger," McGonagall's voice was stern, "Lucius Malfoy has far too much influence for that. You did all that you could. You could have walked in waving a pardon from Merlin himself and this would still be the outcome. You are not to blame yourself as it is not your fault."

Harry nodded, "Professor McGonagall's right Hermione. You've been going half mad looking up laws and giving up your own time, time you could have been studying or getting rest, to help Hagrid. Blame Malfoy, both the older and the younger prat."

"Oh I do. I blame the younger for being a prattish attention seeking twat and the older for being incapable of speaking out of anything other than his arsehole. Sorry Professor." She looked up at McGonagall. "The thing is that it doesn't matter. I can blame anyone and everyone but it doesn't make a difference. Buckbeak will still be executed for something that was not his fault at all. Hagrid had warned us over and over again and he only reacted like his species does at being insulted. I get it...I do but it's so unfair."

"Life is, unfortunately, rarely fair. The best we can all do now is be here for Hagrid. I will adjust your schedules and arrange for materials for your new classes Mr. Potter, if you will please return that crystal ball to Professor Trelawney while I work with Miss Granger to adjust her schedule."

He scratched the back of his head, "Oh, right. Um I'll do that then." He got up and gave Hermione a hug, murmuring, "We'll go visit Hagrid after classes okay?"

"Okay, thank you and I'll see you later." Hermione hugged him back tightly and watched him leave before turning her attention to Professor McGonagall and the task at hand.

Harry trotted back up to the Divination classroom, it having gotten out not long ago and poked his head into the incense heavy air, "Professor Trelawney?"

The curtains over the single window were drawn tight and the light was dimmed and red tinted from all the fabric draped over every lantern. Sybil Trelawney was sitting on one of her soft puffs, her back against Harry and a cup of fragrant tea on a small tray table next to her. She didn't acknowledge hearing Harry call to her, sitting still looking out in the distance.

"It will happen tonight. The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers. His
servant has been chained these twelve years. Tonight, before midnight... the servant will break free and set out to rejoin his master. The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant's aid, greater and more terrible than ever he was. Tonight... before midnight... the servant... will set out... to rejoin... his master..." Her voice was deeper, scratchier than usual and she was still completely still, sitting like a statue.

Harry frowned. That was...different even for Trelawney. He walked closer and tapped her on the shoulder in concern, "Professor?"

"Hm?" She blinked up at him from behind large bug eye like glasses, looking as if she'd just woken from a deep sleep. "What is it Mr. Potter? If you are here to apologize it is quite alright and I'd be happy to see you next lesson." She reached out for her tea and made a face as she took a sip. "Bleh, it's gone cold."

"Er...well I'm returning this actually," he set the crystal ball on the table, "I am sorry for losing my temper but I really don't think I'm suited for your class." He hitched his bag higher, "Um what did you mean when I walked in by the way? What's happening tonight?"

"What are you talking about dear boy? I haven't said anything." Sybil blinked again and wrapped her glittery scarf tighter around herself. "I accept your decision Mr. Potter but really I worry about you. Maybe you should go see Poppy, the stress is taking its toll I fear."

"Er," he started backing out, "right. Um you have a good day. I'm going to go find Ron and Hermione and do some studying. Bye."

Harry laughed, "We're a bad influence on her Ron. Back in a flash." He rushed up to put his things away and change into jeans, a t-shirt, and a jacket before trotting back to the common room, "Alright, let's go then."

They walked outside and over the bridge leading to the grounds and Hagrid's hut, they hadn't made it far when they saw Malfoy and his cronies hiding behind the large rocks, spying down on Hagrid's cottage and Buckbeak being tied in the pumpkin patch. Seeing that, seeing them rejoice in the fact that a creature would lose its life something just snapped inside Hermione. She had her wand out before she could even think about it and charged Malfoy, placing the tip of her wand underneath his pointy chin. "You....You foul, evil, loathsome little cockroach!" She wanted to hex him so badly, her hand actually trembled from the need of it.

"Hermione no!" Ron looked positively scandalized and worried at the same time, "He's not worth it."

Harry's brows were up high, he'd never seen Hermione look quite so murderous...it was a good look for her.
Watching Malfoy cower and almost sniffling and hearing Ron's voice got through the red fog of rage. She hesitated only for a moment before lowering her wand. From the corner of her eye Hermione saw Malfoy's sniffling transform into his ever present smirk and she pulled back her fist and planted it right in that pale loathsome, smirking face. Punching him as hard as she could, watching him crumble to the ground. It felt bloody good, even the throb in her knuckles couldn't ruin that feeling.

Both Ron and Harry jumped and Goyle and Crabbe looked as if they didn't have the slightest idea what to do before their leader grabbed them and ran away, leaving Harry and Ron to stare in amazement at Hermione.

She beamed at them. "That felt fantastic!" It was almost better than a hex even, she stretched her hands over her head and flexed her throbbing hand. "Shall we?" Hermione started to walk again.

Ron scrambled down after her, Harry following behind him, "Hermione I don't know what's gotten into you, walking out on Trelawney, clocking Malfoy, but I think I like this new side. Where's it been hiding?"

"Oh it's always been there, just kept it under wraps." She turned and winked at him. "Remember that the next time you decide to be an utter prat." Hermione clenched her fist and waved it in his face. It was strange but she felt utterly liberated.

Harry's lips twitched as Ron held his hands up in surrender but the sound of sniffling from Hagrid's hut soon wiped all humor off his face. He walked up to the door and knocked, "Hagrid?"

There was a shuffling sound and the door opened, revealing an utterly wrecked looking Hagrid, tears streaming down his cheeks and into his beard. "Ye shouldn't be here," Still he opened the door wider to let them in. "They'll be here soon, to...ye know." New sniffling and sobbing sounds. "I heard the Malfoy himself will be with 'em to make sure it's done right."

"Malfoy," it was a snarl and Harry looked over at Hermione, "I really hope you broke that little twat's nose flat." He pat Hagrid's hand, "I'm sorry Hagrid. Can't you....I don't know just let Buckbeak go, say he slipped his chain?"

"Believe me Harry, I wish I could but if Buckbeak isn't here when they come then I'm back in Azkaban...I can't do it Harry. I can't go back there." Hagrid looked devastated and more tears came, as if someone had turned on a faucet.

Hermione hugged him around his middle and moved to look out the window, at Buckbeak lying down in the pumpkin patch, grooming his feathers.

"Anyone for tea and biscuits?" Hagrid blew his nose in a horrible polka dotted handkerchief.

Hagrid's biscuits were awful but it would make him feel better so Ron nodded, "That'd be great Hagrid."

Harry wanted to hit something, preferably Malfoy, as Hagrid sniffled to the teapot. This wasn't right, not only was it unfair it just wasn't right. Hagrid had warned them all but Malfoy hadn't listened and got a tiny little scratch. Ugh Hermione should have kicked him in the nads. "We'll stay with you Hagrid, you shouldn't be alone, or with Malfoy senior smirking at you."

"No, it's kind of you but you can't stay. It will be after curfew and the last thing I want right now is getting you guys into trouble." Hagrid walked to his cupboard to pull out four large cups when he made a surprised sound. "I think I have an uninvited guest...It looks like your rat Ron." He pulled
out a squirming, brown fur clad creature out of the cupboard and held it in his giant hands so Ron could see it.

"Scabbers!" Ron jumped forward to take the squirming, struggling rat into his hands. "Hey, hey it's alright Scabbers. Look at him he's so thin and he's lost so much hair." He pet the rat gently, "It's alright, we've got the shield spell learned so you'll be safe. It's okay now."

Harry had to smile just a bit. He was glad Ron had his rat back.

Hermione was glad too, though he hadn't said much she knew how much Ron had missed and worried about Scabbers. She reached out to pet him when something made the bowl on the table shatter, causing her to jump in alarm.

Harry spun round as something hit him in the head, "Ouch! What in the," he broke off as he saw out the window Dumbledore, Fudge, Malfoy, and a masked man coming up the path, "WHAT?! I thought they were going to be here until after curfew! Malfoy that bloody, buggering, hobknocking twat!"

Hermione gripped her wand, wanting to use it but knowing full well that would be an exceptionally bad idea.

"Go, hurry and get out of here." Hagrid motioned toward the door. "Please, I don't want you to get in trouble and I don't want you to see this...I really don't. Thank you for coming but please, just go."

Ron held Scabbers close, understanding how Hagrid must feel right now, "We'll be back tomorrow, for tea and...to talk okay Hagrid?"

Harry nodded, not really able to say anything more as Hagrid shooed them out and they had to leave.

"I hate this, I hate it so much. It's not right." Hermione was doing her best to hold back her tears as they hurried away so that they wouldn't be seen by the group of men coming to Hagrid's hut. She refused to look at the long, gleaming axe the masked man carried over his shoulder. If she looked at it then it would be real. They stopped when they were out of sight and watched the group enter the cottage, except for the executioner. Even from this distance she could see the sneer on Malfoy's face clearly.

Harry actually hissed a curse in parseltongue before kicking a rock, "I should have asked Dobby to throw Malfoy out the bloody window, save us all trouble."

"Right now I wish you had." Hermione said in a choked off voice. Hiding her face against Harry's side as she heard the swish of the axe and then terrible, dreadful silence.

He wrapped his arms around her and pet her hair.

Ron swallowed thickly, "This is just so wrong. I- augh Scabbers take it easy! OW! He bit me!"

Hermione pulled her head away from Harry's shirt at that and watched Ron drop the rat and hurry after him, trying to catch him again. Both Harry and Hermione ran after their friend. "Ron come back, let him go, we can find him again."

"Not a bloody chance! He might run off into the forest!"

Harry jumped over a boulder, helping Hermione do the same in their chase of Ron and Scabbers, then watched his friend dive, scant centimeters away from the danger zone of the Whomping
Willow and turn over onto his bum a self-satisfied grin on his face. "Got you, slippery little bugger. Would you calm down there's no cat out here!"

Harry shook his head at his friend, "Alright Ron you've got him, so let's go back to the castle n-what is it?"

Ron had turned sheet white and was pointing behind Harry and Hermione, "G-grim!"

Hermione turned just as the enormous black dog took a giant leap over her and Harry and moved straight for Ron, clutching its massive jaws around a leg and pulling the redhead backwards towards the Whomping Willow. "Ron!" She tried to find a way to get to him or hex the dog but Ron was in the way, she didn't want to hit him accidentally.

Harry didn't follow the calm logical approach she did, he rushed right after them and had to duck under a pugilistic branch just as the Grim pulled Ron into a dark hollow at the base of the tree's roots. "Bloody hell RON!" He dodged another branch, teeth grit and mind spinning and then he remembered a spell Hermione had cast last year on the bloody pixies. He pulled his wand, pointed at the tree and snapped out the incantation, hoping it would work, "Immobulis!"

The branches groaned in protest as if they wanted to continue to strike and move but they did slow down. Hermione took the chance to rush over over to where Harry was, looking down at the hole Ron had disappeared into. She exchanged a look with Harry. "We're doing this right?"

He nodded, "Yeah," he took her hand, cast lumos and went down into the hole. "It's a passageway. Not just a dirty hole in the ground."

Casting her own lumos she followed behind Harry down the narrow passageway. They had to look out for roots and almost caved in sections. "It doesn't look to have been used for quite some time." She whispered, on edge and listening intently to hear if there was any sound from Ron. In the darkness it was hard to say how long they had walked for when they came upon a hatch and stumbled out into a room. It was old and dusty and here as well the scent of the air was unused. "Harry..." Hermione looked around, noticing the paw marks and the drag marks in the dust. "I think we are in the Shrieking Shack."

He saw destroyed furniture, "Yeah but ghosts can't do that," his head shot up at a sound from upstairs, "Come on." He and Hermione crept slowly upstairs to where he heard a low moan and deep purring through an open door. He burst in, staring at Crookshanks next to Ron purring on a big four poster bed. He ignored the cat and went over to Ron, "Are you okay?"

Hermione walked over too, furrowing her brows. What on earth was her cat doing here? He'd been stretched out in front of the fire in the common room when she saw him last. She also noticed the angle of Ron's right leg and came to the conclusion that her friend must be in pain, even with adrenaline rushing through him a break like that had to hurt. She almost jumped out of her skin when the door slammed shut behind them.

Harry spun round and stared at the man there, long matted hair, sunken eyes, so thin you'd easily mistake him for a skeleton. Sirius Black. before Harry could even bring his wand up the escaped convict had cast a disarming spell and had Harry and Hermione's wands flying towards him.

He took a step forward, "I should have known you'd follow your friend, it's the same kind of thing James would have done."

Harry's hands clenched into fists and he shifted so that he was in front of Ron and Hermione, "Don't you dare say his name!"
Without conscious thought Hermione moved to stand between Harry and Sirius. She would not let a murderer touch a hair on Harry's head. "Sirius Black, you're an animagus. You're the dog." She frowned. "Why didn't you use that ability to get away back then? No one knew right? Why not transform and escape?"

"Clever girl." He actually smiled a bit, "No only four people really knew back then. James, Lily, Peter, and Remus." His fingers twITCHED just a bit at the last name.

Harry jerked at Professor Lupin's name. If he'd known...why hadn't he told anyone? And why would Black not use his animagus form to escape. It didn't make sense. No more sense than what he'd seen outside Privet Drive at the start of this year, "You were there, outside Privet Drive."

"I had to see you, couldn't help but check up on James' boy." There was a heartbreaking sadness in those haunted eyes.

Ron, being Ron, yelled, "So why come here to finish your job? Why wait until Harry's in Hogwarts to try to kill him?"

"Because it isn't about that."

Hermione jumped again at the new voice, cursing Lupin for moving so silently. She looked at their professor and noticed he looked worn, his scars red against his waxy pale skin. She kept waiting for Lupin to yell out Expelliarmus, for him to do anything to disarm Black but he didn't. He just stood there in the doorway, like the ghost this shack was famous for.

"It's all about Peter." Remus' voice was gravelly and hushed.

Harry stared at the professor remembering the map and narrowing his eyes as his mind worked. He knew he'd seen Peter Pettigrew on the map the night Black had, he'd tried to convince himself he hadn't, that the map had been wrong but..."Black wasn't the only animagus was he?"

Ron sat up, still cradling Scabbers to him, "Harry what are you-"

Black nodded, deliberately ignoring Remus, "James and Peter were too. We made quite a team, learned how to do it in our fifth year to keep Remus company," his lips twisted into a sneer, "we wanted our friend to have someone there during his monthlies."

Remus clenched his jaw but didn't respond. What would he say to that anyway? It was true. Instead he walked further into the room, looking at Ron. "Ron, please hand me your rat...Please."

It took a while, an unusually long time for being Hermione but finally a light flicked on and she looked from Sirius to Remus to the rat in Ron's grasp. "Oh no....How can that be?"

Harry's hands shook, "The only thing they found of Pettigrew..."

Black nodded, "Was his finger. He was Wormtail during the full moons and he's been sneaking about for twelve years in just the right position to act if Voldemort came back to power."

Ron drew Scabbers closer to his chest, "You're mental!"

Harry turned round and put a hand on Ron's wrist meeting Remus' eyes, "What if you're wrong? What are you going to do to Scabbers?"

"I am going to force him out of his animagus form. If I'm wrong then he'll just stay a rat but I'm not wrong Harry...You saw him on the map. After that I'm going to see to it that he's taken to the
Aurors to pay for his crimes." Remus felt a sliver of panic run down his spine. He'd ignored Severus' advice and chased after Sirius anyway...He hoped and prayed that Orion wouldn't be the one paying for it.

Sirius snarled, "He should die! He betrayed Lily and James!"

Harry frowned, "I thought you were their secret keeper."

"I was supposed to be but then I got the brilliant," the word was full of self-loathing, "idea to switch it to Peter. I was always the one around James, the one everyone expected to be the secret keeper but Peter, no one ever paid attention to him, no one would even suspect that he was the one so we let everyone think it was me, didn't tell anyone that we'd changed it because there was a spy sneaking information to Voldemort. We never, never thought that spy was Peter. Never thought it could be Peter. But we were wrong."

"He played his part very, very well. No one at all believed it could have been Peter. It was though, so Ron, please, please hand me your rat. If he's just Scabbers the spell won't do anything at all to him." Remus turned to Sirius. "Perhaps he should die but I'm not going to let you kill him. If you do, where would that leave you?"

"I really doubt you care. You haven't for the last several years, not about me and apparently not about Harry either. Where were you Remus? When he was being treated worse than my mother's house elves by Lily's sister and that fat walrus of a husband of hers?" Gray eyes flashed with temper, lips pulled back in a snarl.

Amber eyes flashed in return, Remus knew he was in the wrong but damn it, it wasn't as if he'd chosen the path he was on. "You have no idea what I've been doing the last twelve years, what my reasons are but I suppose it's comforting to see you haven't changed. Always jumping to conclusions. Remus is the spy, we can't trust him. Remus is in the wrong, it's all Remus' fault...Well boohoo. Fine, if you don't give a shit about yourself and the opportunity to actually be cleared and take care of Harry yourself...Since I haven't done it. Then I am going to take Peter in alive for Lily and James' sake, so the world knows the truth about who betrayed them."

"You think I d-"

"Hey!" Harry's voice barked out with command and temper, "Can you two shelve your little lover's spat for a minute and come back to the subject at hand?!" He looked back at Remus, "I have your word that it won't hurt Scabbers if he's just a rat?"

"I swear it Harry, it won't hurt him at all unless he actually is Peter Pettigrew." Remus was embarrassed and angry and suddenly he felt fifty years older than thirty-three and so bone tired. He hadn't known what he'd expected but it wasn't this and still he was surprised at his surprise. It hurt, it was as simple as that. It hurt to realize that the past was truly the past and he'd been living in some sort of fantasy for far too long than what was healthy.

Harry sighed and nodded, turning to Ron and putting a hand on Scabbers, "Ron, look I don't want them to be right, I want them to be mental and crazy and just plain wrong, but I trust Professor Lupin and I did see Peter Pettigrew on the map earlier. We have to know so...do you trust me?"

Ron's brows were drawn together, his eyes distressed even as his hand loosened around Scabbers, letting Harry take hold of the rat because he did. He did trust Harry, with his life. he knew his friend would never do anything to cause him pain and if he trusted Lupin then...so would he. "Alright mate."
Harry gently took the now struggling rat and handed him to Remus, meeting the amber eyes, "I'm trusting you here and not because you were friends with my dad. I'm trusting you because you've gone out of your way to help me more than once this year so I figure you've earned a little bit of my trust."

"Thank you Harry, I'll try not to disappoint you." Remus took the rat who was squeaking in distress by bow. "I see so much of your parents in you Harry but more than that I see you and I know James and Lily would be so proud." He pointed his wand at the panicked rat and uttered a mumbled incantation. There was a flash of yellow light and as if in fast forward the rat transformed into a short, squat man with the look of someone who'd lost a lot of weight in a very short time. His balding, pale hair was limp and unwashed and his beady eyes darted around the room as if he was looking for an escape route.

"Harry Potter, meet Peter Pettigrew." Remus' voice was cold and hard.

Sirius' lips went back in a snarl, "Hello Peter."

Ron looked as if he was going to pass out and Harry's eyes were narrow beams of Avada Kedavra green, "You bastard. You're not a rat, you're more of a cockroach twat than Malfoy."

Sirius had to release a barking laugh at that, "You may look like James but you sure got your mother's talent with insults."

Crookshanks had risen from where he was resting and angry hisses and a low steady growl had replaced his purring as he looked at Peter. The cat went to stand on Ron's chest as if wanting to comfort and protect him all at once. Hermione, deciding that Harry probably wasn't in any danger from Sirius Black went to sit next to Ron, taking his hand in hers and squeezing it tightly.

Pettigrew groveled and twisted in Remus' grasp, licking his lips nervously while his eyes still darted around. "I-It's not as you think, it wasn't my fault...I didn't want to do it. No one c-can say no when the D-Dark Lord, calls on you." He turned his beady eyes on Ron. "And you...I've been good haven't I? I good rat, a nice rat haven't I? A faithful pet?"

Remus made a sound of disgust and gripped his former friend tighter. "Shut up, you have no right to even speak to them!"

"And really Peter, being a better rat than man isn't anything to brag about," Sirius fiddled with Ron's wand, tapping it in a way that broadcast his desire to use it.

Ron gripped Hermione's hand, "I don't know what makes me sicker, knowing that you sold out people who were real, true friends to you, or knowing that you were sleeping in my bed as a rat."

Harry made a sound of disgust, "I think it about draws even Ron. You gave my parents up, you nasty, disgusting bastard, of your own free will. Voldemort," he paused seeing the shivering traitor flinch, "yeah you're gutless alright, Voldemort couldn't have plucked the location from your brain if he tried, not under Fidelus. How long were you working for him? Answer me!"

A glimmer of something, something dark entered Pettigrew's eyes. Almost like he was a different person than the groveling creature from just moments ago. "Real, true friends...Are you kidding me? I was their pity party, their charity case and they never let me forget it. It was always James and Sirius, attached at the hip. Then Remus came and I thought that finally, finally there was someone worse than me...non human, a monster but no...You all still saw that thing as better than me. The Dark Lord saw me, saw me. My gifts and what I could do. He approached me in sixth year, just after you, Sirius, had sold out your precious Moony to become a murderer like he's
supposed to be and he saw my talents and they are great. I fooled all of you didn't I?"

"That long?" It was a pained whisper from Sirius, "You were stabbing us in the back that long you son of a bitch!" He had the wand up before Remus could react, ready to cast the Killing Curse.

Harry jumped between Sirius and Pettigrew, "No!"

"Harry, this man-"

"I know but I think enough people have suffered because of him. We'll take him up to the castle, right in front of Fudge. That way you'll be free." He looked behind him at Pettigrew, "and then the dementors can have you. I only see one monster and murderer in this room and I can tell you it's not the man keeping you from running away like the diseased rat you are. How hard did you work to plant doubt in people's minds? To convince my parents and Sirius that it was Professor Lupin who was spying?" they were rhetorical questions, "By Merlin I hope the dementors make you suffer before they suck your bloody soul out you waste of skin."

"I didn't have to work at it at all, that was the perfect thing." Pettigrew's face turned into an ugly sneer. "It was so easy, just a question to Sirius what Remus was up to and he took it and ran with it...Managed to convince Lily and James all on his own. It was beautiful and perfect to sit back and watch how their tight knit little group fell apart all of their own doing."

Remus had had enough and placed a Muffliato on the traitor, he couldn't listen to poison anymore. "Let's go turn him in before I kill him myself. I can't stand to hear another word the piece of shit has to say."

"You're not the only one. Ugh I have to wonder if even the dementors would eat his soul, it's so diseased," Harry went over to Ron and slung one of his arms over his shoulder, "Think you can walk mate?"

"Not with just your scrawny arse supporting me I can't." Ron's tone was forced humor.

"Oi now that's just mean."

"Here," Sirius handed them their wands back and draped Ron's other arm around his own shoulders, "least I can do after chewing on your leg. I imagine it twinges a bit."

"A bit," Ron let them cart him down the stairs and into the passageway, "a bit?! You almost tore my leg off!"

Harry's lips twitched. If Ron was exaggerating he was doing fine. He looked behind them to see Hermione pointing her wand warningly at Pettigrew as he tried to squirm away and he gave her a wink.

Sirius huffed, "Sorry about that. Normally I'm quite lovable as a dog. More than once James suggested I make the change permanent. The tail I could live with," he met Harry's eyes, humor sparkling in his own, "but the fleas, they're murder."

Seeing that sparkle in Sirius eyes was comforting. Even if it would never be directed at him again it showed Remus that the Sirius he had once known was still in there somewhere. That was good, especially if he really was going to take care of Harry from now on.

Remus concentrated on staying out of Sirius' way and keeping his head down as he herded Pettigrew down the passageway, Hermione walking last, her wand pointed at Pettigrew's back all the way. It was nice when they finally emerged on the edge of the forest, from beneath the
Whomping Willow. The air was fresh and clear and the moon was just rising. Pale, luminescent and...Full.

"Oh bugger! Leave...You have to leave...Now!" Remus couldn't believe he'd forgotten the moon, even worse he'd forgotten the Wolfsbane potion Severus brewed for him monthly. Amber eyes changed until no white was showing. Teeth elongated and bones popped and changed. Muscles stretched and tendons snapped. It hurt, it hurt so incredibly much and with his last reasonable thoughts Remus hated for these kids to see the transformation. It was something no one should have to witness. He felt his skin break across his abdomen as he slashed a claw tipped hand across it and he could feel the scent of his own warm blood as the wolf took over completely, howling at the moon that cursed him.

Harry's eyes went wide and he was suddenly left with the full weight of Ron as Sirius transformed and moved to block Moony from the children, "Oh this is bad."

"Bloody hell you think mate? Oh shite! Look!"

Ron's cry brought attention to Pettigrew transforming and scampering away, Hermione too far to stop him without crossing the werewolf's path. Harry grit his teeth. They'd deal with it later, "Hermione! Get over here! I can't cart Ron back alone!"

Hermione stared at the werewolf and the Grim fighting, snarling and biting as she slowly backed toward Harry and Ron, trying not to draw attention to herself. She'd known Lupin was a werewolf but seeing the horse sized, feral wolf was another thing entirely.

She'd just reached her boys and wrapped an arm around Ron when Lupin howled and threw Black off of him and into a tree trunk before turning yellow eyes on the three youngsters. Stalking toward them with single minded intent.

Another howl echoed from deeper in the forest and Lupin turned his large head to listen to it, ears perking forward. As the howl sounded again, he gave a huff and bounded off to find the source of it.

The Grim transformed back into Black and moved to help the teenagers, "We've got to get out of here and fast. Whatever it was that howled won't keep his attention for long." He took Hermione's place supporting Ron, "Let's go."

Hermione ran ahead, wand raised and keeping werewolf watch as best she could. Suddenly there was a shift in the air and a tall blond man stepped out from behind a tree. "Well, well, well...What is this? I only thought I would see what Dumbledore's favorite little monkies were up to, running about after curfew but look who I stumble upon...Sirius Black. Most wanted fugitive by the Ministry. How very...Fortunate." Lucius Malfoy straightened his already immaculate ponytail and with a leather gloved hand and smiled at Black in a way that looked almost friendly, if you didn't look to close. "This was already proving to be a good day, seeing that animal who dared to draw my son's blood put down and you Black, you just made it so much better. Do you think I'll get a medal when I turn you in?" He tilted his head curiously as two, tall, hooded figures came to flank him on either side.

Sirius paled at the sight of the dementors and his knees gave way under him as he collapsed with a pained cry. Ron shivered and Harry felt bile rise in the back of his throat even as his mind tried to black out. he steeled his spine and reached for a good memory for that shield Flitwick talked about, "Your useless little prat of a son was too stupid to listen when told that you never insult a hippogriff, good to see it runs in the family. What did you do with that book by the way?" Okay so maybe he had more balls than brains but he needed to at least stall while trying to figure out what
to do.

Lucius' lips quirked in annoyance but he didn't lose his pleasant expression. "Ah well, no matter how useless you think Draco is you will always be worse, blood always tell in the end. And what did I do with that book? Besides slip it to little Miss Ginevra you mean? My little dragon told me all about that...Haven't laughed that hard in ages." Lucius flashed the dementors something on his arm before he spoke to them. "Do what you must, the Ministry hasn't said anything about wanting Black back with his mind intact...And sadly casualties happen. I would mourn of course...Deeply if the boy who lived would happen to be kissed."

When the dementors moved forward Harry shook, "No! You can't! He's innocent! And you know it Malfoy! Y-you...really are rot...ten to the core." He heard Hermione collapsing and Ron slipped from his grasp as he brought his wand to bear, "Ex...pecto Patr...onum," barely any silvery mist came out but he tried again, he had to succeed, "expec..." he fell and just before he blacked out he saw his father rush from the woods and cast the Patronus Charm.
Dumbledore saw the realization light in Miss Granger's eyes at the mention of more time and had to smother his smile of satisfaction. Things were falling out tidily. From the moment of Black's escape he'd known that Remus would eventually be unable to keep from going after him, it was werewolf nature to seek out their mate after all. So he'd arranged so it would happen on Hogwarts grounds, knowing that Remus would not be able to leave Orion to attend Hogwarts without coming himself to protect him he'd offered the position of DADA professor. He didn't mind so much the relationship building with Harry, it would give him one more string to cut when it was time to turn Harry into the mindless warrior for the light, and Remus acted exactly as expected. As had Sirius. All it had taken was a polite suggestion to Lucius Malfoy that he visit Hogsmeade before he left, the quickest path taking him past the Whomping Willow and the passageway Harry and the others exited.

And now he would be gaining more of Harry's trust by letting him save Sirius, without the Marauder being able to raise Harry. Black's nobility wouldn't let him deprive Harry of his Hogwarts education. "Sirius is locked in Professor Flitwick's office on the seventh floor. Thirteenth window from the right of the West Tower. If all goes well you should be able to save more than one innocent life tonight. Remember though it is imperative that you are NOT seen. Not under any circumstances are you to be seen. It is now five minutes to midnight so three turns ought to do it Miss Granger. Now I'm going to lock you in, good luck."

Hermione nodded to the Headmaster and pulled her necklace from underneath her shirt. She walked over to Harry and pulled the chain over his neck so that it was covering them both. She turned the time turner three times and felt the now very familiar sensation of time moving backwards. When everything came into focus again the infirmary was empty, there was no Ron lying in one of the cots and Madam Pomfrey was nowhere in sight. "Come on Harry, we have to hurry and the Headmaster was right. We're not allowed to be seen, especially not by ourselves." She put the necklace back in place and reached for Harry's hand, pulling him along with her down the stairs and out on the grounds. They hid and watched as she punched Malfoy, Hermione noticing critically that if she had angled her fist slightly different then she would have had more power behind the punch. After that the two of them made their way down to Hagrid's hut, hiding in the tree line as the other them walked inside the hut.

Harry's mind was reeling, "Hermione what's going on? How are we...how?" time travel was supposed to be impossible.

"It's a time turner, it's how I've been managing all my classes this year. Professor McGonagall gave it to me at the start of the year...Basically I've lived everyday twice to be able to keep up. I wasn't
allowed to tell anyone about it and it's strictly forbidden to interact with the 'you' in the proper timeline. All sort of nasty things will happen if you do and by nasty I mean the Universe imploding sort of thing." Hermione knew it was a lot to take in, she'd gone around in a haze for weeks after McGonagall had told her about this option.

Hermione had lived every day twice all year? Universe imploding? What in the..."Wait if we can't be seen how are we supposed to save Sirius?!

"Well...Professor Dumbledore said it was the thirteenth window from the right of the West Tower right? And if this goes as we want it to go we will have wings." She pointed at the resting Buckbeak and tried to force back the uneasy dip in her stomach at the thought of flying.

Harry stared at the Hippogriff, "We'll be able to save more than one innocent life...so why are we crouched in the trees right now then? Shouldn't we be getting Buckbeak?"

"We can't get him yet, remember what Hagrid said. If Buckbeak isn't here when the Ministry and Malfoy comes then Hagrid will go to Azkaban. We need to wait until they have seen him and are inside with Hagrid before we move." Hermione was patient in her explanation.

"Ugh, this is weird Hermione I don't mind telling you. No wonder you were tetchy enough to clock Malfoy." He took a lurching step forward when he heard Ron exclaim Scabbers' name before he stopped himself, hands balling into fists. "That rat. Hermione I know you say that killing someone crosses a dark line but I'd happily pay the price to kill that bastard. He's worse than what I thought Sirius was before all this came out."

"In this case I can't help but agree with you. That creature makes both men and rats look bad." Hermione sidled over to wrap her arms around Harry. "I know it isn't ideal but we'll get Sirius out and one day that rat will get what's coming to him." She kept her arms around him and looked toward the hut. "The gits are coming...And we're not leaving. Why are we not leaving Harry?"

He frowned, "I haven't seen out the window. We're all focused on Hagrid and Scabbers...what shifted our attention?"

Hermione nibbled on her bottom lip. "The bowl...The bowl shattering and you were hit in the head weren't you?" She let go of Harry and started to look on the ground for something to throw, coming up with a few pebbles.

Harry winced in sympathy for his past self and rubbed the back of his head, "That really hurt you know." He waited with Hermione until their past selves had left then scrambled out of the treeline, "Come on." He approached Buckbeak, met him in the eye and bowed low. 'Please, please don't take forever now.' He breathed a sigh of relief when the hippogriff bowed his head back then went to the chains that held him, flicking his wand with a whispered, "Relashio," that had the chains releasing from the post. He pulled on the trailing end, "Come on Buckbeak, we need to get out of here."

The hippogriff was stubborn and didn't seem very inclined to move. Hermione was slowly starting to feel tendrils of panic claw their way through her and she looked around frantically. Her eyes landed on some dead ferrets tied together and with a grimace of disgust she grabbed them and waved one in front of Buckbeak. "Come here Buckbeak, look I got yummies for you...tasty, tasty rodent corpses. Come get them." Luckily it seemed to work as Buckbeak took a step forward and Hermione walked backwards at the same time, slowly luring Buckbeak into the trees.

Harry grinned and helped her get Buckbeak into the forest as the Minister, Malfoy, and executioner MacNair came out with Dumbledore and Hagrid, all but Dumbledore expressing surprise. He
almost laughed out loud when Malfoy cursed loudly and the executioner swung the ax, splitting a pumpkin in frustration but managed to stifle it.

As soon as they were a safe distance inside the forest Hermione threw her arms around Harry again, dead ferret scarves still around her neck. "We did it Harry!" She hugged him tightly. "I suppose all we do now then is wait." Hermione knew it was frustration for Harry to wait and do nothing while knowing that Pettigrew would slip away but there was nothing to do about that. For now they had to count every success as a victory.

He blushed, feeling her pressed against him, her fluffier chest pressing into his and he pat her back, "Yeah, come on, let's get closer to the Willow so we can watch and make sure we don't bollocks up. I promise I won't turn Malfoy inside out, no matter how much I really, really want to. Evil git."

"I would love to help you with that...Wonder how much of the body you actually could turn inside out and keep the victim conscious and aware of what was happening, making them feel everything." She made a considering hum and moved to sit down on a log, crossing her legs as she waited and throwing Buckbeak a ferret every time he got restless.

"Hermione, never go over to the dark side please, we'll be screwed if you do." Harry sat down with her, eyes on the passageway at the base of the Whomping Willow. "Heh you know it's kind of funny, every time I think I might be able to get away from the Dursleys forever something happens to stop that. Not funny ha-ha but...you know."

"I know." She answered quietly and leaned her head on his shoulder in a way that allowed her to still have a view of the Whomping Willow and the entrance to the passageway. "I wish I could help you Harry, take you away from there for good." Hermione reached for his hand and traced patterns on his palm. "I was wondering though...Not that it's as good as leaving or anything but I was wondering...Do you think your aunt and uncle would let me visit this summer? If I bring my parents with me? They are doctors after all even if it is of the dentist kind."

He tilted his head, "I'm not sure but nothing saying we can't ask." They couldn't actually kill him after all, if they did they knew they'd have more wizards than they could spit at jumping down their throats. "Hermione, when I cast the patronus at the game, did it take a solid form?"

She shook her head. "No, it was like a wall of light I suppose but it didn't take a solid form. Why do you ask?" Hermione raised her head and looked at him. "Did you see anything back there?"

He nodded, "I thought, you'll call me an idiot but at first I thought it was my Dad, someone jumped out and cast a patronus and it looked just like the pictures I'd seen of him but..." he smiled a bit, "everyone tells me just how much I look like my father you know?"

"You mean that you saw yourself? So you think it's you, this you that's here now that cast the patronus?" Once again her teeth found her bottom lip. "It makes sense I suppose, what form did your patronus take?"

He chuckled, "A lioness from what I saw before I passed out." He nudged her knee with his, "Bit funny since it's always the ladies that protect me best or make me feel...safest."

Hermione flushed and was thankful that the sun was setting so that it didn't show as much. "Except for the gender thing it fits you perfectly though, hunter, nurturer and protector. All words that fit you Harry." They sat in silence for a little while. "Hey Harry, I'm not judging anyone or jumping to conclusions but why do you think Lupin never has been to visit you? It's obviously something that upsets Sirius greatly."
Harry tapped his foot, "I don't know but from what I've come to know of him...there has to be a strong reason. It's not just because of the man he is but what he is. I meant what I said when I said he's not a monster but he is a werewolf and all wolves, were or not, stick by their pack. My parents and I had been his pack, he wouldn't have just...left me there without a really, really good reason."

"Maybe someday he'll tell you about it." Hermione leaned her head on his shoulder again as they fell into an easy silence once more. After a while the branches on the Whomping Willow stilled and the shapes of themselves emerged from the passageway. It wasn't any easier watching Lupin's transformation from this distance and see how he and Sirius fought. Hermione waited and waited for the howl when she saw the werewolf practically upon them up there.

"Oh bollocks...I'm a moron." She jumped up from the log and cupped her mouth, letting out a loud howl. "Werewolves answer only to the call of their own."

When the werewolf didn't immediately turn Harry echoed her howl, making Lupin turn and trot towards them, "Okay, now I'd say we need to run!" He grabbed her hand and pulled her into a run through the forest.

"I second that idea completely." Hermione held on to Harry's hand like a lifeline as they ran through the forest floor avoiding roots and low hanging branches as best they could. Hermione felt a slender branch whip her in the face but it was nothing compared to being mauled by a werewolf. They stopped when they saw Malfoy step out of the treeline and walk toward the other them. Hermione felt Harry tense up and she squeezed his hand.

Harry gripped his wand, forcing a lid on his temper as Malfoy stood there, sneering at their past selves and as his past self tried to cast the patronus charm then he squeezed Hermione's hand, "Okay here I go. Back in a flash," he jumped out, raised his wand and shouted, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Letting out a strong blast of silvery light that blew the dementors back from them then formed into a lioness that tore around the clearing, chasing the dementors off as his past self collapsed. He caught sight of Fudge and Dumbledore heading their way and then rushed back into the forest to join Hermione before they could see him, his patronus fading.

'I hate this, I hate this, I hate this so bloody much.' That phrase went over and over in Hermione's mind as she clung to Harry with all her might, her eyes tightly closed and her face buried between Harry's shoulder blades. It was even worse than being on a broom since Buckbeak moved as she flew and she could hear the flapping of his wings. What if he tossed them off? What if he rolled around and they just fell off and got flattened against the ground. She didn't feel in control as she flew and she hated it. "Are we almost there?" Her voice was pleading as she spoke against the fabric of Harry's jacket.

He pat one of her hands, "Just about. Hermione we really need to find a method of flying you can stand." Buckbeak banked and flapped up to the window of Flitwick's office.

Sirius' head shot up at the tap on the window and Harry's smiling face had him gaping and shooting to his feet, "Are you mad?"

"Well plenty pissed that you're in this situation yeah. Move back so Hermione can get you out of here."

Calling on all her inner strength, Hermione slowly unwrapped her almost numb arms from around Harry and pulled her wand and blasted the bars off the window, letting Sirius climb out and onto Buckbeak's back. "Please, please Harry, get me down on the ground as quick as you can."

"On it," Harry tickled Buckbeak's side and had the hippogriff flapping down to the terrace of the
hospital wing's floor. He hopped off and held out a hand to help Hermione off Buckbeak looking up at Sirius. "This isn't fair."

Sirius nodded, "You're right about that. I'll try and write but you let those relatives of yours know that a dangerous, escaped wizard convict is your godfather and will be looking after to see that you're treated well and healthy." He winked then gave Hermione a smile, "You take care of yourself Miss Granger, and give the cat a good long pat from Padfoot."

"I'll do that, you take care too and be careful. Harry and I can't always be there to break you out." She smiled a bit shakily and reached for Harry as Buckbeak rose in the air again with Sirius on his back. "I'm sorry Harry, so sorry but you'll see him again." It seemed like such a small thing to say, it wasn't enough but it was all Hermione could do.

He nodded and squeezed her hand, "Come on, we'd better get back now, before we're locked out of the infirmary."

Hermione nodded and they both hurried into the infirmary just as Dumbledore pulled his wand to lock the door and the other them faded out of view.

They rushed forward and Harry blurted, "We did it! Sirius made it out on Buckbeak."

Dumbledore smiled, exactly according to plan, "Well done," he moved to let them into the infirmary, "now you'd best get back into your beds before Madam Pomfrey finds you out of them."

Something about the twinkle in the blue eyes unnerved Harry just then but he was too pumped with adrenaline and the need to remain undetected by Fudge to examine it right now. He nodded and pulled Hermione in with him, to Ron's choking, gaping astonishment.

"Wh...how...you were just there! And now you're here!"

"Well tell you all about it Ron...Tomorrow." Hermione shared a smile with Harry as she collapsed on her bed, breathing raggedly and heart beating a mile a minute. She felt as if she'd aged more these few hours than she had throughout the year. She was so happy they'd made it though. Saved what could be saved.

Harry nodded and crawled up into his hospital bed, helping himself to the chocolate on the side table, "Definitely tell you tomorrow mate, right now I'm knackered." He smirked at the sound of Lucius Malfoy yelling at Fudge and Dumbledore outside the ward's doors. "And that sound there is going to give me sweet dreams." he gave the door a two fingered salute.

Hermione snickered as she kicked off her trainers and pulled the blanket over her. "Hear, hear to that, sweeter than any lullaby." She replied before she fluffed her pillow and closed her eyes. Adrenaline still rushed through her but the sheer exhaustion she also felt overrode all else and it wasn't long before she fell asleep.

Ron spluttered a bit more as Harry also fell asleep then he just flumped back against his own pillows, "Well what the bloody hell?"

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Harry climbed the stairs to Professor Lupin's office, worried about him after the events of last night.

"Hello Harry." Remus was packing his trunk slowly, moving stiffly with bandages sticking out from beneath his robes. "Are you alright? I hope I didn't scare you too much last night." He loaded
more of his books into the trunk and covered up the tank with the Grindylow in it.

Harry's eyes were wide, "I'm fine, you're not really that scary...You've been sacked?!

Remus smiled sardonically. "Not sacked as much as asked to leave quietly. Lucius Malfoy saw me transform last night...You saw what length he went through to get rid of the hippogriff that scratched his son. You really think he's going to stand idle and let a werewolf teach him? A lot of the other parents will follow him and I should leave before the school suffers another scandal, things are already rocky since Sirius Black managed to escape." He packed up his teapot and the cups that followed with it.

"Bloody Malfoy," Harry muttered, "You're the best Defense teacher we've ever had! Everyone passed their tests this year even! That's never happened before! That should bloody well count for something." He scuffed his foot over the floor, "So...can I write you over the summer at least?"

Remus stopped packing and went to stand in front of Harry, placing bandaged hands on his shoulders. "Absolutely Harry, I'm always just an owl or a patronus away. If you need me I promise to come, no matter the reason. I am so proud of you, so very proud. It has been nothing but a pleasure teaching you and getting to know you." He ruffled Harry's hair. "Oh and a favor, look out for your underclassmates, especially sneaky little Slytherins who act first and think second. These are worrying times after all."

He grinned, "Are you kidding? Orion's practically an adopted Gryffindor, besides I kind of like acting like a big brother to him. Maybe if things had been different I'd actually have a little brother." His eyes glimmered with life and amusement, "So Orion's getting saddled with the title." He blinked innocently, "it'd be easier to look after him if I had something to help me keep an eye on where he is."

"Smooth Harry, very smooth." Remus chuckled, feeling a little bit better knowing Harry would look out for Orion and summer was almost here and then Orion would come home for a few months. "I did promise that it was just a loan didn't I?" He rummaged through the clutter on his desk, pulling out the map he'd gotten back from Severus earlier. "Here you go Harry, use it well."

"It'll be put to plenty use," he grinned and tucked the map into an inside pocket, "how good that use is....well I am the son of Prongs aren't I? What animal was Prongs by the way?"

"Prongs? He was a stag, large enough to be able to herd me when I got...Frisky but still not a threat to a wolf. And yes you are certainly James' son, with Lily's sense and a courage and mind that is all your own." Remus smiled at Harry as he charmed the rest of his books to pack themselves.

"Hermione's gonna be so mad that you're leaving. The little prat Malfoy might have to watch his wee pointy bandaged nose," Harry snickered, "Mione's got one heck of a right hook."

"She'll manage, she's brighter than any professor anyway." Remus smiled at the mentioning of Hermione hitting the younger Malfoy but he was still a Professor on school ground so it wasn't very proper to approve, even though he wholeheartedly did. "You should hold on to her Harry." He gave the younger man a wink.

Harry tilted his head in confusion, "Huh? What do you mean?"

"Nothing, it doesn't matter, just an old man trying to be funny. Forget about it." Remus was reminded that despite everything he'd already accomplished Harry was still a child. And that was just how it should be. He looked around the now clean and packed office. "Well I should be off before someone comes to assist me, remember you can always write me Harry and if you need me
I will be there."

"Oh don't worry, you're not getting rid of me now." Harry gave him a hug. "Look after yourself will you Moony." He grinned, "Really who came up with those names? They're so silly."

"Oh they are, extremely silly and sadly they stuck...You have no idea how long I fought against Moony. As for who came up with them...Your godfather of course, who else?" Remus' smile dimmed a fraction. "Thank you for breaking him out. Sirius is not made to be stuck behind bars. Take care now and tell Hermione and Ron I said goodbye."

"I will and of course it was Sirius who came up with them. He's a few chips short of a full meal." Harry leaned against the door and watched Remus walk away, frowning deeply before moving through the halls. He had to roll his eyes when Malfoy, for once without his goons tried to waylay him. "What the bloody hell do you want twat?"

Draco bristled at the name calling but he kept his gaze on the floor somewhere close to Harry's feet. "I didn't tell Father to get Lupin fired. I actually liked him as a teacher. You...You don't know how he is when he gets an idea into his head...What he's willing to do to see it through and make sure it turns out in his favor...You don't know." He lifted his head and met Harry's eyes for a second before he hurried away, disappearing around a corner.

Harry stared after the vapor the blond left. He might know much about Lucius Malfoy but he knew enough to class him as an enemy, the kind who needed to be taken down as soon as possible. The man had commanded dementors for Merlin's sake, what did that say about his personality? The mini git though, there might be something salvageable there, if he ever decided he could flip his father off. he made his way back up to the Gryffindor common room to break the news about Lupin to Ron and Hermione and to start getting things ready for the train ride in the next couple of days.
Harry lay upstairs, brooding at the ceiling. Since he'd been able to pull out the threat of Sirius it had been a beating free summer so far and he even got all his materials in the tiny room with him and had finished all his summer homework and a good three quarters of the catch up for Crystal Theory and Runes and it had only been a month. Hermione and her parents were coming by tomorrow and he'd been left to himself without chores while the Dursleys spent the day out shopping. Now all he had were his thoughts for company and they weren't good ones.

He just kept going over the school year in his mind, over the fact that Dumbledore knew about the Shrieking Shack, over the fact that Sirius had never had a trial, and that even back then Dumbledore had been the head of the Wizengamot, that he still was. But he'd never insisted that Sirius be brought fully to trial. So much didn't add up. The Philosopher's Stone, how he could have possibly missed Quirrell's duplicity, the way he'd just let Hagrid be carted off as a child and then never let him finish his schooling, and there was no possible way he'd not known what the monster in the chamber had been. If Hermione found out Dumbledore had to have known. And everything with Sirius just made it even more odd. It just didn't add up, not if Dumbledore really was the man he purported to be.

He didn't like to admit it but he was beginning to think that Dumbledore wasn't the man he thought he was.

Hermione looked up at the house as she and her parents walked up the short walkway. It was strange how such a normal house could hide such ugliness. It was only the end of June but Hermione had missed Harry, even though she'd written him regularly and even gotten to speak with him over the phone once or twice. She straightened her ponytail and pulled on the skirt of the flower printed summer dress she wore before she reached out to ring the doorbell. A very large mustache wearing man opened the door and glared down at her.

"Um...Hello, I am Hermione Granger, here to see Harry. These are my parents, doctor Janine Granger and doctor Herbert Granger." She motioned to her parents.

Mr. Granger didn't like the way the large man's eyes shifted from near violent to suddenly pleased but he knew that getting to see Harry was important to his daughter so he offered his hand, "Pleased to meet you Mr. Dursley. Is Harry at home right now? Hermione has been looking forward to seeing him."

Before Vernon could say or do anything more than accept Herbert's hand, Harry's voice came from behind him, "I've been looking forward to seeing her too Mr...er Dr. Granger."

"Harry!" Hermione beamed and looked around the very large frame of his Uncle to see him before making her way around Vernon so she could hug him tightly. "Look at you, it's only been weeks and you've grown so tall...Like a weed. And just call Dad Herb, everyone does, right Dad?"

He chuckled, "They do indeed. You are looking well Mr. Potter."
"Thanks," he hugged Hermione back, "You've got a little more height too Hermione," he tugged a frizzy curl, "it's good to see you."

"Likewise, I've missed you...And Ron of course." She slowly let go of him and stood next to him as Petunia stuck her long neck around the corner of the sitting room. "Veron, let the doctors inside, don't leave them standing in the hallway." She came in sight, wiping her bony hands on a frilly apron. "I do hope you'll join us for tea while the young ones catch up." She smiled a sickly sweet smile. "I've been up since before dawn baking the most darling cupcakes that you really have to try, they are very light on sugar...good for your teeth." She laughed and poked Herbert with a bony elbow. Actually it was Harry who'd been up since before dawn baking but no one needed to know that little fact. It had been one of the conditions to let him have a visitor.

Harry exchanged a look with Hermione, knowing that she knew exactly who'd done the baking, "If it's alright with you er...Herb and Mrs. Dr. Granger I need to show Hermione some of my notes on my catch ups, we'll be right upstairs, the open door, can't miss it."

Hermione's mother smiled and made a shooing motion, "Of course dear take your time. I know adult conversation is dreadfully boring for teenagers."

"Thank you Mom, Dad, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, it was a pleasure to meet you both." Hermione smiled but inside she gagged as she was forced to say that with a straight face. She followed Harry upstairs and leaned against the wall in his room when they got inside. "Oh my god Harry, they're so horrible! I mean I knew that they were but seeing them...I just wanted to pull out my right hook on both of them and drag you out of here. How do you stand it?" She whispered the words but the red tint on her cheeks and neck showed how upset she was.

"Long years of practice and really, it's better this year since they don't want to anger my criminal godfather." He smirked briefly and sat on the narrow bed, "I'd be happy to let you pull me out of here for the rest of the summer, or at least until the Quidditch World Cup really, if your parents would be okay with it. I can tell you that as much as they want me miserable my aunt and uncle would fall all over themselves to get me out of the house early."

"I would love to have you stay with us until the World Cup, you know I would but we're going to France as usual. I'll be home just in time to go to the Burrow." Hermione looked miserable as she went to sit next to Harry on the bed. "Eugh, I can't stand the thought of you being stuck here. Can't you go to the Burrow earlier? I know Molly would love to have you there, her lost son in need of feeding...Like twelve meals a day." Her lips quirked upwards at that since that was exactly how Molly Weasley was. "How are you Harry, really? If we disregard your monsters for relatives for a moment, how are things? You look tired." She rubbed her thumb over the shadows beneath his eyes.

"Couldn't sleep last night." He ran his fingers through his hair, "I got a letter from Ron, well a reply more like," he nodded at the sleeping Hedwig on her perch, "his Mum asks every year to let me stay with them, asks Dumbledore every year and every year is told that it's best I stay here with my mother's blood but I ordered some books from Flourish and Blotts about blood wards and..." he frowned, "the only ones that work require affection on the part of the 'protector' something I can tell you my aunt doesn't feel in the slightest."

"Strange, why would Dumbledore force you to stay somewhere where he knows you're miserable if the wards doesn't even do any good? I mean if it's in a book a student can access then he has to know." Hermione crossed her legs and bit at her bottom lip. "I hate to say this but he acted strangely all of last year don't you think? And why hasn't Sirius ever had a proper trial? One interrogation with Veritaserum used and it would be clear that he's been telling the truth all along.
I've been thinking about it a lot Harry and it doesn't add up."

"No it doesn't and not just that, why would he let a Basilisk roam the school, he had to know what it was. You found it after really thinking on all the bits and pieces. Why would he bring the Philosopher's Stone to the school, I don't care what everyone says Hogwarts isn't safer than Gringotts' maximum security vaults, why would he bring a werewolf into school to teach then sack him once it was found out? I refuse to believe Remus just left only because of Malfoy's big mouth. So much doesn't add up Hermione, not unless you think about us, or me rather. I keep getting into messes each year but each one makes me stronger and...colder too. And I found out something about people who survive a Basilisk bite, their immune systems fight off malicious potions and weaker poisons. This year I learned two spells above my year, the Patronus Charm and the shield spell...Hermione it's like he's trying to turn me into a soldier."

She nodded and reached for his hand and tangled their fingers together. "I don't like this at all but I think you're right. Everything he does, every hardship at school...It's like he's grooming you. Wanting you to turn only to him." Hermione's brown eyes were large and worried. "I don't think Dumbledore is the sweet and kind old wizard he pretends to be Harry. I don't think he can be trusted. Think about it, yes he's powerful but You-Know-Who is the darkest wizard who's ever risen, there must be another reason he's reluctant to take Dumbledore on, something he knows about him, knows that he's capable of. Oh Harry, what are we going to do? I'm not going to let him make you cold...I'm NOT!"

Harry squeezed her hand, "Hey, I know what he's up to now and you know if he really wants a warrior, I can do that," he smirked, a twinkle in his eyes, "but on my terms. The way I see it, Voldemort's going to keep coming after me, I don't know why but he is so I do need to know how to protect myself but it won't be just Voldemort I protect myself from anymore but Dumbledore's little machinations. I was thinking about my dad and the Marauders too, how useful would an animagus form be hm?"

"Oh you're onto something there." Hermione's eyes lit up. "I think it could come in very useful, especially if we could keep it hidden even from Dumbledore. And really how hard can it be to learn? I mean Pettigrew managed and I for one am not going to come in second to that abomination." Her ballerina flat hung from her toe as she wiggled her foot in thought. "I can research it over the summer and maybe you could ask your godfather if you can get a hold of him or Lupin perhaps."

"You read my mind. I sent a letter with the last bird Sirius sent but I want to talk to Remus anyway. If Dumbledore has manipulated my life so much already...I'm wondering if he's not the reason Remus didn't look after me. If he did something to Remus to keep him from coming to me." Harry frowned and swept a hand through his hair, "If he did...Mione I swear Dumbledore will find himself living his worst nightmare."

Hermione squeezed his hand. "I've got your back Harry, always. You know that. Just be careful, think before you act. I couldn't handle something happening to you, you're my very best friend, my family." She pressed a soft kiss to his cheek, flushing a little when she felt the slight stubble there. Her Harry was growing up.

"Don't worry Hermione. I plan on taking the patient route this time. I'm going to learn everything I can and then I'll take Voldemort out and Dumbledore down when I'm strong enough. I'm not dumb enough to try when I'm still just an ickle student." He brushed a bit of her hair back from her face, "I'm hoping to bring you and Ron along for the ride just so you know."

"Oh just try and stop us and see what would happen, we'll be there Harry, right next to you for it
"Thanks Hermione," he leaned in to kiss her cheek on impulse, "You're the best and I do mean that in every way." He sat back and grinned, "If, by some miracle, Hedwig isn't up to it, I'll pop over to Diagon Alley and use an albatross or something for letters. Also," he fished out a money pouch of Galleons, "I want to ask you a favor. I know France has a looser definition of 'dark' magic so if you happen to find any books about Parseltongue I really want to get a good idea about it and why it's considered a dark ability. Talking to snakes can't be the only reason."

"You got it, I already have the perfect place to start in mind." Hermione tucked the pouch into her bag. "The same bookstore where I plan to get started on reading up on animagi and how to become one." Research she could do, that was something she felt fully confident in. She scrunched up her nose. "We should probably get back downstairs, before Dad's had enough and loses it. He can smell bullshit from several kilometers away and he usually doesn't take well to it. He knows this is important to me but he can only take so much." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I don't want to leave you here though."

He hugged her, "I'll be fine. I plan to be out of the house as much as possible and the twins sent me a set of lockpicks so I can get in and out no problem. We won't go into what else they've sent me."

"No please, knowing them I don't want to know." She grinned as she got off the bed. "I'll write you all the time and I'll send you anything I find on Parseltongue as soon as I find it...And we'll see each other at the Burrow, it's not that far away after all." She tried to convince herself more than Harry that everything would be okay. "I'll miss you though. Ron is amazing but the deeper stuff...kind of goes over his head you know..."

"Yeah I know but no one's more loyal. Plus he's brilliant at strategy. Take care Hermione, take pictures, and have fun for me as well as yourself okay?"

"Mmm, I'll try. You take care too and be careful." She turned and hugged him tightly, her arms tight around his neck. "I really am going to miss you, you know. Write me if you find out something from Lupin, I still want to take a rolled up newspaper to his snout for leaving us." She let go and walked down stairs with Harry, almost bursting out in laughter at her Dad's relieved expression when he caught sight of her.

Her mother still had the polite smile on her face but you could see the irritation lurking behind her eyes, "Ah there you are dear, I was about to go up and get you. Harry dear I hope you had a good catch up."

"Yes, ma'am. It should tide me over til the World Cup, barely."

Mr. Granger laughed and went over to ruffle Harry's hair, "Good to see you again lad, don't be a stranger and really if anything," he glanced very shortly at the Dursleys, "anything at all happens where we can help, don't hesitate to call or send a letter or anything."

Both Hermione and her mother nodded eagerly and Hermione gave Harry one last hug before it was time to say goodbye and leave. As soon as the door had shut behind the Grangers, Petunia lost every bit of pleasantness she'd had. "Well get this mess into the kitchen boy and do the dishes, we all." She smiled at him, wondering to herself when he'd grown up so much. "Oooh here, before I forget." Hermione reached into her purse that was only a slightly smaller version of her usual bookbag and pulled out a leather binder. "These are all my notes on Runes and Crystal Theory, I've copied them down on normal muggle paper so you should be able to read my chicken scratch. It should be enough to get you caught up and if you have any questions I'll only be a phone call away. The number to our place in France is in there as is the address if Hedwig should feel up to a long flight."
were good to you now you know. Letting you have your little schoolfriend in our home. You better pay for it." She pointed to the tea tray before starting to talk with Vernon about summer homes in France and all kinds of trite.

In the kitchen Dudley was feasting on the left over cupcakes, frosting all around his mouth. He never showed himself when Harry's 'kind' were in the house, remembering the pigs tail all too well. "Oi shrimpy...I didn't know that they made your kind of freaks in that shape or form." He leered at his cousin. "That girlie was stacked, has she let you squeeze them?"

Harry turned slowly and gave Dudley a cold stare and whispered so that just his cousin could hear him, "Do you remember the snake Dudley? From the zoo? Do you know there's a magic that's not detectable by the people who sent the warning year before last? It's called Parseltongue and it lets me speak to and command any kind of snake." Dudley might be book stupid but when it came to self-preservation his instincts and brain were pretty highly honed. "You might want to keep the snake from the zoo in mind next time you want to talk about my friend that way."

Dudley's eyes bulged and he swallowed loudly. He might rather die than admit it but he really did fear his scrawny cousin's abilities. Fear and envy them. "Tche, whatever...Who would want to talk about your freak-friends anyway?" He got up from the kitchen chair he had been sitting on and wiped his mouth. "I'm going out, have fun cleaning up." He tossed Harry a smirk and walked out the backdoor, not wanting to be subjected to his mother's kisses and lectures.

Harry indulged in a bit of childishness and stuck his tongue out at Dudley's retreating back. He'd keep quiet for the next few days then take the Knight Bus to Diagon Alley and see if he could find a library or someplace that had old copies of the Daily Prophet. There should be some sort of story about the Potters' friends, maybe something to point him in the right direction to see what might have kept Remus from looking after him instead of his aunt and uncle.

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Harry sat outside Fortescue's and blew out a long, low breath at what he'd found. It didn't have much detail aside from that Remus had been wrongfully imprisoned and experimented on for seven months after Sirius' arrest. It was disgusting and quite frankly made him want to find the people who did it and return whatever they did to Remus threefold. He was beginning to think that the Ministry was more corrupt than the Death Eaters. He flipped through the paper he'd bought an old copy of absently. It went in depth into the relationships his parents had had during Hogwarts years. He found himself wrinkling his nose seeing that his Mum had been friends for a while with Snape but then he nearly spit out his ice cream at a picture of Sirius his first year at Hogwarts. If he didn't know better he'd think him seeing Orion!

He frowned and peered closely. Orion's jaw wasn't quite as sharply defined and his eyes weren't gray, really around the jaw and eyes he looked more like...like Remus. No, no way it wasn't possible. Just because he resembled Sirius with amber eyes didn't mean...or was it possible? Magic could do a lot of things and homosexual couples weren't persecuted in the magical world. He ran his fingers over his scalp. He couldn't believe he was even thinking this. It was time for another trip to the library and then a visit to the return address on Remus' letters.

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Harry got off the Knight Bus and shouldered his pack before walking towards the end of the lane and over the gentle hills to the cottage Remus' letters came from. He paused to look at the simple and rather cute cottage with the thatched roof, lush cheerful garden, and stone fence with a whitewashed gate before walking up the path to the door and knocking.
"Da-ad, someone's at the door!" A loud youthful voice sounded through the cottage.

"Then answer it, I'm a little bit busy up here." Remus was on the upper floor gathering Orion's dirty clothes. Sometimes Remus could swear his son changed outfits four times a day.

"Kay." Orion bounded over to the door and unlatched it, his amber eyes growing wide when he saw who was standing on the other side of it.

"Harry, what are you doing here? Not that you're not welcome. Come in, come in." Orion waved him in eagerly.

Oh yeah this was really angling toward confirming his suspicions. He stepped in, looking around and smiling at the cozy furnishings and warmth that had nothing to do with temperature. "Hey Orion. Been getting into messes yet this summer?"

"Nah, nothing big...No one fun to prank over the summer, plus I'm surrounded by people who have eyes in the back of their necks." He sighed mournfully.

Remus came down the stairs and froze when Harry came into view, he had fully expected to see Severus or old lady McDonald who sold them their eggs.

"Harry, this is a surprise." His eyes darted between Orion and their guest. There wasn't much use in pretending now. "I see you've met my son, Orion Lupin."

"Yeah. Really Moonstar? you couldn't come up with anything better than that?" He gave Remus a teasing smile though his eyes held seriousness behind them.

Remus answered Harry's smile but his eyes were questioning and wary. "It worked didn't it? It was mostly to keep him from becoming teased for having a Professor for a parent." The word werewolf hung unsaid in the air.

"I'm almost afraid to guess but the morbid uncle is Snape isn't it?" Orion's nod had him hanging his head, "Now I have to be respectful to him, drat." He shifted and ruffled Orion's hair, "Okay my sneaky little friend, mind if I talk with your Dad? Without you listening in?"

It was clear that that statement almost made Orion burst with curiosity.

"Go to Aggie and help her with her lawn as you promised." Remus told him and with head hanging low Orion obeyed. Aggie was a tattletale and would tell his Daddy if he was to stay behind and eavesdrop.

When Orion had left, Remus invited Harry to the kitchen and got the kettle going. "What's wrong Harry? I'm happy to have you visit but I imagine you're here for a reason." Remus looked at him closely.

Harry sat down and fiddled with a salt shaker in the shape of a dragon, "I did a lot of thinking after this year, about things that just...didn't add up. Came to more than a few conclusions but first...I want to know why you didn't come get me from the Dursleys after you were cleared. "I want to know why you didn't come get me from the Dursleys after you were cleared." He met amber eyes, "Why did you leave me there, it doesn't seem at all like the person I've come to know."

"I wanted to Harry, believe me I wanted to get you so badly. I was all set to raise you and Orion together. I just waited for my health to get the all clear from Poppy and then I planned to be there." Remus looked broken as he held Harry's gaze. "I don't know how much it's safe to tell you but I can say as much that my hands were very efficiently bound behind my back. To keep Orion alive
I had to give up on you...I didn't want to choose like that Harry! Someone is very, very intent to keep you at your Aunt's house, no matter the cost." Remus' hands were trembling.

Harry's jaw tensed, "I believe you. What did Dumbledore do to Orion?"

Remus' eyes widened. "He...He tied Orion's lifeforce to himself. He literally has my son's life in the palm of his hand and if I fall out of line he can just snuff it out. I'm sorry Harry but I can't risk that. Orion is my everything."

"I'd never ask you to do that!" Harry felt just a little insulted Remus would think that he would, "I came here for answers, not to get you to take me in." He huffed and crossed his arms over his chest, "I thought it might be Dumbledore who held you back but I wasn't sure." He leaned his chin on a hand, "Does Sirius know? About any of this?"

"I didn't mean to imply you would ask me to jeopardize Orion, it's my own guilt speaking there. I want to help so badly. And no Sirius doesn't know. I didn't have a chance to tell him before he went to Azkaban and as you could see he's not exactly willing to listen to anything I have to say these days. You though young man, are way too smart for your own good." He gave Harry a grief tinted smile.

"Not much to do at Privet Drive except think and get curious and then look things up when I get the chance. So where does S...er Professor Snape, fit in? See I don't know everything."

That made Remus chuckle, "Not quite everything but enough I'd say." Remus was relieved Harry had guessed and researched though, it felt good that Harry knew just why he was such a meek coward. "Severus and I...We were not what you would call friends when we were in school...Far from it. When I made it to Hogwarts I had just given birth to Orion alone in the woods. I had silver poisoning, malnutrition and bloodloss and Orion wasn't much better off. Severus really is a brilliant potions master and he helped us get better. When Dumbledore did...What he did I lost faith in the world...I had no one, absolutely no one and you know that once a month I'm not exactly fit to care for a child. I basically coerced Severus to help me and somewhere along the way he's turned into my dearest friend. He's family and both Orion and I love him for the prickly bastard that he is."

Harry took the teacup Remus handed to him and muttered, "Prickly?" before sipping. There were a thousand other adjectives he could apply to Snape that would fit better than that understatement. "Okay so he's a good guy to you and Orion...and he was friends with my Mum," from his backpack Harry pulled the paper out that had basically lead him to seek Remus out at the cottage and waggled it, "why does he treat me like the scum of the earth?"

"Severus has a greater weight on his shoulders than anyone can imagine. A weight that makes it difficult to show his true self." Remus brought out the Jaffa cakes, this company deserved the good biscuits. "Also, James and Severus really, really didn't get on in school and I'm trying to be diplomatic here. He knows you're not him but sometimes old hurts are difficult to heal."

"Hmm why do I have this funny feeling Dumbledore is also behind that weight." Harry wrinkled his nose again, "And please don't bother being diplomatic. I think I've had enough mushroom food shoveled at me disguised as diplomacy to turn me off even honest diplomacy for life." He tapped his foot, "I know it'd hurt and all but...do you remember anything about the ritual Dumbledore did? I don't want Orion in danger anymore and if there's anyone on the face of this planet who can find out what it was and how we might be able to turn it on the old coot, it's Hermione."

"I was so stupid Harry." Remus got lost in his memories, his hands fistling in his lap underneath the tabletop. "Dumbledore asked to see me and Orion to make sure Orion was healthy, that the potions and medicine was working and I just handed him right over. Orion was crying so bitterly and I just
placed him in that man's arms. There was a goblet on his desk, most likely a potion or something he'd prepared before I got there. He pricked Orion with a needle and dripped his blood into the goblet and after that tendrils of green wrapped around both Dumbledore and Orion...It was more than that though I literally could feel a part of Orion being ripped away from him and me, something that belongs purely to Dumbledore right now.” Remus closed his eyes so Harry wouldn't have to see the agony and the guilt in them.

Harry reached across the table and laid a hand on the man's shoulder, "You trusted him. He was a man you'd only ever seen good from, someone who'd let you attend school and make real friends despite your lycanthropy, a man who you'd always been able to trust before. Babies cry for lots of different reasons and you were just getting used to being a dad. You weren't stupid Remus, you trusted a man who'd never given you cause not to trust him. The only blame here lays solely on the old bastard's shoulders."

"He sits there twinkling and has the respect and awe of all of the wizarding world and all the while he plays everyone like puppets. Ruins lives at a whim. Why Harry? What are his reasons?" Remus really didn't understand it. "The thing is...Before he did what he did to Orion, to you, I would have laid my life down for him and the cause he fought for. Now I don't even know what that is, I can't decide who's worse, Dumbledore or you know who.” It wasn't right to spew all these over a boy who wasn't even fourteen yet but Remus couldn't help himself now that he had someone who listened, someone who believed him. "I am bound but I am on your side Harry and if you need me I will find a way to be there, to help."

"I don't know what his reasons are but I do know that I'm going to turn tables on him." Harry's eyes lit with intent and not a little mischief, "spinning lies about blood wards, hurting you, Orion, and Sirius, letting that great big Basilisk roam the school, bloody hell I'm starting to wonder if he didn't mould Riddle into becoming Voldemort for whatever reason. Either way, when it comes to me, he's been trying to turn me into the perfect, mindless warrior for him," he smirked, "I'm going to teach you should be careful what you wish for. He wants a warrior, oh he'll get one, one that's aiming to take him down along with Voldemort."

"I believe in you Harry, if anyone can do it, it's you." Remus reached out to ruffle the impossible black hair he recognized so much from James. "Remember to fight for yourself though and don't take on everyone else's burdens. We'll all fight with you. Also be careful, we've seen what Dumbledore is willing to do and there's no telling what steps he'll take if he begins to feel threatened."

Harry grinned, "Lemme tell you a secret, the Sorting Hat originally wanted to put me in Slytherin. I asked it not to thanks to Malfoy. Dumbledore won't even know the end is coming until it bites him. To start with I'm going to learn how to become an animagus. It just seems like a really really useful thing to know. I also want to see if I can learn Occlumency because if the old bee isn't a Legilimens I'll eat Dudley's shorts."

"Oh he's a Legilimens alright, a very accomplished one at that. You're probably not going to like this but one of the only ones who can challenge Dumbledore there is Severus. If you can stand him and he you then he would really be the best to teach you.” Remus picked up his wand lying on the table to reheat his forgotten tea, it never tasted as good but cold tea was even worse. "You should definitely look into animagi as well, you are right, it is useful. Especially if you manage to keep it hidden. I have some books and notes you can borrow but Sirius is the expert on that subject though I think he managed on pure stubborness alone."

Harry snickered, "Well I've got plenty of that and if Snape, sorry Professor Snape, is really my best option, first Merlin save me and second, can you convince him to actually teach me if I try to keep
a lid on my smart-arse? I can't promise it'll stay on being as it's sort of natural but I'll try."

Remus chuckled. "Oh I believe I can manage to talk him into it, for some inexplicable reason he's scared of my carping powers. It comes with being a parent I suppose, you have no idea how many times I have to tell things to Orion before he actually listens."

"Well as Dudley doesn't actually listen to Aunt Petunia I've only got Mrs. Weasley to guess off of but I think, considering Fred and George, I can round it off a bit." Harry grinned at him, "Speaking of, how close to not quite eavesdropping is he?"

Remus sighed. "Either he's in the flowerbed outside the window here or he's in the cellar trying to listen in but for once he's biting the dust. A Muffliato was cast all around the kitchen when we entered so he can't hear anything. No doubt he's tearing out hair in frustration by now."

Harry got up and stuck his head out the kitchen, "Okay Orion we're done you can come on in!"

There was a slight shuffle and a slightly embarrassed looking Orion emerged from a hatch in the floor, climbing up from the cellar. "Took you long enough, I almost fell asleep down there...Oooh Jaffa cakes." He bounced over to the kitchen table and nabbed several of the chocolate and orange flavored biscuits.

"See." Remus told Harry with an exasperated sigh.

Harry just laughed and sat back down, nicking a biscuit for himself, "You know I was thinking, if Mr. Weasley can get an extra ticket or two, that it'd be great to have you two with us at the Quidditch World Cup."

Amber eyes locked on amber, one pair glistening with all kinds of puppy eye dog power. "Oh Daddy please, please, please. Who knows when the Cup will be played in England next time? Please Dad."

"I don't think I stand another month and a half of that." Remus smiled, of course he would let his son see the World Cup if it was possible but he couldn't cave too easily now could he? "We'll see, if chores are done as they should be and if someone in this room actually tries to listen at times then yes, as long as there's no trouble for Arthur."

"YES!!" Orion whooped and threw himself around Harry's neck. "You're the absolute best!"

Harry made a soft oof and ruffled Orion's hair, "You'll have to give Mr. Weasley one of those as he's the one finessing the tickets." That wasn't to say he wasn't going to make an anonymous donation to Mr. Weasley's ticket fund though. It wasn't fair to make him pay for all the tickets. "And you know I heard tell it was your birthday a little bit ago."

"Yup, Dad tried to bake a cake but I swear, a rock is soft compared to what Dad managed to turn out." Orion grinned up at his Daddy. "It was great though, Uncle Severus was here and Dennis sent me an owl."

"At least I got up and baked for you, ungrateful brat." Remus huffed with a smile.

"Well I bear some belated birthday surprises," he tugged a red and orange polkadot present, one small flat one still wrapped in the brown shipping paper, a smallish one in a light silvery paper, and a rather large one wrapped in newsprint, "From the twins, me, Hermione, Ron and I'm pretty sure his Mum added some things too."

Orion gasped and looked almost disbelievingly at the gifts. "Can I open them now?" At Harry's
affirmative nod he reached for the polkadotted present first, eagerly ripping the paper off. "Woah, wicked!" He plucked at the different kinds of brilliant gags and tricks he could use in his pranks. He was especially interested in the brightly wrapped candies causing all sort of ailments if you ate them. Then he opened the one from Hermione, grinning at the books of old wizarding myths and history. Ron's gift contained a dozen chocolate frogs and a book on chess. Orion was pleased since he had declared he would beat Ron in a game before the year was over. Molly Weasley had knitted socks to match the sweater he got for Christmas and sent several berry pastries. Finally he moved to the last gift and opened it carefully, gasping when he read the gift certificate. "Harry, is this for real? It's too much, way too much." Still he gripped the card tightly to his chest.

"Of course it's real," he reached out and tweaked Orion's nose, "I've got Galleons to spare so why shouldn't I spoil the important people in my life hm?"

"Thank you Harry, thank you so much!" Once again Harry found himself with an armful of Orion as the younger one hugged him as tightly as he could.

"Thank you." Remus mouthed too over Orion's head. There was no way he could have afforded a broom on his translator salary, even with the money he'd saved from working at Hogwarts and testing Severus' potions.

Harry just smiled and pointed from Orion to himself, the message being that he remembered being in a similar position. "Okay I've got a couple of hours before I have to snag the Knight Bus back so why don't you tell me what you've been up to so far this summer?" He sipped at his tea and nibbled on biscuits and enjoyed the feeling of 'family' that he never felt at the Dursleys as Orion started talking a mile a minute. He also started mentally composing a letter to Sirius asking to see him. It was time he knew that he had a son and that he had no reason or right to be snapping at Remus.

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Sirius sniffed the air then transformed, stepping lightly into the scrubby little woods by a park near Privet Drive. "Harry?"

"Over here Sirius," Harry was sitting down while he waited, studying his Runes textbook. Now he looked up at his godfather, "You're looking better." He was filled out and actually well groomed, his hair pulled back in a sleek tail and his resemblance to Orion was almost painfully obvious like this.

"Is everything okay? If your relatives have done anything I-"

"That's not why I asked you to come. They're too scared of you to bother much with me. This is about Remus."

Sirius' lip curled and he flopped down against a tree, "What about that coward?"

"Don't call him that!" Harry's voice was a whip, drawing startled gray eyes.

The blazing temper in the green of his godson's eyes reminded Sirius of Lily when her ire was roused but the commanding voice was all Harry and like nothing Sirius had ever heard from either James or Lily. "Harry he left yo-"

"I know where I've been for the last thirteen years and where he's been too, can you say the same? Have you bothered to find out why he never came and got me?" Harry didn't wait for Sirius to reply, just took out the paper that he'd found on it and flipped it over to the dog animagus, "Take a read."
Sirius scanned the paper, his jaw clenching when he read about Remus being held and experimented on. The part of him he thought he'd buried and locked up tight twinged at the thought of his Moony being hurt like that. "Okay fine but he still didn't come for you after he got out and recovered did he?" Nor had Remus fought for him.

"He couldn't. He was effectively leashed, by Dumbledore. Think about everything Dumbledore has and has not done. He stuffed me away with the Dursleys citing protection that doesn't even exist, I looked. And he knows you're innocent, he knows it and he's the head of the Wizengamot but yet here you are, hiding out. He kept Remus from coming to get me and here's how," he tossed Sirius a picture of Remus and Orion grinning and waving, "He's got his 'mother's' eyes and jaw but the rest of him, is all his father. Look like anyone you know?"

Sirius' healthy tan went from a nice golden tone to sheet white as he looked at the picture. He could have been seeing himself twenty four years ago except for those eyes, those eyes were all Remus. He remembered Remus' promise of happy news, the way he'd looked so exhausted and worn and his hand trembled as he met Harry's eyes again, "Mine?"

Harry nodded, "Oh yeah. His name is Jonathan Orion and when he was only a few weeks old Dumbledore tricked Remus into letting him hold Orion and then the old bumbly bastard performed a ritual that bound Orion's life to his whim. If Remus steps a single bloody toe out of line, Dumbledore will kill Orion."

The picture fell to the ground as a wave of nausea swept through him. "Shite." What had he done? Accusing Remus without finding out the whole story...and now maybe blowing his chance to be a part of his son's life. Fuck him he had a son!

Harry nodded at the devastated shock on Sirius' face, "Yeah now you're getting it. If you want to start groveling, and believe me you've got a lot of that to do, Remus' address is on the back of the picture. Don't hurt him again Sirius or I'll let Hermione at you. She's a whole lot more punishingly creative than I am."

Sirius nodded, picking up the picture and flipping it over to read the address. 'Of course, his mother's cottage.' He looked back to his godson, "Harry..."

"Just go, I'll write you later."

Sirius nodded and tucked the picture away before transforming and taking off at a wild lope.

The hippogriff landed in the woods near Remus' cottage, it was a wizarding community so Buckbeak really wouldn't be out of place as Sirius went about his business. He hopped off Buckbeak, pat a feathered neck and smoothed his hands down his casual blue button down shirt and jeans before walking towards the cottage. A happy laugh caught his attention and he saw Remus standing out back, watching indulgently over a twelve year old flying low over the soft springy grass. Sirius inhaled sharply at the smile on Remus' face, one he hadn't seen in so many years.

A soft summer breeze carried with it a scent Remus would never, ever be able to forget. He whipped his head around and caught sight of Sirius Black. At first his insides clenched and he wanted to snatch Orion up and just run as fast and as far he could but he wasn't that cruel. He could never deny father and son the chance to get to know each other, it just wasn't in him. "Don't fly too high, we don't want to give the neighbors heart attacks. I'll be close by." He waited until Orion nodded before he walked over to the edge of his garden. "Sirius." He forced his voice to remain
calm. "What brings you to my home?"

Sirius shifted. Now that he was here, he wasn't sure what to say. How could you apologize for treating someone the way he had treated Remus? He rubbed the back of his neck, "I...well to start I came to apologize...grovel even." He met the suspicious amber eyes, "I'm an arse pure and simple Remus, jumping to conclusions and making judgements based on stupid, stupid hints and evidence without finding out the whole story. I'm sorry. I know..." he looked up at the sky then down to his feet before looking back at Remus' face, "I know it doesn't mean much but I am so so sorry."

"I believe you." Remus couldn't bring himself to meet Sirius' eyes. This was what he'd dreamed about all those long, lonely, sleepless nights. Why then didn't it feel better when it actually happened. "You're always sorry after the fact." He placed his hands in the pockets of his denims so Sirius wouldn't see the blood running from the nail marks in his palms. "Why don't you come in? Meet your son."

'Please, please, please don't take him away from me.' Those thoughts ran in his mind over and over again as he opened the gate to the garden.

"Our son." Sirius had flinched at Remus’ matter of fact statement of him being sorry after the fact. "He's yours Moony, you carried him and raised him and I want to get to know him and have him get to know me but I'm not going to take him from you."

"It's not your fault you couldn't be a part of his life from the start. I've always made sure he knows that." Amber eyes looked up for a second before lowering again. "He doesn't know who you are though so don't take it personally if he's unsure to begin with...He's wonderful you know, the best of both of us." Remus led the way down the trampled pathway. "Orion, come down for a moment. There's someone here you should meet."

Orion blinked and touched down, trotting over and blinking up at his Dad and...his brows knit. The man with his Dad looked familiar, he couldn't quite place it but he was sure he'd seen that face before. He moved closer to his Dad, "Er hullo."

Sirius smiled and crouched down so he was on Orion's level, "Hi. That's a nice broom you've got there kiddo and you looked to have a pretty good feel for flying."

Amber eyes grew warmer, "Yeah I know! Madam Hooch says I'm the second best beginning flyer my age she's ever seen. Course Harry was the best. he got me the broom for my birthday!"

Remus smiled and rubbed his hand over his son's neck. "Orion, this is someone very important." He wrapped his arm around Orion's shoulders. "I would like you to meet your father, you know he fought in the war like a hero right? Fighting for all our safety and for what was right. Well he feels really dreadful for not being able to meet you sooner but he would really, really like to get to know you. You don't have to do anything other than talk. I'll be just inside." It was a coward's move but Remus couldn't watch, couldn't be that close to Sirius, not now. "Do you want tea or lemonade?"

He asked Orion gently.

"Lemonade please." Orion studied the man his Dad said was his father somberly. "So...where were you?"

Sirius knew Remus would probably kill him for blurtling it out but he wasn't going to start off meeting his son by lying. "Azkaban."

"You're Sirius Black!" Orion's finger pointed at him as amber eyes went wide.
He nodded, "Yes but I-

"Uncle Sev told me you're a...wait lemme say it right," he mimicked his honorary uncle's deep, mocking tones, "a reckless, childish excuse for a waste of skin that wouldn't deliberately betray a friend if you held a gun to his head but never thinks past the moment and winds up bollocking up everything he does," Orion nodded, "Course I think someone had spiked the eggnog otherwise he'd never have said bollocking but that's what he said."

Sirius honestly didn't know what to say to that.

Remus came back out just in time to hear his son channeling Severus Snape and didn't know whether to groan or chuckle. He handed Orion a glass of lemonade and a cinnamon roll and Sirius a cup of tea.

"Um...I don't know if you still take your tea like this but I can change it if you want." He found that he still couldn't meet those gray eyes, they saw way too much. Things Remus wasn't ready for him to see.

Sirius took the teacup, mind still whirling, "Not much in my tastes have changed really." He looked back to Orion, "Er so Uncle Sev...would that be Severus Snape?" His mind was chanting a mantra of 'Please say no, please say no, please say no.'

"Yup! He's been helping Dad look after me on the moon ever since...well forever. He's really prickly and bad moody but he really cares about me and Dad, not like boyfriend cares about Dad though."

Sirius nearly bobbled his tea. Oh he did not need those mental images, especially since they made him feel...jealous, something he had no right to. "Er yeah I'll um...agree with the prickly."

"He's been a great help." Remus couldn't help but open his mouth. "Saved both our lives he did and he's been there ever since. Granted I sort of forced him in the beginning but he's come around. Don't you think so Orion?" He took his own cup of tea and sat down on the garden bench at the outer wall of the cottage.

Orion nodded and went to sit next to his Dad, "Yeah! And he's a great Head of House too!"

Sirius moved to sit across from Remus and Orion and took a bracing sip of tea, "So you're in Slytherin then?"

"Yeah, it's pretty good, except for the twat Malfoy and his gorillas and I've always got Harry and Ron and Mione for back up if I need them." Orion kicked his feet where he sat and nibbled on his cinnamon bun.

Sirius' lips twitched at the mention of Malfoy and his gorillas even though he saw Remus frown in disapproval, "So Lucy's son is a bit of a prat then?"

"He's a bullying twat!"

"Orion!" There was an edge to Remus' voice. "You've done plenty to make him pay and you promised to stop. To let Severus handle it. One foot out of line regarding that when you get back to school and the broom will be taken away. You won't become a bully in turn, singling out a single person to play pranks on. No matter what kind of twat he may be it's not right and it's not going to make things easier for anyone." He looked at Orion. "We've talked about this, what teasing can do."
"Dad! I didn't say I was going to go back to singling him out! I just called him a bullying twat," he pouted and folded his arms over his chest, "which he is. I promised both you and Uncle Sev that I'd spread my mischief among the masses," he lifted shiny puppy eyes to Remus, "Don't you trust me?"

Sirius had to turn his head and conceal his grin. Oh his kid was good.

"No, I know much better than to trust you in the slightest." Remus replied in a deadpan. "Luckily you're cute and I have my spies at Hogwarts, letting me know how you behave...You'll never get away from my all knowing parental and slightly judgemental eyes so get used to it." Remus grinned woflishly at his son, knowing Orion would recognize the humor in his words. This was so weird, being outside with Orion was such a normal thing, something they did every day but having Sirius there put him on edge, making him completely unable to relax. No matter what he did he was 'aware' of Sirius and every little move he made.

Sirius laughed at Orion sticking his tongue out at Remus, "You know that sounds a little familiar to what your dad once said to me just after he got his prefect badge. Even though he still helped us make mischief."

Orion perked up, if he'd had dog ears you would have seen them go up, "Yeah? What was Dad like? He tells me about the Marauders as a group all the time but never very much about himself."

"Well, I first met him in the dorms, nerdy, bookish, fade into the wallpaper quiet...until you made him angry," he whistled lowly, "Man I remember James tried to play keep away with his homework and I thought for sure your Dad was going to toss him out the window. Jamie nearly pissed himself and dropped the parchment then your Dad just picked it up, calm as you please, and went back to his bunk and shut the curtains." He grinned, remembering that first year of pitfalls and getting to know each other.

"It was nowhere near that dramatic." Remus piped up. "The reason I don't blow my own horn Orion is that if you take away my disease then there's really nothing interesting about me and there never have been. Besides it was all a lifetime ago, nothing that matters anymore. The Marauders were fun and great and I was just a footnote in that story." He ruffled his son's hair. "Concentrate on the interesting and leave the boring alone." He raised his eyes to look at Sirius. "I was only prefect for a year, didn't have time to quite get the hang of it."

Sirius met those eyes soberly and spoke softly, knowing Remus would hear him as clearly as if he'd shouted, "You were never just a footnote Remus. Without you we'd have all fallen apart and the Marauders never would have been and I'd never have broken free from Walburga."

Orion looked between his Dad and his father. There was still love there, on both their parts from what he could see.

"We fell apart anyway Sirius. Everything fell apart." Remus blinked back tears and pulled his gaze away from Sirius'. "I...I should go inside with the milk before it spoils." He gathered the milk and the uneaten cinnamon rolls and hurried inside, very clear on the fact that he was running away.

Sirius watched him go, his heart in his eyes.

"You still love my Dad." Orion pulled a knee up and propped his chin on it, studying Sirius quietly.

He nodded right then his son reminding him so much of Remus it was like a punch in the gut, "I've made stupid mistakes but yeah kiddo. I never stopped loving him."
"Don't give up then. If it all fell apart start picking up the pieces and rebuild, make it stronger, better. And stop being stupid."

Sirius smiled, "You're a lot like your Dad there kiddo."

Orion grinned, "Dad always said I'm a lot like you. I like to think I'm a lot like me really. So, coming back for another visit tomorrow when Uncle Sev is visiting and being nice is a good place to start for you. See ya."

Remus stood in the kitchen, his hands gripping the edge of the sink so tightly his knuckles were bone white. Since the backdoor of the cottage was open he could hear his son practically dismissing Sirius and how the other man rose and left. Fuck! This was so hard. Remus still loved Sirius, loved him to the brink of madness. He wanted to pull Sirius inside and keep him there with them, care for him and love him and make sure he would never feel hardship again. The golden tan looked so good on Sirius and Remus wanted to reach out and touch the sleek, black hair. Wanted to know if it was as silky and soft as he remembered.

He couldn't do any of it though. Sirius and he, they weren't good for each other. They tore into each other until they bled...Love wasn't supposed to be like that. And as lovely and generous, brilliant and gorgeous as Sirius was he was also thoughtless. Every time Remus opened up completely trusting and loving with all his heart something happened. He had trusted his dorm mates with his biggest secret and in a fit of...Something Sirius had sold him out, almost made him the murderer he was terrified of becoming. The moment there was something Remus couldn't tell Sirius about his missions he was branded as a spy, a traitor...As if Remus could ever turn on his mate, his pack. He knew Sirius was sorry but every time it happened something inside Remus broke and he didn't know how much more he could take.

When Sirius had found out he was a werewolf he'd preached and preached that he was a man and not a monster. Still out of everybody except for the ones who'd experimented on him, no one had treated Remus as a werewolf, a monster as much as Sirius and he didn't even realize he was doing it until it had happened.

Remus wanted to cry, wanted to scream and curse and break something but instead he straightened his back, ran his fingers through his hair and went outside to watch his son fly.
WARNINGS: Violence, angst, Quidditch, family fluff.

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Harry grinned widely up at Mrs. Weasley, Orion, and Remus from where he'd fallen out of the fireplace, "Hullo all, pardon my awful entrance."

Orion crouched down so he could whisper to Harry. "It's okay, I did the same thing when we got here...Only I landed on the cat." He pointed at Crookshanks who was sitting in the window, making noises at the gnomes outside.

"Welcome Harry, it's so good to see you." Molly hauled him up from the floor with surprising strength and hugged him close, almost suffocating him with her rather fluffy bosom. "You must be hungry. It's lunchtime soon but I can make you a sandwich or two to hold you over. You are far too thin dear boy." She kissed him on top of the head and herded him toward the huge, wooden kitchen table.

He just grinned wider, "Mrs. Weasley I will never, ever turn down your amazing food." He looked at Orion, "How'd Crookshanks react to nearly being squished by a twelve year old?"

"A lot of hissing, spazzing and puffing up to three times his size." Orion grinned. "He didn't scratch me though...But he does tend to jump to high places if I get too close."

Molly was already making sandwiches happily, thick slabs of bread with generous slices of meat and fresh salad picked from the garden on them. She hummed as she worked and placed the sandwiches in front of Harry along with a tall glass and a pitcher of pumpkin juice. "There's enough for you too Orion." She ruffled Orion's hair and went to get another glass.

"Wicked." Orion didn't waste time and grabbed one of the towering sandwiches.

Remus only rolled his eyes. His son had certainly inherited his wolfish appetite.

Harry took a bite out of one of his own sandwiches, chewing and swallowing, "How about you Remus? How are you?"

"I'm good, thank you for asking." Remus said calmly. "Been having a certain mutt over a lot, good for Orion." He fiddled with the cuffs of his blue long sleeved t-shirt. "How have you been Harry? Okay?"

"Yeah. Can't use magic of course," he wrinkled his nose, "but you'd be amazed what having a convicted murderer as your godfather does to keep the Dursleys off one's back," the second sentence had been spoken sotto voce so only Remus and Orion could have heard it, "I'm all caught up to Runes and Crystal Theory, praise Morgana for Hermione and her incredible generosity and brain, and have the rest of my homework done. I've been doing some independent reading of books Hermione sent me from France, English translations of course, and they're doing a lot to help me
towards my personal goals," he grinned with meaning at the last.

"Good for you Harry, I am sure you'll master it before long. You are certainly clever and stubborn enough." Remus smiled, still it stung that threats of a murderer were necessary to keep those awful muggles off Harry's back. "Anything I can do to help, just let me know."

"Yeah and once you've got it down you could teach it to me...Let's carry on with our parents legacy." Orion spoke around the sandwich in his mouth and pumped his fist in the air.

"Merlin help us all." Remus deadpanned.

Harry chuckled and ruffled Orion's hair, "Aw c'mon Moony, can't you just see Orion as a cute little puppy? or a wolf cub?" He used his hands to make Orion's hair stick out like two ears on the top of his head.

Before Orion could pout or Remus reply a familiar voice came from around the corner, preceding Fred's face, "Do my ears deceive me Georgie? Did I just hear the name of one of our heros?"

"No, I think you're right. I also heard the dulcet sweet tones of the boy wonder, savior of us all." George replied in a breathless, admiring tone as two lanky redheads emerged in the kitchen. "Harry our boy, do my eyes deceive me or have your clothes actually gotten even more tent like and awful over the summer?" The twins plonked themselves down on either side of Harry, planting wet, smacking kisses on his cheeks.

"Oi! Geroff!" he elbowed them away, "Well Dudley gets fatter every year and I get the hand me downs. And yes you heard the name Moony," he pointed at Remus, "One of the Marauders, in person and no I'm not joking."

Fred stared at Remus then got up with George to kneel at his feet, "Oh great master impart to us your wisdom!"

Remus both flushed and grinned as the twins kept bowing in front of him. "First thing, get off the floor before your mother finds out. I may be grown and an ex Marauder but any sane being fears Molly Weasley." He gave Harry a weak glare for spilling the beans. "I'm not sure what to tell you lads, you seem perfectly capable of getting into trouble all on your own."

Harry grinned unrepentantly and just kept eating his mini meal as the twins pestered Remus.

Fred stood up and fluttered big brow cocker spaniel eyes at him, "But you're one of the masters. We could learn so much! Like the map! Or that trick when you turned all the seventh year girls blue!"

"Not all of them." Remus protested. "It was a spell activated by a certain thing...The um...Pure ones remained unaffected." That had been a rather brilliant spell he'd come up with at James' nagging. It all started because he wanted to know if Lily had done it with someone. Oh she had beaten the crap out of James when she woke up blue. Remus snickered at the memory and then remembered that his son was also listening, with way too much eagerness and gleaming amber eyes. "Er...Nevermind."

Harry had already fallen off his chair laughing and was holding his stomach. The image of all the non-virgins in a Hogwarts seventh year turning blue was too much.

"Bloody hell mate who flipped your switch? Hermione, he's finally snapped I think." Ron looked just behind him at the girl as Harry cackled. "What's the joke?"
"Nothing your dainty sensibilities can handle Ronniekins." George replied with a shiteating grin. Oh he and Fred had to learn that spell, the havoc they could wreck among the girls in their year.

Hermione watched Harry with raised eyebrow, happy he was happy but slightly suspicious what the joke was about since the twins had their angel faces on and even Professor Lupin was blushing slightly. "Hi Harry." She chose to ignore the whole issue and went to pull Harry up so she could hug him. "You're finally here, I'm glad."

He managed to close a lid on his mirth enough to hug her back, "Yeah. Good to see you Hermione. How was France and you did take pictures right?"

"I did, more than was necessary probably and no doubt you'll be bored blue looking at them but I did take them." She couldn't understand why her wording sent the twins into a new fit of gleeful laughter but she gave them another suspicious glare all the same.

He squeezed her shoulders and murmured, "It has to do with an old Marauder prank. I'll tell you later."

"You'd better." She nodded. "Oh and I have a book for you on the you know what. It was too big and heavy for me to send and it's in French but it looks very useful. I think you're going to like it."

"Brilliant! and I'm sure there's some spell or another that can help me with translating." He turned to Ron and caught his friend in a headlock, "And you, it's good to see you and I've not cracked yet! Give me time though." He felt full of energy and happiness here with the people he cared the most instead of stuck in Privet Drive with his soul sucking relatives.

"Oi geroff!" Ron reversed their positions, giving Harry a noogie, "you're mental mate." His grin belied his words. he was just glad to see Harry feeling so good.

Remus smiled even as the twins continued to pester him about the magic used to create the map and the legendary vomit upwards incident Sirius had managed for the Slytherin Quidditch team during their training once. It was nice seeing Harry play around with his friends and actually smiling freely without worry. It was something that didn't happen often and that made it all the more special when it did.

Seeing Harry and Ron horsing around, play fighting made Orion want to be a part of it too, so without qualms he jumped on both boys, proclaiming he would win over both of them with one hand tied behind his back. Nope, nothing wrong with his confidence.

For once Hermione didn't frown or look disapproving as the boys wrestled, she just laughed and cheered Orion on, knowing better that to keep a favorite among her boys.

An unfamiliar, to Harry, redhead poked his face in from outside then leaned on the bottom half of the divided door to watch, "Hey what's...Ron you're about to get accidentally racked."

Ron's eyes widened and he managed to avoid Orion's flailing foot just in the nick of time, "Thanks Char!" He squirmed and tried to shake the little monkey off while also keeping Harry subdued before gruntng, "Alright mate, I let you go, we both go after the squirt?"

"Deal," as soon as he was free Harry had Orion's hands caught while Ron tickled him mercilessly. "No, not fair...Child abuse!" Orion screeched in laughter as he flailed and squirmed, trying to get away from the two pairs of tickling hands.

"Two against one hardly seem fair, what do you say Freddie, should we aid our little protegé in
pranks?" George's eyes gleamed with amusement, he never said no to a good tumble...In any sense of the word.

Harry yelped and released Orion, "Oh no! You two stay away."

Fred grinned and started advancing, "Now why would we do that Harrikins?"

Harry looked around for a quick escape and shot an apologetic smile at the Weasley he'd not yet met, "Sorry but," he dashed at the startled man, used a hand on the lower half of the door to vault over it and him, then took off running towards where Ginny was now gaping at him. He dashed behind her, "Ginny save me! The twin terrors are out to get me!"

"And you think I want to get between you and them if they're in hunter mode?" Ginny asked in disbelief but her lips were twitching in a smile. "I've got an idea. Since we have Charlie at home for once and Orion is here as well. Why don't we take this outside and settle it in a game of rogue Quidditch instead? We have enough people to make up two teams...I'll even convince Percy to join us to make us even numbers since I'm guessing Hermione prefers to stay on the ground."

"You got that right, I can keep score." Hermione shuddered slightly at the mere thought of zooming through the air.

Harry peered over her shoulder at the others, noticing another Weasley he'd never met, "Okay, sounds like a plan to me." Quidditch was something he was confident in after all. He was even a half okay Chaser if he needed to be thanks to Oliver's drilling the entire team on the positions of the others. "By the way, the two big guys, mind introducing me?" He bat his eyes at her, aware of her snorted laughter and relieved that she seemed to be getting over her crush on him.

"Oi Charlie, Bill, come meet Harry." Ginny hollered loudly, causing the two redheads in question to walk over to their little sister. Molly shook her head and complained loudly about the fact that even her little girl seemed to have been raised in a barn.

"Harry, meet my oldest brothers Bill," Ginny nodded to a tall, slender, long haired man, with very blue eyes and a charming grin. "And Charlie." He motioned to the other man who seemed as solid as the earth. Also very good looking with large hands and muscles that wouldn't quit. "Boneheads, meet Harry Potter."

"Aw thanks Gin, so nice to know you love us." Charlie grinned and held out a hand to Harry, "Nice to officially meet you. I keep hearing amazing stories about your flying so I'm all for a game to find out if they're true or if Ron's just exaggerating."

Ron's indignant yell about them being true had Harry grinning, "Well I was the youngest seeker in a century at Hogwarts but I guess we'll see. He said you were scouted by England's team."

"Eh yeah well, I liked the dragons better." Charlie grinned.

Harry laughed and turned to look at Bill, "You're the curse breaker right?"

"That's me." Bill grinned broadly and held out a faintly tanned hand. Not even his skin remained snow white in the Egyptian sun. "And you're the one who saved our little sister, thank you for that." The dragon fang his brother had given him from the first dragon he's wrangled dangled from his ear. "It's good to see you here, both my youngest siblings have been on about you all summer, I feel like I already know you."

Harry turned a light red, "Er well...I mean Ginny's my friend. I couldn't leave her down there when Lockhart was just going to run away, I'd be the second worst kind of Gryffindor if I had."
Bill's blue eyes shone. "I didn't mean to embarrass you and from what I've heard I think it has more
to do with the kind of person you are than what house you belong to...Though Gryffindor is of
course the absolute best." He snickered at Orion's outraged protest at that.

Harry chuckled, "Oh you'd better watch your hair now, you see Fred and George? Put them into
one person, give him black hair and amber eyes and you'd have Orion."

"Oh Merlin, like the world needs another menace like them, is it too late to save him you think?
Place him on the straight and narrow." Bill found it impossible to keep the amusement out if his
voice.

"Oh hush you." Ginny placed her hands on her hips. "You're were quite the menace yourself back
in school and to my knowledge you still are...Besides straight and narrow...words you're not and
I'm not even sure you can spell to them. Now let's play before we lose the daylight." She stalked
out with her chin raised.

"Bossy! When did she get so bossy? She used to be such a sweet little girl." Bill said morosely.

Harry blinked and tilted his head cutely before pointing at Molly then Hermione, "Um, learning by
example? Besides nothing's wrong with her being bossy. Ron and I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for
Hermione bossing us around," he gave his female friend a smile to know he was just teasing about
her being bossy.

"Very nice save Harry." Hermione smiled at him. "It's smart being on the good side of the one
keeping score." She started to follow Ginny out to the wild garden, stopping to bring Crookshanks
with her. She'd learned to keep him close since one of the Gnomes had bitten her once. With the cat
around they didn't dare to come too close.

Harry grinned, "It's smart just being on your good side period Hermione, as Malfoy found out."

Ron snickered at the memory, "Oh that image shall always be near and dear to my heart. Our
Mione, clocking Malfoy in his pointy nose. Oh yeah and Harry, you can use Dad's broom since the
Firebolt would be cheating."

Harry stuck his tongue out at Ron but caught the broom that was tossed at him, "I'll still win." He
grinned as teams were formed and they started to play. Yeah this was going to be the best end of
the summer he'd ever had. If nothing went wrong at the World Cup.

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Orion's eyes were saucer wide and he turned his head like an owl, trying to take in everything. It
was like a huge town of tents, complete with shops and restaurants. The green shamrock clad tents
of the Irish and the bold reds of the Bulgarians on either side and all the spectators different tents
between them. There were so many wizards, everywhere! He couldn't get enough of watching
everything. "This is bloody wicked!"

"Language Orion." Remus chided and fought the urge to hide in the collar of his light jacket. He'd
never been good in crowds, always fearing that his secret would somehow get out. It didn't matter
how humane or enlightened a wizard said they were, having a werewolf in a crowd was never, ever
a good idea.

Arthur, keeping an eye on all of the goggle eyed kids, pat Remus' shoulder, "We're just a bit further
on. You Amos?"

Mr. Diggory, still with the pleasant beaming expression on his face, clapped his son's shoulder,
“We're in the next section near the water spigots. You should all feel free to come by if you get a chance. Or we'll come by and visit you, less people to move then.”

Cedric nodded as he smiled at all of them. "We'll be over later, after the game if nothing else." He took the pack from his father and they hurried away to get their tent set up and things organized.

Ginny looked a little starry eyed as she watched Cedric, leave. She knew he was with Cho but there was no harm in watching was there? They walked a little further until they were almost at the edge of the giant stadium, only a few trees between them at the stadium. Her father pulled out the tent she and Hermione would share before setting up the one for the boys. It was a bit silly bringing two tents but hey, she didn't mind not having to listen to her brothers snore up a storm, she got enough of that at home.

Harry went about helping Arthur set up the tents and starting a normal fire though he wondered how all the guys would fit in their tent. Something he got answered when he stepped inside and saw a fully furnished home, "Wicked. How's this done?"

George sidled closer and wiggled his fingers. "Why Harry...You see there's this thing you might have heard of, it's called...Magic." He finished the statement with breathless amazement.

"It's a simple engorgement and transfiguration spell with a little of a cloaking spell weaved in." Bill said and elbowed George in the side. "Not that complicated actually."

Harry peered around Bill at George, "Mock me again and I'll tell your mum where you hid the homemade joke stuff. And yes, I know that you put them in a charmed pocket on Orion's pack and Fred put his share in mine."

"Me? Mock you? Dear sir you have it wrong since I only live to serve." George made a flourish bow in front of Harry before rushing off to find his twin and rescue their precious, precious joke items, the things that would make them rich and famous one day.

Harry grinned at his retreat. He wouldn't actually tell Molly about where they'd hidden their tricks but it was a good threat to have in your pocket. He looked over at Bill, "Thanks. I'm still getting used to everything magic can do."

"It's quite useful isn't it? I've grown up with it so I don't know anything else but I can imagine that it's somewhat overwhelming at times." Bill smiled gently and sunk down in a red and plush armchair, being the oldest had it's perks and he could order his younger siblings to get water and do all the boring stuff. "You belong in this world Harry, magic is a part of you but I think getting used to and still find magic incredible is a good thing. Because it is...Incredible that is."

Harry looked around the tent then smiled, "Yeah but you know," he looked back to Bill, "every day muggle stuff can be incredible too, if you pay attention. I'm gonna go help Hermione and Ron get the water. Later." He scampered out of the tent, grinning when he saw Orion worming his way into the water gathering brigade, "What you lot leaving without me?"

"Never." Hermione grinned and ruffled his hair. "Knew you would catch up." She looked around at the city of tents and all the bustling wizards and witches. "This really is extraordinary, imagine all the wards and charms used to keep something like this secret from the muggle world. All this magic in one place must cause havoc on electrical and magnetic tools for miles around. They must have found a way to even reroute the planes so they don't fly over here while this is going on. It's amazing that they can pull it off."

Ron shrugged, "Eh not so much. A few people high in the muggle government know about us, a
few are even squibs, so it's not all that hard for the Minister to let them know when and where in
England a big magical event is gonna take place and they just do," he waggled his fingers,
"whatever it is to make things work."

Harry kept an eye on Orion, "Still impressive. I mean they've got to come up with a cover story for
rerouting things and the power shutdowns and all. It's got to take a lot of coordination."

"Exactly." Hermione agreed. "And you know how difficult it is to cast a charm with someone else
and make it perfect, imagine the number needed to work together for the wards here. You're a berk
Ron if you can't see how great this is."

"It's like one big party." Orion piped up and his eyes grew big when he saw a wizard in a pink, lace
trimmed negligee dance down the street, making glittery bubbles shoot out of his wand.

Harry snickered, "Yeah you're right about that, several glasses of firewhiskey in."

Ron shook his head and stuck his tongue out at Hermione, "I am not a berk. This kind of stuff
happens everyday all over the world. What's great is how Krum flies or how the Irish chaser team
works together with their keeper."

Harry leaned down and murmured to Orion, "Uh-oh looks like they're starting up again."

"They do like to argue." Orion agreed as Hermione started to gesture wildly and Ron's voice grew
louder. "Isn't it ever uncomfortable? How do you know when it's for fun and when it's not?" Orion
could see how fond of each other Hermione and Ron were but he still wondered because there
really were a lot of shouting done between them.

"Last year, when Ron was really mad about Crookshanks, then it was uncomfortable. I don't know
how to explain when I can tell it's not for fun but there's a...tone to their voices and a way they
move that gives it away and I just...know." He ruffled Orion's hair.

"Yeah, I get it." Orion's voice grew quieter. "Dad gets that tone when he speaks with Sirius, that
awkward forced tone. I don't get why exactly since they love each other, even I can see that they
do."

Harry grimaced, "Well see...Sirius has hurt your dad a lot. He's never really meant to do it, which
kinda makes it worse. How is your Dad supposed to trust Sirius when he can't even trust that when
Sirius says he'd never want to hurt him that he won't? Padfoot has to prove that he's not going to
hurt your Dad by accident again before your Dad can let him back in."

"I understand that, I do but it still sort of sucks." Orion kicked a pebble in front of him. "I don't
want Dad hurt, not ever and I will do anything to keep that from happening...I still believe Sirius is
the one that can make him the most happy as well, that they can make each other happy. I know it
won't be now but sometime down the line."

"Eventually yeah," he poked Orion's cheek, "don't get too down about it. They'll get together soon
enough." He looked up as he saw Seamus approach and grinned at him tossing his opinion in with
Ron. Oooh Hermione was going to be steaming over that. He couldn't wait for the game though. It
was going to be awesome.

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Harry was gesturing excitedly with Ron and nodding, "I know! I've got to learn how to do the
Wronski Feint, it's just too amazing! I can even see Malfoy falling for it and ploughing right into
the ground! Krum was incredible really. The Irish Chasers were stunning too."
Orion was bouncing like some sort of demented rubber ball, adrenaline and sugar rushing through him as he discussed the greatness of the game with Harry and all of the Weasley brothers.

Hermione shook her head, she had enjoyed the game but she wasn't as invested as the rest of them. That Krum person could fly, she had to admit that though just watching him had made her almost queasy. "You'll do no such thing Harry Potter, it could just as easy be you ploughing into the ground face first." She was nervous enough when he flew without him adding new stunts to the ones he already had.

Both Hermione and Ginny were in the boys tent, eating and celebrating with the rest of the family. She looked over at the twins in their green shamrock hats and almost cringed at how very badly they clashed against their hair and freckles. The huge grins on their faces took away from that though and she found herself relaxing and just taking part of the festive mood.

Ron stuck his tongue out at her, "Yeah? What if Harry decides he wants to become a professional Seeker? He'd have to learn stuff like the Wronski Feint. Besides he treated his broomstick like a bloody surfboard in first year! The Feint isn't any more dangerous than that!"

"Put that slimy thing back in your mouth before you lose it." Hermione snapped back and made a snipping motion with her fingers toward his tongue. "I wasn't any happier back then than I am now." She knew Ron had a point, playing Quidditch was about flying and learning moves that threw your competition off, she didn't have to like it though. "What happened when he stood on the broom Ron? He crashed and almost choked on the Snitch."

"Er since you're talking about me shouldn't my opinion count here?" Harry looked at his friends.

"What? And deprive us of fodder to argue about?" Hermione sounded shocked but she grinned to show she was joking. "Of course your opinion counts, it's your life and you'll do what you want with it. You know both Ron and I will support you...With some harping if you make the wrong choices."

He smiled at her, "I don't know what I want to do really. I mean I really don't know much of what there is to do to make a living in the magical world. I know there's Quidditch, what Mr. Weasley does, teaching, dragon handling, and curse breaking...kind of a limited list there and of it I'm liking Quidditch best."

"There's so much to do, almost unlimited jobs and things to keep you occupied. You're fourteen Harry, you're not supposed to know what you want to do with your life yet. That's the great thing, you have time to decide. Try different things, travel, study, find out what fits, what feels right." Hermione kept her eyes on him as she spoke.

"That coming from you Hermione, the girl who plans every minute of every day...Wow." George gaped at her and she threw a rude gesture back at him.

"Just because I like to be organized doesn't mean I have decided either what I want to do with the rest of my life, it's a huge decision."

"But you're you," Fred grinned over George's shoulder at her, "Surely there's something you're leaning towards? Some people know from a very early age what they want to be you know."

Harry watched as Fred and George started twitting Hermione and thought about the discussion. The truth was that he didn't even know if he'd survive long enough to choose a vocation so he hadn't done much thinking about it.
Hermione discussed loudly with Fred and George but she kept one eye on Harry, not liking the flash of sadness in his eyes. She might have a general idea what she wanted to do and put her efforts into achieving that but that didn't mean she hadn't told Harry the truth. There really was no hurry to decide and she would do everything in her power to make sure Harry had that time, being alive and safe and happy and allowed to choose for himself what he felt like spending his time doing.

"Oh yeah that reminds me Harry," Ron started talking as if something said had triggered it, "You find your wand yet?"

Hermione grew quiet as well, waiting for Harry's reply. Losing your wand was a big deal. She looked around the clutter the boys had managed to create in a day and sighed. Although it could just be here on the floor somewhere, it would be impossible to see with all the junk lying around.

Harry frowned, "No, not yet. Remus?" He lifted his voice a bit, "Have you seen my wand about? I can't find it."

Remus frowned and shook his head. "No Harry, I haven't seen it. Where can you remember having it last?"

Harry closed his eyes and thought, "Just before we left to get to our seats, after that I was too caught up to notice until after we came down from the stands." He grimaced, "Do you think it fell out of my pocket and is out in the stands somewhere?"

"I think that's a pretty good guess yes." Remus nodded. "We need to get you a proper holster. I don't think we can Accio it from this distance but if you want I can walk with you and we can try when we're a bit closer."

"Sure, that works for me." He got up, dusting off his knees absently, "There are holsters for wands?"

"Of course there are. Look I like to have mine on my arm." Remus pulled up his long sleeved shirt to reveal his forearm holster, feeling a bit conscious about the scars on his arms but pushing that thought away, this wasn't about him. "Then there are ones for your thigh and even for your torso if you prefer that. It's safer than a pocket and the wands are easy to reach when you need them."

Remus had just reached for his jacket when there was a loud sound like an explosion and the tent shook where it stood.

Harry's eyes went wide and Arthur stood up, eyes narrowed, "Remus stay here with the children. Bill, Charlie come with me, no Percy you stay as well. Do not leave the tent," he looked at Harry, Ron, and Hermione with that, "unless Remus is with you and an Auror has come to tell you to go."

George and Fred complained loudly and bitterly about being labeled as children and Percy looked more than a little put out. The ground shook again and there were greenish flashes of light, showing through the fabric of the tent at the ceiling.

Remus recognized that light, he'd seen it plenty of times before and his sensitive nose could pick up the stench of Death Eater magic. He herded them all to the middle of the large sitting room and told them to get their wands out just in case.

Harry's jaw was tense and his shoulders were tight. He was used to being in the middle of the action, used to being the one putting his life on the line for others. He couldn't say he liked the feeling being reversed and he definitely didn't like being without a wand. He closed his eyes and
stifled his instinct to run out in the middle of everything, instead sitting cross legged on the ground. "Moony why don't you go over the theories behind animagus magic while we," he flinched at a particularly bright flash, remembering what he saw when dementors came too close, "wait."

Amber eyes looked at Harry in understanding and his calm smooth voice started to go through all the theories behind animagi magic and how to achieve it. He broke off when a wild eyed Bill came barging into the tent telling them that they all had to leave right now, that the tents were burning.

Harry jumped to his feet, one hand holding Hermione's the other Ron's after making sure Remus had Orion. Well he was actually picking up and holding a complaining Orion but it worked as they all scrambled out of the tents and towards the woods.

Charlie took up the rear of the group and started to explain, "We'll hide in the woods and if things start getting really bad Bill, Percy, Remus and I will Side-Along Apparate you all until we're all safe back at the Burrow."

Ron had his wand out, watching corners and shadows as they all rushed towards the woods, "What is all this Charlie?"

Harry's blood ran cold as Charlie replied.

"Death Eaters."

Suddenly a man in a skull mask appeared before them, wand raised and ready to cast a curse but a snarling mass of black fur appeared from nowhere and tackled him to the ground, breaking his neck before barking at them all and pacing a few steps ahead, then looking back.

"Bloody smart dog." Charlie pushed his brother ahead.

"Brilliance has never been his problem." Remus said quietly, holding a still complaining Orion close. Remus didn't care, Orion could complain all he wanted as long as he was safe. "I suggest we follow him though, he'll lead us somewhere safe."

"Look." Hermione squeezed Harry's hand and nodded between the trees where more of the hooded persons walked, levitating the muggle family who owned the camping site where they were high above their heads, making the children spin and laughing as the mother cried and tried to get to them.

"Son of a bitch!" Harry took a step towards it but found Charlie's hand in the middle of his chest and both Ron and Hermione holding tight to his hands.

Charlie shook his head, "No. The Aurors will be here and help them and Dad's already on his way to do the same."

Ron pulled Harry towards the woods, as Padfoot barked frantically, "He's right mate, besides, you've not got your wand remember?"

"I know it's hard but there's nothing you can do." Bill was suddenly beside Harry, with a hand on his shoulder. "Dad and Moody're there now though and the rest of the Aurors are coming. Do as Char says and go deeper into the forest." As suddenly as he'd shown as quick he was gone again and Hermione clung to Harry's hand as they stumbled through the darkened forest, too cautious to cast lumos.

Soft barks and whines led them to a well sheltered copse of bushes and trees and Harry found himself nuzzled by a Grim. He hated this, hated knowing that the others were right, that he had to
stay here where it was safe while other people were being hurt. He turned and rested his forehead against Hermione's shoulder and tried to block out the screams and sounds of magic crackling through the air.

Padfoot, seeing that Harry didn't need him right now and maybe didn't want him, went over to Remus and Orion, ears drooping and a soft whine in his throat, nudging gently at Orion's hand, knowing better than to seek attention from Remus just yet. His Moony was still angry and rightfully so.

Orion reached out and stroked Padfoot's large head before cupping a velvety ear. The warm, soft fur felt comforting underneath his hand and with his Daddy's warmth there he felt almost safe.

The animagus whined again and licked at his son's face, moving his canine body so that, should anyone be foolish enough to attempt to harm Orion, they would have to get through him from the front and Remus from the back.

Hermione wrapped her arms around Harry, her fingers stroking through his impossible hair, she knew how he hated feeling helpless and unable to act and she tried to soothe him as much as she could. This was horrible, such a festive event turning into a nightmare. Hermione tried not to hate but she did hate the cloaked and masked figures out there, she hated them with a passion.

Ron shifted, hand on Harry's shoulder comfortingly as he remembered what Harry said he heard when dementors were near. The flashing of magic and the screams must be reminding Harry of that and Ron wished he could banish that feeling from his friend. He couldn't but he knew that he could at least let Harry know he was here, that he wasn't alone.

Charlie sucked in a sharp breath when the Dark Mark blazed across the sky, certain that more Death Eaters would soon arrive to that call, and tensed, wand in hand, ready to defend his family and friends.

After what felt like an eternity as sounds of curses and screams quieted and disappeared slowly, Harry heard footsteps crunching toward them and his head shot up and he was crouched and ready to fight if he needed to.

"Boys? Bill? Charlie?" Arthur Weasley came into view, wand lighting up the area with a Lumos.

Bill crept forward slowly, trusting his father but being cautious all the same. Once Arthur was in sight his eldest son relaxed somewhat. "Is it over? How in Mordred's hangtits could something like this happen here? The security is supposed to be top notch."

"It's over and I would imagine that a few of the 'guests' were once Death Eaters." Arthur smiled at the others coming out of the woods and pulled a wand from the inside of his coat pocket. "Harry I believe this is yours."

"My wand!" Harry reached out and took it with a wan smile, "Thanks Mr. Weasley. Where'd you find it."

Arthur's eyes gained a sober edge, "Whoever cast the Dark Mark in the sky found it first and used it to cast then passed it off to a house-elf named Winky."

"The elf that was in the stands holding her master's seat?"

"That's right. Winky was running scared and got stunned by Amos then Barty gave her clothes, displeased that she'd run from the tent against his orders."
Harry frowned, not liking that his wand had taken part in the awful events that had happened and even less hearing that the poor elf from earlier had been blamed for running for her life. "That doesn't sound right."

"It isn't right at all." Hermione was looking outraged. "The tents were burning and this Barty expected her to stay anyway, punished her for being scared and trying to save her life? He's the one who should be punished. Not the elf." Her voice grew louder and louder and finally Bill placed a hand on her shoulder.

"No one disagrees with you Hermione but maybe this isn't the right place to discuss it?" It was quiet for now and Bill could see flashes of the Aurors bright red robes but it was best not to take chances. "Did you get a return portkey Dad or should we start side apparating now?"

Orion wasn't letting go of Padfoot's fur as he leaned into his Daddy. Right now it was hard to remember he was twelve and supposed to be grown and brave. Harry had fought You Know Who and killed a Basilisk when he was twelve but Orion couldn't help it, he was scared. His insides were filled with the knowledge that he hadn't seen the last of those green flashes and the skull and snake mark still flashing in the sky. Something bad was coming, something evil and really, really bad.

Padfoot turned his head and licked Orion's cheek again as Arthur answered.

"Side-alonging, there are so many people who need a portkey more right now that I don't want to take away Ministry resources. I'll help you bring everyone back but then I have to come back here and help clean up."

Charlie nodded and placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder, patting it a bit in commiseration at her fury, and the other on Harry's, "Dad you go ahead and stay here. Bill, Remus and I have everyone covered. We'll tell Mum that you're fine."

Arthur nodded, "Alright then. Give her my love."

"Course we will."

Harry gripped his wand and gave Ron a semi-smile as he sidled over to Bill instead of Percy for the side-along. He knew that all the Weasleys loved Percy, his was part of their family after all, but Percy could be a bit much. He did managed a weak chuckle at Percy's put upon expression when he found himself flanked by his grinning twin brothers.

"Well ol Perc, looks like you're stuck with us. Try not to splinch us." Fred punched Percy companionably on the shoulder.

"I had perfect scores on my apparition test, I've never come close to splinching anyone." Percy complained and rubbed the shoulder Fred had hit. He shouldn't be here, he should be with Mr. Crouch and be there for his boss and anything he might need. "Now get over here George, stop your dallying."

George rolled his eyes. "I'm standing right here, if I get any closer I'll be inside you and isn't that just a disturbing thought in every way possible." George grabbed Percy's other arm, winking at his twin.

Since Orion still refused to let go of Padfoot so Remus solved it by grabbing both his son and the dog, Molly would have to live with Padfoot in her house for a while.

"That's everyone I think, let's go." Bill called to the others.
Ron squeezed his baby sister's hand with a soft smile just before the feeling of being compressed and sucked through a straw overtook him but within a few moments they were back in front of the Burrow. He looked over at a thump and bit his bottom lip at the sight of Harry face first on the ground. Merlin help him it really wasn't funny but Harry and magical travel...

"Y'know if anyone has any tips to help me keep from embarrasssing myself at the end of a trip by magical means, I'd really appreciate them sharing." Harry's voice was half muffled by the ground and perhaps a bit overshadowed by an amused bark.

"Pretend you're on a broom Harry." George called between chuckles.

Even Hermione had to smile as Harry got up and spit out some grass. She found his slight awkwardness with magical travel adorable, not that she would ever tell him that to his face.

They had only begun to get their bearings back when the door to the burrow flew open and Molly rushed outside. "What happened? All of a sudden all of your hands switched to mortal peril." She was pale and her red hair in disarray after fiddling with it as she watched her loved ones be in danger on the clock in the kitchen.

"Let's go inside and we'll tell you Mum, you know we could all use a spot of tea." Bill walked forward and kissed his mother's cheek.

"But of course, come in, come in, all of you." Molly looked once more, noticing Arthur wasn't there but the clock didn't point to danger anymore at least. She hoped that was something.

Harry walked over to Remus and Orion, ruffling the boy's hair before looking down at the Grim, "You, behave well around Molly or you'll be a shaved dog."

Padfoot whined then yawned as if to say he'd had no plans to be otherwise. Harry looked up at Remus, "How many people have fallen for the innocent, poor puppy me act there?"

"Too many to count, as you can see he's perfected that act...And believe me, he practiced until he got it down." A brown brow rose as he looked at the large black dog before taking his son's hand and slowly walking inside after Percy and the twins. Orion made sure that Padfoot and Harry followed as well.

Harry accepted the tea from Molly with a grateful smile and settled in to sit beside Orion on a squashy sofa with Padfoot at their feet. He looked over when Hermione sat on his other side and Ron on her other side. He bumped her shoulder with his as Molly got the tale in its whole from Bill and Charlie.

Orion smiled into his teacup as Padfoot stretched out across his and Harry's feet and Crookshanks sidled over and nuzzled the black fur before lying down next to the dog. It was such a strange sight but Orion supposed it could have something to do with the fact that the dog wasn't really a dog but his father.

Molly was bristling with anger toward the Death Eaters and worry about her family and smothered both feelings with hugs and an insane amount of biscuits and tea cake.

Harry chuckled, enjoying her motherly fretting, "Mrs. Weasley if anyone in your family ever stops appreciating how much you do for them, send them my way and I'll set them to rights, by wand or by one of Hagrid's rock cakes over the head. I really think sometimes that I was one of the luckiest blokes ever that I saw you my first year looking for the platform," he looked around at all the Weasleys, his lips curved in a wistful smile, "you really do have the best family."
"Oh Harry." Molly's voice was shaking and her Prewett blue eyes filled with tears and in the next moment she had yanked Harry out of his seat and pulled him in for a massive hug. "Dear boy, you are a part of this family, I consider you my son just as much as any of the redheaded brood here. We were the lucky ones, getting to know and care for you." She hugged him more and kissed the top of his head. Molly had battled with Dumbledore for years now about being allowed to create a permanent home at the Burrow, he would always be welcome here.

He'd yelped in surprise when she'd yanked him up but he didn't mind being hugged by Mrs. Weasley and returned it, murmuring, "Still, I can't thank you enough for all you've done for me. Not just taking me in when I've needed it most but for showing me what a real family is like." Until he'd met the Weasleys and then later Seamus, who had loads of fun describing his five thousand Irish relatives, he'd thought that the way he'd been raised, the way the Dursleys were, was the normal way of things.

Padfoot watched them, his tail thumping once against the floor. He might have still been a bit of a prat, despite Harry's threat, but seeing how much Molly cared about his godson, and hearing those words banished it from his mind completely. He wouldn't do anything to cause this woman stress, he owed her far, far too much.

Remus watched too happy that Molly and the rest of her family loved Harry but there was a twinge inside him as well, knowing that Harry should have had a loving family all his life. He should be able to take love and support for granted, that was how it should be.

When Molly finally released Harry with more hugs and kisses and let him sit back down. Hermione leaned her head on his shoulder while her hand found Ron's. "She's right Harry. We're lucky to have you in our lives, I'm lucky to have both of you." She squeezed Ron's hand.

Ron stuck his tongue out at Harry, "Oh good going mate, now you've made all the ladies mushy," he pointed at his sister who, ever the tomboy, was blinking furiously to chase away the damp in her eyes, "we'll hear about this til we get on the Express. What're we supposed to do about that?"

Harry reached over and pinched his friend in the side, smirking at the jump, "Appreciate it. Love should never be taken for granted, if it is then it gets turned inside out and people forget what they have."

Padfoot's head swung, along with every head in the room, and he stared at Harry. That was it. That was exactly it. That was what had happened all those years ago and why he and Remus had grown apart before James and Lily's deaths. He'd taken it for granted. Taken Remus' love and forgiveness for granted, hell he was still doing it, just assuming that with enough time and groveling Remus would eventually forgive him. That was also why he so easily messed up and hurt Remus without meaning to. Bloody hell he was an arse. Maybe it was time for him to grow up and stop taking things for granted. He looked up at his son, no maybe about it. It was time he grew up and stopped taking things for granted before he did the unforgivable and wound up hurting his son as much as he had Remus.

Ron rubbed his side and muttered, "Just because I don't go all girl mush doesn't mean I don't appreciate it."

"Girl mush?" There was an edge in Hermione's voice and Ginny had raised a red brow as well, looking at her brother. "Care to elaborate Ron? Is it mushy to care for your family and to let them know you care? Views like that will let you spend your life alone but hey, you won't be forced to be mushy like a girl so yay for that."

"I'm a guy Hermione! I'm not supposed to go spouting on and on about the power of love or
 anything like that. It's my job to grunt, say good meat, or nice dress, or smell good and for that to equal romantic affection in the presence of others."

Harry's shoulders shook as he put his hand over his face and tried not to laugh at the hole Ron was digging himself. Really he'd ought to have learned by now.

"So your woman is to cook for you, dress up for you, bathe and smell nice and you'll do...What? Say good meat? Oh I hope you end up alone, cooking for yourself and with your right hand as your trusted companion because no girl worth her grain will touch you with a ten foot pole." Hermione got up and kissed Molly on the cheek. "Thank you for lovely tea and cake Molly. Can I use your shower, I'm suddenly feeling very dirty?" She glared at Ron and stalked up the stairs when Molly nodded with a hidden smile.

"What? What did I say?"

That was it, Harry lost it. The stress of the evening and everything exploded out in a peal of half-hysterical laughter so loud he was surprised it wasn't heard by his relatives in Surrey. "R-ron w-hahaha...we're s-supposed...hahaha...to have...haha...evolved f-from t-the caveman d-days." He was holding his stomach, tears of mirth and releasing stress leaking from his eyes, much to the vague horror and flailing distress of Ron.

Harry's outburst made the rest of the boys in the room smile as well. Fred and George laughing almost as loud as Harry himself.

"What did you say? Really Ron, do you ever even want to have a girlfriend?" Bill shook his head sadly. "Oh how this family have gone down the drain since my days. I guess it's true what they say, a Father's first load is his best, then it only goes downhill from there."

"Bill!" Molly's face grew red and the twins laughed even harder.

By now Harry was actually on the floor, being nuzzled by Padfoot as he laughed, "Oh Merlin I needed that! Ah," he sighed flipping over onto his back and grinning up at Bill, "I wouldn't say that statement's entirely accurate though. Percy over there," he waved a floppy, lazy hand at the Weasley in the corner, "is fairly bright, enough to stand toe to toe to Hermione in a debate. Those two," he waggled his fingers at the twins, "are devious brilliance personified."

Before he could go on Fred bowed, "Why thank you kind sir. We do try-"

"Our best to give deviance a name and face." George smile was so wide it threatened to split his face in half. "The brilliance is just an added bonus."

Molly shook her head. "Obviously something went very wrong somewhere along the road."

Orion looked around with wide eyes. "If the first load is best...Then Harry and I would be practically geniuses then right? Being only children."

Remus just groaned. "Thank you for that Bill."

"My pleasure." Bill stretched out and ran his fingers through his ponytail.

Harry quirked a brow as Padfoot got up and stretched then trotted over to Bill, looking up at the redhead for a moment before dashing behind him and biting him in the bum. A rip was heard over Bill's yelp and then Padfoot was almost skipping in a canine fashion back to Orion's feet, a bit of leather trousers and what looked like sparking wand covered boxers in his mouth.
"Pfft! I think he doesn't like you corrupting his boy Billy!" Charlie leaned on the wall and laughed at his brother rubbing his bum, "Also, sparkly pants? Something you want to tell us big brother mine?"

Bill rubbed his bum gingerly. "Just that I'm man enough to pull off glitter." He grumbled and turned blue eyes to the dog who looked as if he was smirking. "And you, you mutt. You owe me a pair of trousers...I wonder if dog is as good as dragon when it comes to leather."

"Touch him and live your life bald as a Crystal Ball." Orion said threateningly.

Fred exchanged a glance with his twin, "And if Orion wishes assistance in that endeavor we are-"

"More than willing to lend our assistance in such a noble quest." George finished with flourish.

Orion grinned happily at that before sitting back on the floor, petting Padfoot.

"Okay, the dog is safe...For now at least." Bill shrugged, finding it all more amusing than anything. "Well I'm going to take my gorgeous uncovered arse upstairs before any ladies swarm the place just to sneak a peek." He wiggled his bum and walked to the stairs. "Night you all." He waved over his shoulder.

Eyes rolled across the room and Ron shouted, "What girl would want a look at that hideous thing?!"

Harry laughed weakly, "You never know Ron, there are all kinds out there. There might even be one for your poor romantically challenged soul."

"Prat." Ron poked him with a foot. "Alright there though mate? You're looking...peaky."

"Why Ron I didn't think you were allowed to care, being such a bloke after all." Harry grinned at the two fingered salute that garnered him, "I'm fine, just a bit tired. Been a big, busy day."

Almost instantly Molly was in front of him, brushing his hair away from his forehead and brushing her lips against it. "Why don't you go to bed darling? You're right that it's been a long busy day and you should all get some rest. It's very late after all."

Remus nodded. "Orion you should get to bed too. Molly is it alright if Pads sleeps with Orion tonight?"

Molly eyed the dog before nodding. "You are in Percy's room, Percy you're with the twins and Charlie you're with Bill."

Harry sat up and took Ron's offered hand to get all the way to his feet, "Mrs. Weasley did our school lists come today?"

"Yes they did dear, do you want yours now or do you want to wait until morning?" Molly asked gently.

"It can wait until morning. I just wanted to know because I really want to get to Diagon Alley to get a wand holster, I do not want what happened with my wand today to happen again, and there's no reason to make two trips is all." He gave her a smile, "Besides it'll be more fun going with all of you."

"Oh you sweet thing." Molly kissed his hair. "We can go the day after tomorrow, I think we're all a bit beat to go tomorrow. Now go sleep."
"Thank Merlin you said the lists could wait until tomorrow." Ginny walked up to him. "If you hadn't Mum would have made me bring Hermione hers and I would have to spend the night listening to her excited squeals of the new books to get and read."

Harry chuckled, "You prefer her mutters about Ron being a neolithic dolt?" He'd heard more than one of those rants and knew they could go on for hours. He squeezed Molly's arm and murmured goodnight before walking up the stairs with Ron and Ginny. "Besides I think she's as knackered as we are. She'll probably fall asleep as soon as her head hits the pillow."

Once they made it up the first landing there was a terrible commotion and an extremely red faced Bill hit the wall before in front of the ones walking up. "I swear I had no idea she was still in there, I swear on everything holy I didn't know...I was just going to brush my teeth before bed."

An equally red Hermione came out, a large towel wrapped tightly around her. "I love your family Ron but GOD, I can't wait for school to start." She stomped her bare feet and hurried into Ginny's room, slamming the door behind her.

"Ouch...I think I can safely say she won't fall asleep any time soon." Ginny bit her lip. "Well I better get in there and do some damage control. Goodnight boys." She slipped inside to talk to Hermione about idiot redheads and faulty locks.

Harry narrowed his eyes at Bill, "You'd think, after several years growing up here, your Mum would have pounded the rule of knocking on a door first into your head. Ron's certainly learned that lesson, he even knocks on the boy's dorm bathroom door. I think," he paused briefly before giving Bill a smile that would have sent a few people running, "that you should watch your hair."

Bill gulped, a look like that had no place on a scrawny fourteen year old boy but Harry could certainly pull it off. "I'll apologize again tomorrow...Going to bed now." Bill practically fled to his bedroom wondering if it was possible to place a protective shield on his hair.

Harry looked over at Ron once Bill was locked behind his bedroom door and pat his friend on the shoulder, "You go on ahead Ron. I've got a Marauder and two deviously brilliant Weasleys to talk to."

Ron's lips twitched, "You're wicked mate. See you once you've set up the mayhem." He slipped into his room, knowing that tomorrow morning would be interesting if nothing else.

Harry snagged Remus and explained his idea, liking the gleam that entered the amber eyes at hearing that Bill was the target, then went to knock on the twins' door. At their raised eyebrows he whispered, "How would you two like to learn how to duplicate the blue skin Marauder prank on your eldest brother?" The two answering grins and open door was all the answer he needed.
"FUCKING HELL!!" The screech was loud enough to be heard through all the Burrow and far beyond.

Molly looked up from cutting the bread for breakfast as her firstborn stomped down the stairs. His skin was bright blue, his long hair the most horrific shade of green she'd ever seen. His freckles were still there though, standing out like blaring red dots against the blue skin.

"By Morgana, what have you done to bring this on?" Molly didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the sight of him.

"Nothing that deserves this punishment." Bill glared at his brothers and Harry sitting at the kitchen table. Everyone was up early after having spent the previous day resting up it was now time for the trip to London and Diagon Alley.

Harry took a sip of his morning tea and blinked innocently even as Ron was losing it cackling at his brother's new coloring. "Did you remember to knock on the bathroom door today?"

"Yes." Seeing someone blush blue was definitely a new and unique experience. "And I have apologized over and over again...Haven't I?" He sent Hermione a pleading look.

"You have," She nodded. "You still walked in on me in the buff though...And didn't leave until I shoved you out." She tilted her head. "I actually think I find this an improvement on you. Any chance of making it permanent?" Hermione turned to the twins.

Fred tapped his chin as if in deep thought, "Might take a bit of time-"

"But I'm sure that with a few adjustments we could make it so." George finished the sentence while stroking an imaginary beard thoughtfully.

"You wouldn't dare...I said I was sorry. Mum! Make them stop." Bill turned puppy dog eyes on his mother.

"Really William, you're almost twenty-four, I think you should fight your battles with your brothers without my help. Besides you always knock, it's a rule in this house, always has been." Molly wasn't sympathetic. "Now sit down and eat your eggs before they go cold."

Harry speared a bit of sausage just as Padfoot came in from doing his morning business and he couldn't help but grin as the dog nearly tripped over his paws then started barking loudly. He knew if Sirius had been in human form he'd have been rolling on the floor with laughter. Harry caught Hermione's eye and winked at her. He had indeed told her about the Marauder's blue skinned girls prank so he knew she'd get the joke, "Guess Bill's far from pure eh Mione?"
"Like anyone believed he was...I'm sorry Molly but your eldest has a bit of slag written all over him." Hermione smiled and winked back. She was in a brilliant mood, shopping for school supplies was wonderful. The smell of new books, parchment and ink...Ah it did wonders for the soul.

"No offense taken. I keep telling him it would be better if he just cut his hair...it makes him look cheap." Molly answered calmly, firmly ignoring Bill's loud protests.

Charlie was grinning like a loon at his older brother, "Harry, because as much as I know my little brothers are devious somehow I think this has you written all over it along with assistance from my brothers, you have absolutely made my morning."

Harry lifted his teacup in a toast, "I live to serve. Hermione, Ron do you think you'd like to get a wand holster as well?"

Ron looked at his Mother, "Not sure about that mate, I-"

"Actually," Charlie took a nibble from his toast, "I've got one Ron can have. It's in new condition, made from blue dragonhide. It was a gift from the reserve manager but I've got no need of it. If you want it Ron, it's yours."

Ron blinked, "Really? Blue too?" It was his favorite color as his brothers all knew.

Charlie flicked his wand summoning the box down from his room and held it out to his brother, "Yeah. I've got my Fireball hide thigh holster," he indicated the red leather holster strapped to his thigh, "the blue doesn't have the anti-disarming spells on it but I'm sure that McGonagall or Flitwick could fix that for you if you like."

Ron opened the box and looked at the shiny blue holster, a wide grin spreading on his face, "Wicked!" He looked up at his brother, "Thanks Charlie!"

"It's beautiful, you're lucky Ron." Hermione said and looked at the holster. "I'm definitely getting one too, I was thinking of a thigh holster like yours Charlie but with the girls uniform at Hogwarts it seems like maybe a bad idea...I'll go for an arm one instead." She didn't fancy flashing everyone, every single time she reached for her wand.

Bill understanding just what his little brother had done placed a hand on Charlie's shoulder and squeezed before returning his attention to his breakfast and the fact that he was blue.

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Harry stepped into Ollivanders with Hermione. Just like with wands the best place to go in Diagon Alley for the accessories was Ollivanders. "Hello? Mr. Ollivander?"

There was a shuffle in the backroom and Ollivander came out to stand behind the counter, gray hair wild and the eyes behind the bottle bottom glasses very receptive. "Return customers, two of them even. What can I do for you? I hope nothing is wrong with your wands."

Harry shook his head, "Not at all. We came to get holsters for them. I've been heavily advised against putting my wand in my pocket. And well...it sort of occurred to me that I really don't know much about actually taking care of my wand so I wanted to ask the expert for advice."

Hermione almost smiled at the disgust flashing over Ollivander's face at the mentioning of having your wand in your pocket but honestly, the wandmaker kind of scared her so she kept a straight face.
"Your wand is your anchor to magic, a weapon and an everyday tool. A wizard relies on his wand in every aspect of his life. Of course it needs care and putting it in your pocket is lazy, stupid and not to mention dangerous. Yes it's a good thing you came to me." Ollivander peered at both of them closely. "What sort of holsters are you looking for? Do you draw from your hip or higher? Any special enchantments or protection that you want on the holster?"

Harry had flinched at the rebuke. It wasn't as though he had anyone who taught him these things, Hogwarts didn't exactly have a class to integrate those raised by muggles into the magical world after all. "Er well sir what sort of enchantments and protections are there for wand holsters? I don't really have...anyone to tell me these things over the summer and in Hogwarts...it's assumed we know. And I'd like a higher draw please, one will let me pull my wand as fast as I can reach for it."

"Hm." Ollivander stepped out from behind his counter and circled Harry slowly, looking him over. "Well there's the anti-disarming spell of course, the anti-detection spell...Of course your opponent will understand you have a wand but won't be able to spot where you carry your holster. That can buy you the time you need in a pinch. I recommend them both." He pulled on both of Harry's arms. "An underarm holster would be best I think. There are those with a spring, shooting the wand out in your hand but as you know mechanics can always malfunction...No I would recommend a holster that you carry on the opposite arm from your wand hand, allowing you to draw quickly...Yesss, that would be good."

Harry smiled, "I think I'm going to defer to your superior knowledge here Mr. Ollivander. An underarm holster with both spells for my left arm."

"Very well and for the lady?" Ollivander circled Hermione now, looking her over with sharp eyes.

"Um...the same please if it's possible sir, my left arm as well." Hermione was a bit wary of those sharp eyes, sometimes it felt as if they saw too much. Ollivander knew his business though, no doubt about that.

Ollivander nodded and shuffled back to his backroom without another word, returning quickly with two flat boxes. "This one for Mr. Potter I believe." He took the lid of the box revealing a bright green dragon hide holster, the leather as soft as butter.

"And this one for Miss. Granger." The other holster was buttery golden colored and a bit shorter than the green one. "Well go on then, try them on and test the feel of them."

Harry helped Hermione get hers on first then set about strapping his on. It reminded him somewhat of the holsters used by the police detectives on the shows Dudley was once obsessed with. He tucked his wand into the holster and shifted, measuring the feel. It would take some getting used to, not only changing where he instinctively reached for his wand but also the feel of the straps and holster pressing against his side and arm. He reached up and drew his wand, committing the way it slid out to memory and also absently noticing that he could better begin to cast immediately on the draw this way. yeah it would take time to get used to but it would be a lot more useful and effective than his pocket. Safer too. "Yeah I think this is just right. How about you Hermione?"

"Mmm, it will take some getting used to, especially with sleeves over it but I think it will be great." She drew and reholstered her wand several times, getting the feel of it. "It's a very good fit Mr. Ollivander, I'll take it."

"Good, good." Ollivander ducked behind his counter and came up with two small glass bottles and two soft rags. "I'll throw this in with the purchase. A polishing rag and a bottle of oil...A wand is magical but it's still wood, a little love and tender care will keep it from drying out and cracking
and will keep its magic in top shape."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, for not tossing me out after hearing about me keeping my wand in my pocket and for explaining that." He dug out the total for both holsters from his money bag and shook his head at Hermione when she was about to protest, "Hermione you and Ron are always right beside me in every danger I face and I can't do much to keep you safe. Let me get this as part of what'll help keep you safe?"

"We don't stand by you to gain something from it...But since you worded it like that, how can I protest? Thank you Harry, thank you so much." Hermione leaned in and kissed his cheek. She would find a way to repay him somehow, she just hadn't figured out how yet but it would come to her.

"Why would I toss you out?" Ollivander looked truly baffled at that, his glasses sliding down his nose. "You can't know what no one has told you, none can and you came here to learn. That's a sign of a good wizard...and witch." He pushed his glasses up again. "Thank you for your business and take care of that wand Mr. Potter, I have a feeling you're going to need it." He nodded at them and packed their holsters up in their boxes again before leaving for the backroom, clearly dismissing them.

"Odd man that." Hermione couldn't help but say as they walked out of the shop.

Harry chuckled, "A bit but when you consider it, he's seen dozens of witches and wizards pass through his doors and has to find a wand that fits each one just right. He could go through his whole shop one by one but from what I've heard he manages most in less than five tries. He has to see so much to do that, a bit like the Sorting Hat."

"That's true, I guess I never thought about it that way before." Hermione nodded slowly as she thought about it. Harry was right, they hadn't introduced themselves but Ollivander had still remembered their names. Granted that wasn't too difficult with Harry but she was just a nobody and he'd remembered her as well. "Intriguing work, making wands. Must take dedication, time and a lot of magic. I wonder how it's done really, I mean I understand the principle of it but to actually be able to witness it and see just how you fuse the magical core with the wood and which wood to choose...Fascinating."

He grinned at her going off on a tangent. It was just so...Hermione and one of the things he liked best about her, even when it occasionally got on his nerves. "Maybe you could visit and ask him one day if you could watch the process. Now, we've got books and robes," he frowned at the crossed out 'dress robes' part of the list wondering what on earth he'd need them for, "potions ingredients and other tools and accessories for the new term, holsters, is there anything we've forgotten?"

"Huh?" Hermione broke off from her monologue, wondering if the wandmakers collected the core subjects for their wands themselves or if they hired someone else and looked at Harry, processing what he'd said before fishing out her own list and checking the crossed off items. "No, I think we've covered everything regarding our school supplies actually. It went rather smoothly this year don't you think?" Hermione looked at the bustling street of Diagon Alley, it was filled with students and their families, shopping for the new school year.

Harry nodded, "Yeah. Well since we've finished all the necessary shopping, mind indulging me and popping into Quality Quidditch Supplies for a bit?"

"No, I suppose not. You indulged me while I tried on Dress robes and you gave me my holster, it's the least I can do." Hermione smiled and linked her arm with Harry's as they walked down the
Thanks.” He smiled and lead her around an odd shimmering mess on the ground and up into the Quidditch store. He paused by a display of seeker's gloves and wondered if maybe he should replace his current pair. They were getting a little tight but then, as they weren't dragonhide, it would be a waste of money when he could just use an engorgement charm on them. "What do you suppose we need the dress robes for anyway?"

"I honestly don't have a clue and you have no idea how much that irks me." Hermione grimaced, she didn't like to admit that there were things she didn't know or couldn't find out. "I've reread Hogwarts A History to see if there were any clues in there but I didn't come up with anything. Reading up on dress robes I found out that they're only used in very formal settings, like weddings or balls and such things. I doubt there will be a wedding for us to attend so I'm guessing some sort of ceremony or dance."

He went from smiling over her disgruntlement at not knowing to going pale, "A dance? Please Merlin don't let it be that."

"What would be so bad about a dance?" Hermione worried over how pale Harry had gotten, looking around and leading him over to a bench where you could try on Quidditch boots where she made him sit down for a moment.

He looked up at her, "Oh let me count the ways," he held up a finger, "you have to find and bring a date," another one came up, "there's a whole crowd of people dressed to the nines and judging you on how well you're dressed, oh and," he held up a third finger, "I don't know how to dance. At all. Not exactly something they teach in muggle primary school as you know."

"Oh Harry, what am I going to do with you?" Hermione sat down next to him. "I don't think bringing a date will be much of a problem for you if you just ask someone that is. I saw the robes you bought remember and I really don't think anyone will be in a position to judge...Except maybe for Malfoy and who cares what he thinks? And about the dancing, I can teach you if it comes to that. I mean I'm no expert but I know the steps. We don't even know if there will be a dance but if there is then there's nothing to worry about."

"I would be eternally in your debt if you taught me Hermione. I don't care if you're an expert or not, so long as, if there's a dance, I don't trip all over my feet and embarrass myself. I'm just...well you know how I am with people. I'm awkward and I'd probably send a girl Screaming into the night with boredom and disappointment. They'd have built up an image in their head of what a date is like with 'The-Boy-Who-Lived' " he wrinkled his nose, "and anything less is a travesty."

"Then shame on them." Hermione knew Harry was right, she'd heard the talk among the girls of the school but that didn't make it right. "It's their loss then, that they don't take the chance to get to know you for the wonderful person that you are. And there are nice girls out there, I'm sure you can find one."

He got up and gave her a hug. "Well, we'll see won't we." He eyed a display of ladies Quidditch boots that had a short heel like riding boots and chuckled, "You know Hermione it's too bad you don't like flying because I've got this image in my head of you wearing a Quidditch uniform with those on and using them to kick Malfoy's arse."

Brown eyes lit up with humor. "The uniform I don't mind and those boots are actually really nice, it's the altitude that gives me trouble. I could dress up just for you though and kicking Malfoy's pasty little bum across the field would be like Christmas come early so no hardship there." She chuckled wickedly.
He grinned at her, "He'd take one look at you being all business and run like the little cockroach he is. But if you ever decide to do it, I'll happily buy the boots." He bent and peered at some instruments, "What is it about the flying that really scares you? Is it the height or something else?"

"I'm fine with heights as long as I have something solid beneath my feet. It's all that emptiness, all around me and having so little control...I don't know, it ties my stomach into knots and makes me freeze up." She looked over to the display case where plenty of different brooms were lined up. "What makes the brooms fly? What makes them stay in the air? I can't figure it out and if I can't understand it then how can I trust it?"

He stood up and pointed to an almost invisible line of carved symbols ringing one of the brooms' handle near the twigs and straw of the bottom, "Those look a little familiar?"

Hermione leaned in close and peered at the carved symbols, she'd never noticed them before. "Runes?" She tried to read what they said but she didn't recognize any of the runes circling the handle. "Do you know what they say?" She had her fingers against the glass tracing the runes absent-mindedly.

"Not on that one. I sent off for an information kit on my Firebolt though and I can show you the book they sent when we get back to the burrow. But all brooms have runes apparently, that are charged magically then concealed. The point is so that people don't notice them." He tugged gently on a frizzed curl, "So I'll show you the book and maybe you can start feeling a little more comfortable on a broom."

She looked at him from the corner of her eye and then back to the broom. "I happily say yes to see the book and a more doubtful maybe to the broom comfort but I'm willing to try." Broom riding was an efficient way of traveling and everyone around her always said it was such fun and such a sense of freedom and she wanted to feel that way too, she just didn't.

He squeezed her arm, "I just want you to be comfortable on a broom for your own sake, so you can get the feeling of what it's like to really fly without worrying you'll fall."

"We'll see, I do want that too and I am willing to try," Hermione looked away from the brooms to meet Harry's eyes. Harry was born to fly, anyone with eyes could see that...Hermione was not born to it but she would work on her issues as best she could.

"No try, do, or do not, there is no try," he dodged the swipe of her hand with a laugh, "Okay I've indulged myself. Let's go meet back up with the Weasleys before they send a hunting party."

She placed her palms together and bowed to him. "Yes Master Yoda." Before following him out of the shop and walking back toward Leaky where they would all eat lunch before returning to the Burrow.

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Harry looked over at Hermione as they climbed the stairs to the Gryffindor common room. "So have you read anything about this Tri-Wizard Tournament before?" the announcement of the lack of Quidditch had made him outright pout but maybe there would be some sort of compensation to see during this tournament.

"I've read enough to know that it was removed for a reason." Hermione was not as excited the rest of the student body about the announcement of the Tournament. "Students died during it Harry, it's not a Tournament of fun and games, it's for real, a battle of magic with your life at stake." She stopped to wait as one of the staircases on the way to Gryffindor tower moved. "I know the
Ministry took quite a beating for what happened at the World Cup but this isn't the way to fix it, I don't know what they are thinking. Also with Wormtail escaping last year and Death Eaters back in the open Dumbledore opening up the school to schools from other countries, Ministry employees, journalists and Merlin knows who else...It's a joke.

Ron snorted and muttered, "The supposed 'safety' of the school has been a joke since we started going here Hermione, what else is new? Besides the ones participating in the bloody thing put their own names in for consideration so they know what they're getting into don't they? If they don't they're dumber than everyone thinks I am."

"Yeah but even as a last year student you're not older than eighteen, students are allowed to be dumb. It's the organizers of this humongously stupid idea that should know better. There will be trouble, I can feel it." The staircase returned and they made their way up the last flight of stairs and crawled through the portrait hole after telling the fat lady the password. "And what do they mean with no exams? How are the last years supposed to graduate if there are no exams? How will our grades be judged?"

Harry sighed, "Probably by each professor." He grimaced. He needed to talk to Snape about Occlumency lessons anyway, "Either way I'm looking forward to actually being a spectator for once," he looked up and clasped his hands together, "Please, please, please let me just be a spectator for once?"

Ron chuckled and pat him on the back, "Don't see how even you could get in on this mate. If Dumbledore says the judge is impartial and has set an age limit then none of us ickle fourth years will get in."

Hermione exchanged a look with Harry. Hogwarts was not a safe place to speak up against the Headmaster but Hermione didn't believe that just because Dumbledore said the judge was impartial that it was a sure thing. "I hope you're right Ron, I really, really do."

Harry nodded, "Oh yeah, I was wondering if you two would come with me to visit Myrtle after classes tomorrow." Of course he didn't really mean visiting the girl ghost. He'd been thinking about where they could practice and speak away from Dumbledore's prying eyes and only one place came to mind. The Chamber of Secrets.

"Sure." Hermione nodded as Ron did the same, they both knew Harry well enough to understand what he meant. "She could use the company, being all alone in there." She found an empty couch close to the fire and hurried over to plonk down on it before anyone else did. The common room was always crowded at beginning of term before everyone had settled in.

Ron nodded, "Alright mate, so long as she doesn't flood the toilets or punch me again." He shuddered, "That was not a fun experience." He sat at the other end of the couch.

Harry, lips a-twitching, flung himself down so that he was on his back, his head in Hermione's lap, feet in Ron's.

"Bloody hell mate why put your ruddy feet on my end?"

"Because Hermione'll turn me green if I put my feet in her lap?"

"Good answer."

"From the smell of both your feet, I think your feet may already be green." Hermione sniffed but with humor in her eyes. She pulled on a lock of Harry's hair before starting to go through the books
Harry chuckled at Ron's indignant shout and snitched one of Hermione's books, accepting the whack on the head she gave him at the move, and followed her suit. He needed to keep up after all if he was going to kick Voldemort's bum off and then move on to Dumbledore.

Ron sighed and made a pained groan before asking Hermione if he could borrow another of the books she wasn't reading. He'd vowed to help Harry get out from under the weight he carried and that meant, shudder, studying.

Giving Ron an almost embarrassingly surprised look at the question, she nodded and handed Ron her Transfiguration book and marked the chapter what would be included in tomorrow's class. Then she returned to the book she was reading, this was nice. Despite Dumbledore pulling strings like some sort of huge spider sitting in his web Hogwarts was still wonderful, being here with her boys felt like coming home.

-----------------------------------------------

Harry sighed as the rest of the fourth year class filed out and waved Ron and Hermione up ahead as he stayed behind. Why Double Potions seemed to be the last class of the first day they had every year was a mystery to him but, as foul a mood as Snape had been in, it worked for speaking to the pissy bat.

"Potter is there a reason you've not joined the rest of the mass exodus?" Snape's tone was sharp and cold and, as always, spiteful.

Reminding himself not to blow his top, Harry hitched his bag higher and nodded, "You're a Legilimens right? And an Occlumens?"

Severus lifted a brow. He had to admit that wasn't exactly what he might have expected to come out of Potter's mouth. "Why do you ask?"

Harry looked around, making Snape twitch.

"Potter spit it out my time is more valuable than your life and no one is here."

Harry muttered, "There are portraits and ghosts," before looking back at Snape, "I need someone to teach me Occlumency. Remus suggested that you might be the best to ask."

Snape's brows both lifted now in an expression of surprise that would shock most to know he was capable of it, "My office Potter."

Harry grimaced and marched to Snape's office turning when he closed and locked the door. Well at least Ron and Hermione knew he was here if Snape killed him. "Sir why-"

"My office is blocked to the ghosts and obviously you see no portraits. You wish to learn Occlumency?"

"I wish it wasn't necessary Sn...Professor but I don't want the Headmaster poking his nose into my head or Voldemort either." He caught the slightest flinch of eyelids and filed it away for later reference, "Will you teach me, please?"

Severus had to wonder, after all the animosity engendered between them, just how much that please burned on Potter's tongue. He nodded slowly, "Very well Potter." He smirked, "A cover will be needed so your weekly free period shall be spent here, for remedial potions to the populace."
And you will maintain respect to me and your current grade in Potions or the lessons shall end."

Harry groaned, "Agreed sir. Remedial Potions, oh Malfoy's just going to have a field day with that one. But better listen to him than have Dumbledore in my head. Every Wednesday then." Now came the hard part, "Thank you sir."

"Hm, now get out of my office." Snape watched him go with vague amusement and speculation. It appeared that Potter was learning just how wrong it was to trust the Headmaster. That was good. Now, to owl Remus and take him to task for the 'suggestion'.

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Harry stepped into the girls lavatory with Ron after Hermione gave them the all clear.

Hermione and Ron, stepped in after Harry, looking around the dreary unused bathroom. Hermione remembered brewing Polyjuice potion and ending up half a cat from it. It was only two years ago but it felt so much longer.

"Harry Potter, you didn't come to visit me once last year...Even after promising." Myrtle floated in front of them, sitting cross legged in thin air, a pout on her translucent features. "None of you came to visit. Oh it's easy to forget all about Myrtle once I'm out of sight. I'm just a ghost right? What feelings could I possibly have?"

Harry grimaced, "Sorry Myrtle. Things were...rough last year."

Ron eyed her, "Mind if I ask why you don't just...come looking for Harry? Can't you just...float wherever you like?"

"Float? Float...Oh yes, remind Myrtle that she's dead, that she doesn't have feet to walk on anymore, that she can't feel the touch of the floor." She zoomed closer to Ron. "Is that funny to you fleshbag? Taunt the ghost, does that make you laugh?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. Myrtle was the most annoying creature in the castle, ghost or otherwise. "Calm down Myrtle, he didn't mean anything bad by it."

Myrtle only huffed and with a splash Hermione wasn't sure how she managed she dove into a toilet to sulk in the U-bend.

Harry walked over and peered into the toilet, "Myrtle he really wasn't making a joke or trying to make you feel bad. Ron's just very literal. You've a lovely float after all." He might not know much about girls really but he knew enough to remember that when Aunt Petunia was sulking, the quickest way Vernon ended it was either by compliments or gifts.

There was a pause and then a silvery pale head emerged from the toilet. "Really? A lovely float?" The ghost blushed silver. "You are a very nice boy Harry Potter, not like the other." She shot Ron a venomous glare.

Ron shifted behind Hermione, knowing that she really wasn't much protection from a ghost but it made him feel better.

Harry smiled at the ghost girl, "Thanks Myrtle. You don't mind if we're in here a lot from now on do you? We're wanting to practice our dueling skills and other things in the Chamber but we'd hate to disturb you."

Myrtle preened. "No, no I don't mind at all if you're here Harry, if it's you then you won't disturb
me." She fluttered her lashes at him.

Hermione hid her smile and leaned toward the boy hiding behind her. "Poor Harry, even the ghosts have crushes on him, it can't be easy being that wanted." Inside she found it cute, that Harry took the time to be kind to a pouty, moody little girl who had died a long time ago.

Ron wrinkled his nose and murmured back very very lowly, "Yeah poor Harry, wanted by almost all the wrong people."

Harry couldn't hear what they were saying but looked over his shoulder at them to let them know he knew he was the subject of their conversation before turning his attention back to Myrtle, "If you get lonely while we're down there you're welcome to come on down if you're able."

"The chamber is a part of Hogwarts so of course I can go down there, I don't though because it dark and scary and even more lonely than here." Myrtle looked sad and very, very young all of a sudden. "If you're there I might come." She emerged fully from the toilet and sat on top of the booth, swinging her legs coyly.

Harry was reminded that the ghost before him was in a perpetual state of girlhood no matter how long she'd been in the lavatory, "You'll be welcome. Um could you maybe not tell Dumbledore though?"

Even as a ghost Myrtle all but shuddered. "Why would I tell that man anything? I don't report to him and in the grand scheme he's the reason I'm stuck here." She floated down until she was floating in front of Harry, leaning in to whisper to him. "He knew, he knew what the monster was and he didn't do anything and I...I died."

Harry's jaw flexed and he put one more debit in the case against Dumbledore, not even bothered by the icy cold when Myrtle brushed against him accidentally, "He'll pay Myrtle. It'll take some time but he'll pay I promise you. You stayed here all that time, in the lavatory to keep others away, to protect them didn't you?"

Ron shuffled out from behind Hermione to stare at the girl ghost. He wasn't the quickest wand around but he could see that might have been what Myrtle had done. There hadn't been a flooded toilet since the Basilisk had been killed by Harry after all.

"It started that way yes." Myrtle nodded. "Since the Headmaster didn't protect the students someone had to, then after awhile it became comfortable, a habit. The other ghosts don't like me much and they never come here."

Hermione's heart ached, she'd seen Myrtle as an annoyance at the most, not stopping to think about the girl she'd once been and what her actions might be. It looked as if she had a lot to learn still.

Ron risked Myrtle screaming at him again and spoke up, "We'll give him a kick in his boney bum just for you then. It's not right you're stuck here cause of him."

Harry smiled and whispered to Myrtle, "See Ron's not so bad, he just doesn't think before he talks sometimes."

Myrtle zoomed over until she was nose to nose with Ron, looking at him closely and running a ghostly cold finger down his nose. "You may be right, if you like him Harry, then he can't be all bad." She grinned impishly. "Besides, you're kind of cute." She held Ron's gaze and caused Hermione to hide a smile again.

"Er thanks?" Ron rubbed his nose to get the warm back in. "Like Harry said, come on down if you
"I'm sure I'll join you sometime. For now though you three should go, I'll stay here and be your lookout, if anyone should attempt to follow you I'll let you know." Myrtle floated around before finding perch on top of the sink next to the one with the snake tap.

"Thank you Myrtle. You're a good friend." Harry hissed for the chamber entrance to open then looked at the ghost before he slid down, "Olive Hornby was wrong you know, your glasses look nice on you and I'd like to find her and tell her just that." He then jumped down, to Ron's rolling eyes.

"Alright! Come on down!"

Hermione exchanged a look with Ron and at his nod she waved at Myrtle and jumped down the shoot as well, her breath catching at the breakneck speed. She oomphed as she finally hit unmoving ground and thanked Harry as he helped her up on her feet.

"You know, I wouldn't mind if you came and visited either." Myrtle twirled one of her pigtails around her finger and winked at Ron just as the redhead jumped down to join Harry and Hermione.

Ron shook his head as he landed on the bones, just like the last time, then glanced back up. He got the feeling Myrtle didn't actually mean her flirting and that it was more a response to having been so lonely for so long. "You know I just remembered. The cave in, how are we going to get past that?"

"We'll levitate the rocks away and, Hermione do you know any stabilizing or sticking charms that we can use to strengthen the walls for now?" Harry looked at the girl who was staring in shock at what covered the floor.

"Huh? Oh yes I think I know a sticking charm we can use." Hermione finally looked away from the bones that littered the floor and crunched under the soles of their shoes. There were both small and large bones and she didn't even want to know what kind of creatures they'd been while alive. She performed the sticking charm on both walls and ceiling to make it safe for them to levitate the rocks out of the way so they could make their way forward. This really was a dreary place, it was hard to imagine a twelve year old Harry going forward here to face Riddle's specter and the Basilisk on his own.

Harry lead the way, his wand lit with a strong Lumos, hissing at the great iron door then nodding as it opened and clambering in. As he looked around, ignoring the giant snake corpse, he had to admit it didn't look any less intimidating than the last time he was here. He turned around to say something then tilted his head at his pale and vaguely ill looking friends who's gazes were fixed a bit behind him and off to the side. "What's wrong?"

Hermione's eyes flicked between the giant snake and Harry several times and then she promptly burst into tears before throwing herself into Harry's arms. She was crying too hard to get any word out, just clinging to her friend tightly while nightmares of what could have happened ran through her head.

Harry caught her, his eyes wide and shocked as he pet her hair, "Hey, what's all this?"

Ron shook his head, "That snake mate. Bloody hell I know you said it had to be nineteen meters but I just...I thought it was just in your mind being that little compared to something so dangerous."
His eyes cleared in understanding and rocked Hermione back and forth, "Hey it's okay Hermione. It's okay. I'm still here."

She held on tighter, feeling her tears wet his shirt. "I know, it. It's just so huge and you were a child and it's not fair damn it. It's not fair at all and I want to go back in time and kick both Dumbledore and Voldemort in the bollocks for making you go through this." It came out in a hiccuping scramble of sobs and words as she couldn't get a grip on herself. She wanted to protect him, be there for him but after seeing the dead Basilisk and knowing what was still left to battle would be worse she just ached at the thought of Harry having to deal with that. How could she, plain Hermione do anything to protect him from that?

"No it's not fair. It's not fair, it's not right, and it sucks vomit flavored every flavor beans but they'll get theirs and I've got you and Ron to help me get to where I need to be for that to happen. You've both already helped me so much. You've saved both my and Ron's arse more than once Hermione."

"We'll always be there Harry, any way we can." She sniffled and pulled away slightly, wiping furiously at her eyes. She hated crying but seeing that blasted snake she couldn't help herself. "I apologize for the meltdown and for," She motioned toward him vaguely. "leaking on you." Hermione wiped at her eyes again. "You're right, they'll get theirs and you'll get what you deserve to Harry, a life free from them...I'll do everything I can to see that it happens."

"Too right mate. I'm at your side and at your back when you need me, even if I'm not as useful as Mione with a spell."

"I know," he pulled a square of linen from his bag and handed it to Hermione, "you can leak on me any time you need to Hermione. I've used your shoulder often enough." He looked up at Ron, "And that goes both ways mate, facing Malfoy and his gorillas or acromantula, with you through thick and thin."

"Cheers then."

Hermione wiped her face and blew her nose with the handkerchief Harry had handed her. "I promise to wash this before I return it." She then walked over to give Ron a hug too. "You are wonderful Ron Weasley and of course both you and I'll be there for Harry, just as he and I will be there for you whenever you need us...Even when you're a forgotten relic from the stone age."

Ron turned red and pat her on the back watching as Harry went over to study the basilisk.

Harry ran a hand along the skin of the fallen beast, surprised it hadn't decomposed.

"You know that belongs to you now right mate?"

"What?" He turned to look at Ron.

"Right of conquest. It's an old magic law. If you killed it it belongs to you. There's a whole bunch of reasoning on all that rot but it's yours by right."

"Ron's right." Hermione nodded and looked at the snake again, feeling a little bit calmer after her tear storm. "It's yours and you have no idea how much people in the wizarding world would pay for even a single scale or feather. Basilisks are extremely rare and extremely magical, potions, wands, charms...You can use it for almost anything. Not to mention what you could do with the venom." She quirked her lips. "I bet you could even make Snape crawl for you for a single chance to harvest this poor thing." No matter what harm it had caused it wasn't really the Basilisk's fault, it had only done what its master had ordered it to.
"Huh," Harry drummed his fingers on a scale, a smile twitching the corners of his lips, "You think Snape would be willing to render it down to parts for a percentage of them?"

Ron snorted, "Oh yeah. He'd happily walk on hot coals for that opportunity if he's any kind of potion master."

Harry nodded, "Then on Wednesday I'll ask him. He's agreed to teach me Occlumency and I get the feeling he trusts Dumbledore about as far as an ant could toss a dragon."

"Well from what Remus has said and even more from what he hasn't said we know Snape is a spy." Hermione tapped her bottom lip with her finger as she spoke. "How much do you want to bet that Dumbledore played him just as he's tried to do you, to make Snape fit into his plans the way he wanted him to. Snape knows about Orion and what Dumbledore did there and I have a feeling there's not much that he doesn't see. He's a rude git but I think it would be a good thing to have him as an ally...A neutral one at least."

Harry nodded, "Yeah I think you're right." He turned back to them and looked around the gloomy chamber, "So Hermione any ideas on how to light this place up so we can get down to work?"

"Hm, let's see." Hermione looked around, walking closer to the walls and noticing a hollowed out trench going all around the walls of the chambers. It was filled with a thick liquid and when she sniffed it she recognized the scent of oil. "Incendio." The oil caught on fire and the whole chamber lit up in an orangeish glow, making the stone walls shimmer. "Quite smart, all around lighting and warmth in one go."

"Brilliant. Okay then, let's get started with the basics of animagi magic. Remus gave me this," he held up a book, "and Sirius gave me some notes too."

Ron grinned, "Let's get cracking then."
Harry followed Hermione down the stairs and paused when he saw Neville's back, the quiet boy looking out the window contemplatively. He stepped forward, "You okay Neville?"

The awkward boy jumped a bit and turned with a pasted on smile, "Yeah. Moody...Moody's really something isn't he? But um, are you okay?"

He considered Neville for a second before telling the truth, "Honestly Nev, I'm a bit disturbed."

Neville looked down, "Y-yeah I guess seeing the curse that...well not really something you want to see is it?"

Hermione stopped when she saw that Harry wasn't beside her anymore and looked back to see him talk to a very pale looking Neville. She'd seen his reactions during class and even implored Professor Moody to stop but she didn't walk back up the steps, afraid she would only get in the way if she walked up there now. If anyone could get Neville to speak about what was on his mind it was Harry and from the look of Neville he needed someone to confide in. Hermione decided to leave them be and wait for Harry downstairs instead. She gave her friend a small nod and continued down the steps.

Ron stood higher up, pretending to ignore what was being said while keeping an eye out for anyone who might try and interrupt Harry and Neville.

Harry nodded, "No it's not. Neville I know we don't really talk much but I hope you know that if you need someone to listen, you can come to me. I know I tend to glom onto Ron and Hermione and not really stretch myself further I'm just..."

"Scared?" Neville looked up at him.

"Yeah. I mean I know you wouldn't, and Dean and Seamus probably wouldn't either but-"

Neville's smile turned more honest and a bit gentle, "Some people would only want to be around The-Boy-Who-Lived?"

Harry nodded.

"You wouldn't pity me, would you Harry?" Neville's eyes searched his dormmate's face.

He knew his answer was important to Neville, "I've never pitied you Neville, trust me. I've sympathized but never pitied."

Neville nodded and lifted his wand murmuring a soft incantation his Gran had spent an entire summer trying to teach him, a privacy spell. "Y-you can tell Ron and Hermione if you want, or if...if they ask. Hermione's always nice to me and Ron's helpful when he can be an' all...just tell them not to treat me weird okay?"

Harry laid his hand on Neville's shoulder, "I will and they won't. We might drag you into an adventure or two though. Not out of pity," he hastened to assure the other boy, "but because we need more good honest friends and you're one of the most honest and loyal people I know really."

Another nod and that shy smiled flickered again. "Better to be beside Hermione's wand than on the business end of it I suppose." He took a deep breath and began to tell Harry about his parents and
why he lived with his Gran.

Ron watched Harry's face go from friendly and amused to horrified then furious then understanding. Whatever the spell Neville had cast was it had kept him from hearing the conversation so he could only imagine what Harry was being told. Whatever it was, someone was going to wind up on the wrong end of Harry's wand. He caught sight of Moody stumping down the stairs and went to wave in front of the privacy charm shield, getting Neville's attention.

Harry turned as Neville dropped the charm, "Ron?"

"Moody," he pointed behind him, "he's coming down the stairs. I figured you might want to move or..." he trailed off at Neville's gaze lifting up a bit, "He's right behind me isn't he?"

"Aye, that he is lad." A very gruff voice sounded right in Ron's ear. "It's a decent thing to do, keeping lookout for yer friends but ye got to get downright sneakier in going about it if ye want to be successful." Moody's glass eye swirled crazily but his real one was fixed on the two dark haired boys on the landing beneath where he stood.

Ron grimaced, "Hey my job was just to let them know someone was coming so they could drop the subject before said someone got here. I'd say I was successful since we weren't doing anything sneakiness requires."

Harry's lips twitched at his best friend's indignant embarrassment, "He's right. If we were trying to be sneaky we wouldn't be talking in the middle of the hallway, right Nev?"

Neville just nodded, uncomfortable under Moody's intent stare.

"Ah don't get yer backs up, I ain't trying to put ye down. You need to be aware though, constant vigilance! The last words were roared out making the poor students jump.

Harry's fingers twitched, half wanting to pull his wand on the man. That bellow would very very soon get old if he kept it up and he'd wind up trying to hex the grizzled old Auror, and fail miserably. "So other than that Professor, is there a reason you stopped to speak with us?"

"Yes, I wanted to apologize to young Mr. Longbottom here. I sometimes get carried away when it comes to getting people to understand the horrors of the forbidden curses, I don't mean anything by it." Moody raised a gnarly hand and scratched at the greyish white scruff on his cheek. "And I heard from Sprouty-girl that you were a bit of a wiz, pardon the pun, when it comes to plants and I have a few books gathered through the years on the subject and wanted to offer ye to borrow them if ye fancy to."

Harry slanted a questioning look at Neville, eyes asking if he wanted them to stay with him. The other boy shook his head just a bit at Harry and, though Neville was nervous about Moody he was supposed to be a Gryffindor so he squared his shoulders and looked Moody square in the real eye, "Yes sir I'd appreciate that."

Harry watched Moody stump away with Neville in his wake and looked over at Ron, "If anyone ever questions Neville being in Gryffindor again Ron, hex them."

Ron's brows shot up, "That sounds like a story there mate."

He nodded, "Tell you and Hermione later, during practice."
Ron stared at his friend then leaned back against the wall, "Bloody hell mate that's..." he shook his head, "I can't imagine it."

Hermione was speechless, such horror. It must almost be worse than having your parents gone completely. Having them alive but tortured so badly that their minds are broken, not even recognizing their child. "It's strange, the things going on in people's lives that you don't have a clue about. I'm a bad friend, a lousy one. You know I have never even asked Neville how come he lives with his Grandmother before." She ducked her head.

Harry reached over and tugged on her hair, "We've all been lousy friends to Neville really, but remember he doesn't want pity so he keeps it tight to himself."

Ron nodded, "It explains why he uses the wand he does instead of having gotten one of his own, it probably belonged to his Dad."

"I understand that sentiment, I do but it's holding Neville back. He needs a wand that chooses him, a wand where their magic will connect. I bet that if he had that he wouldn't be half as clumsy when it comes to casting spells." Hermione chewed on her bottom lip. "I know he doesn't want pity but do you think he'd mind if maybe we'd include him a little more? It's something we should have done since first year anyway."

Harry smiled, "I was already planning to, maybe more than just a little after a while depending on how much he does or doesn't trust Dumbledore."

"We'll find out." Hermione smiled back at her boys. "Neville is sensible and honorable and I think he sees the truth for what it is." She straightened her holster, still getting used to the feel of it. "Oh Harry, by the way, have you heard anything about how Remus has settled in, in Hogsmeade? I can understand his wish to be close to Orion when he's in school. I suppose Moody knows what he's talking about but I still kind of miss Remus as a Professor."

"You and me both Hermione. I'm telling you I hear him bellow about constant vigilance one more time and I'm going to vigilance him in the crazy eye." Harry grinned at Ron's bark of laughter, "Remus is settling in alright, with his dog," he snickered, "Snuffles. He refused to stay behind. I just hope that Remus doesn't kill the mutt. I'd like the chance to get to know my godfather better."

"Oh my I hope so too, Snuffles must really like living dangerously." Hermione didn't know whether to laugh or groan. "Do you think they'll ever get things right? The two of them?"

Harry sighed, "Only time will tell I guess."

Ron snickered, "I'll tell you mate I'd like to be a fly on the wall there. I wonder how Remus is coping with his non lunar furry pain in the arse."

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Remus was hardly coping at all as it was. He understood Sirius' need to be close to Orion and Harry, he did but he was going crazy. It was so hard, keeping his resolve when Sirius was there all the time. Remus didn't know how much more he could take before he snapped, something that would be bad for everyone around.

He was sitting at the kitchen table, trying to concentrate on his latest translation job but his mind was whirring all over the place. It was tough not seeing Orion every day. Remus knew Severus and Harry were looking out for him but it was still so hard, not seeing for himself that he was safe and sound.
The dog door opened and a very damp Padfoot trotted in, giving a brief yip before going into the bathroom off the kitchen that had been insisted on for exactly the reason that Sirius was now demonstrating. He wound up soaking wet more often than not no matter how hard he tried to stay clean and dry. Once in the bathroom he shifted to human and waved his wand at his dirty water trail before banishing his wet clothes and stepping into a hot shower. He'd gone to the Quidditch Pitch to watch Orion practice and had wound up being chased around by Fang, who apparently did not realize that Padfoot wasn't a bitch. He wanted to avoid that thank you very much and so had fallen into a muddy puddle while running until Hagrid had found and reined in the hound, giving Padfoot the chance to watch his son in peace.

Orion had looked good, happy and healthy, and he was a natural on a broom. Harry had come out and joined him after a bit too so he'd gotten to see both his boys joking and playing with each other, as they should have always been able to do.

Once he was clean and dry he summoned a pair of cotton trousers and a t-shirt and padded barefoot out into the kitchen to bow and beg, "Please tell me there's still tea?"

"On the stove, blue kettle." Remus nodded his head toward the stove, his eyes glued to the papers in front of him so they wouldn't drift over to the lean and oh so attractive person in the room with him. "Everything okay with the boys?" There was a wistful note in Remus' voice, he was already missing both Orion and Harry.

Sirius poured himself tea and sat down with a content sigh, "Looks like, yeah. Couldn't get close enough to hear any conversation before they packed the flight in thanks to Fang though. I'm telling you Mo-" he interrupted himself knowing that Remus didn't welcome the old nickname right now, "Remus if Hagrid doesn't get that beast a girlfriend soon I'm either going to arrange a special boarhound delivery or look into neutering spells for him."

Remus snickered. "Aw, you could do worse Sirius, I'm sure Fang would be a doting partner." The image of Fang chasing Sirius was highly amusing, especially since Hagrid had told them how he whined when Sirius escaped every time, all lovelorn and miserable.

He razzed the werewolf, "Not my type thank you very much." His type was currently sitting across from him, studiously avoiding looking at him. He looked up at the ceiling, "I wish I could slug Lucius, just one good right hook into that smarmy face. Fucking nosy twat."

"You can ask Hermione how it's done." Remus sobered slightly, his smile sliding off his face. "It wouldn't have mattered though, even if Malfoy hadn't seen and reported me, I wouldn't have been allowed to stay teaching anyway. Dumbledore wanted me gone and that's that."

"We'll figure out a way to cut those strings Remus, I promise you. I'm also cursing the fact that I can't request an Auror team to 12 Grimmauld Place to clear it of the dark wards so I can renovate the bloody house. Maybe I should just clear the library out and raze it to the ground then build a new house on top of it. What do you think?"

"I don't know, it's your house. I've never been there remember." Remus picked his wand up and reheated his tea. "If the memories of the house will get to you then do it, tear it down and rebuild and if you want to renovate and start doing it now then you could always write the house over to Harry or Orion, they could call in the Aurors and then you could take over, while they are at school...Just a thought." Remus shrugged and sipped his tea.

Sirius smiled, "A good one. Black Manor is Orion's hands down and Harry needs a place to go if he decides to rebel and leave Privet Drive, if he can. So I'll give it to him. Added benefit it'll make it up to Harry whether or not the color blind bee can use it." He glared at the wall paper thinking of
the last time he'd heard from Dumbledore, the hints about the Order starting up again and the need for a place to meet and wasn't Grimmauld Place conveniently located? "Harry can say no and Dumbledore won't risk hurting Orion for it. He needs Harry's goodwill, he doesn't know he's already lost it so he won't do anything to make Harry doubt him right now. Bastard." He spat it out and had to restrain his impulse to hunt him down and gut him for the hundredth time.

"You won't hear me disagree with that." Remus' hatred for Dumbledore was overshadowed by few things. "I am certain he has an agenda with bringing the Triwizard Cup back as well, I don't know what yet but I am sure he's up to something." Remus sighed. "He hasn't said anything to Severus about it either."

The desire to spit out a casual insult towards Snape nearly burned his tongue but Sirius swallowed it, knowing it was mostly jealousy this time. He hated hearing Remus speak of Snape so well while he remained in the dog house, no matter that he deserved it. "We'll have to wait and see then. Damn I hate waiting like this, knowing something bad is up and not being able to do anything about it."

Remus snorted, he'd spent the last thirteen years just waiting and impotent to raise a finger. "Yeah, I do as well. Hopefully Severus will look out for them and tell us if he hears anything and Moody should know if something dangerous were afoot. You worked with him back in the day didn't you? What do you think of him?"

Sirius looked down at his tea, trying to dig out stubborn memories that had been eroded by dementor exposure, "He's a good Auror but...he's too good. Does that make any sense?" He lifted his gaze to Remus.

Remus met those achingly familiar and beloved gray eyes for about a second before sliding his own away. "Yes, it makes a lot of sense. Even as an Auror everything is not simply black and white, there's always shades of gray to consider." He tapped his quill against the parchment on the table. "Karkaroff is the Headmaster for Durmstrang, I remember him and if he was under the Imperius curse as he claimed he was then my inner beast is a bunny."

"That's true enough but I don't think he'll be hopping into the pool this time," Sirius' voice held amusement at Remus' comment, "He sold out dozens of Voldemort's most faithful and best soldiers. He's almost as hated in Azkaban as Harry."

"I suppose that's a small comfort but fear can keep a man in line as much if not better than honor." Remus rubbed his temples, feeling a headache starting to bloom. He hated being powerless, hated it so much.

"Hey," he spoke gently, "it'll come right in the end Remus. We'll find a way to make it turn out right, eventually."

"Perhaps, as long as Orion and Harry will be safe then that's all that matters. Sometimes there's not anything left to set right." Remus continued to rub his temples.

That hurt. Worse than the dementors, worse than anything he'd ever felt but he deserved it and he knew it. Still he couldn't help the soft sound of hurt that escaped him though he quickly stifled it and got to his feet, "I'm going to write my estate broker and get Grimmauld transferred to Harry. If you..." he'd been about to say if Remus needed him he could find him in his room but that was just it wasn't it? Remus didn't want him much less need him, "never mind." He fled the kitchen.

"Bloody fucking hell." Remus dropped his head onto the table and continued to curse to himself. That sound, it cut through him, stinging worse than any physical wound. He didn't want to hurt Sirius, of course he didn't. He loved the bugger. He didn't want to even any scores or hurt Sirius in
any way. He just couldn't go back to what they'd had, it hadn't been healthy to begin with and he was so, so scared that if he let Sirius in again things would be the same again. He couldn't live like that, not now. He needed more than that.

In his room Sirius finished penning the letter to his broker then rested his head in his hands. He wanted Remus back so badly, needed him, but he knew and understood it would, could and should never be as it was before. He knew that he needed to truly be there for Remus, to give as much as was given. Before it had been skewed, Remus needing so much from him but getting only scraps because he'd been too selfish, too childish to share all of himself, and he'd taken all Remus had to give.

He was changing, had changed, but even he couldn't trust himself not to fuck up again and if he couldn't trust himself, how could Remus trust him? He wished there was some spell that would keep him from...his head lifted. He couldn't make an Unbreakable Vow, Remus would kick his arse if he did, but maybe there was something else. A spell that would bind a promise and give him a sharp reminder of when he was about to break that promise. He scribbled a quick letter off to Harry's Hermione, knowing from what he'd heard that she was the most likely to be able to find something, and transformed to deliver it to the owl post station since he'd just sent off his and wouldn't 'borrow' Remus' in case the other man needed the owl.

Hermione sat in the common room, reading and rereading the letter Harry's godfather had sent to her. She didn't think a spell like that was impossible and she could see why Sirius wanted to explore something like that but part of her became sad as she read the letter. Having to get a spell to remind yourself not to bollocks up in the first place was sad to her.

She knew what Azkaban had done to Sirius and his memory but still... She shifted and pulled her feet up beneath her and nibbled at her lip as she started to think about what kind of spell you could modify to make one like Sirius wanted.

Harry staggered into the common room, his head pounding from the mental effort Snape had put him through, his body aching from the start of helping to harvest the Basilisk that Snape had also had him do, and he practically melted into the couch next to Hermione. "I know that look. What's happened?"

Hermione handed the letter to Harry without a word and shifted so she could rub his temples and scalp, trying to ease his headache a little. She knew how hard his lessons with Snape were and she admired him for keeping up with it even though he was hurt and exhausted after every visit to Snape's office.

Harry murmured a thank you to her then read the letter and sighed, "I'm not surprised really. He's buggered up too many times to trust himself Hermione. The prank on Snape, believing Remus was the spy, then after getting out of Azkaban...I wouldn't trust myself either if I were him."

"I do understand and I had just started to puzzle on what spell to modify. Of course I will help him Harry, you know that. I like Sirius and I believe he and Remus belong together. I would have helped him anyway though because he's important to you." Her fingers slid down to rub and press at his neck and shoulders, working to ease the tension there.

Harry made a soft moan, "Merlin, I'd say you have magic fingers Hermione but it'd be a horrible pun. They do belong together. Remus may not want to acknowledge the wolf in him to that degree but wolves and werewolves mate for life. Sirius is it for him and I think that reciprocated." He squeezed her wrist, "And I know you'd help regardless and it's very much appreciated."
"Harry you have more knots than a knotted carpet, it feels as if you have pebbles beneath your skin." She rubbed and squeezed and stretched to the best of her ability. "I'm thinking a modified compulsion spell would be best. I can bind the promise so that every time Sirius is about to break it he'll feel a snap...You know, like the rubberband around your wrist sort of thing. I'm not doing anything that will cause serious pain...Orion would skin me if I hurt his Papa."

Harry grinned at her, "Actually in keeping with Snuffles, why not have the warning feel more like a newspaper whapping the nose?" He groaned as she loosened a particularly painful knot, "Snape needs me to help him render the bloody thing or he can't touch it. That skin is bloody heavy and hard to peel off."

"Can't you do it magically? With your wand?" Hermione wrinkled her nose at the image Harry had put in her brain. "I would offer to help but I think Snape would turn his skinning knives on me if I sicked up all over the Basilisk." She pressed her thumbs on either side of his spine, working through the muscles there.

He shook his head, "No, just like a dragon, magic doesn't work on a basilisk, dead or alive. It's all manual labor. Plus, according to Snape, magic used to render a corpse messes with the magic inherent in the pieces so they don't work right in potions and that's what the blasted thing is worth for mostly, potions. The fangs have some use as swords or daggers and the hide once processed to hell and back is good leather but other than that, and a downright evil poison if you want to get down to it, it's all potion ingredients. Snape advised me to keep some of the venom for myself as well as a fang or two and some of the hide to be processed but the rest to be sold, after he gets his cut for the rendering." Harry grunted at a painful knot being manipulated loose, "I actually don't begrudge him his cut, not with all he's doing to teach me Occlumency and the fact that he'd happily render the thing by himself if magic would let him."

He sighed as his muscles finally gave way to her hands and loosened, "I managed to more than block him today, I actually pushed past his blocks while trying to shove him out...Mione my dad was a twat."

Hermione's hands faltered and fell away from their massaging, she was all but finished anyway. "What do you mean Harry? What did you see in Snape's mind? We know he hated your father so maybe whatever you saw is colored by that." She didn't know what she was talking about but as always if Harry felt bad she wanted to do all she could to comfort in some way.

Harry shook his head, "No it wasn't." He turned back around, facing her, "Dad...well Snape was just sitting under a tree minding his own business, reading a book and then my dad and the others come along and just start bullying him. He tried to defend himself but it was four on one. Dad hung him upside down and bloody pantsed him in front of the entire school. It was like watching Malfoy polyjuiced as a brown eyed me." He plucked at his shoe strings absently, "Course when someone did try to help Snape didn't exactly react nicely but...well I can almost understand it, except for what he called her. I mean his pride was shot to pieces and then only after he'd been humiliated someone steps up to help? I'd probably have snapped too." He shook his head, "Still not a Snape fan but I'm starting to see where he's coming from."

"I'm not trying to defend anyone or anything like that Harry but no one is perfect. This was one memory and maybe Snape gave as good as he got. It's not right with four on one and what they did to Snape was horrible." Hermione fiddled with a frizzy curl as she tried to explain her thoughts. "Your Dad might have been a twat, worst case really as bad as Malfoy but he must have changed, grown up from the way people speak of him and I don't mean just his friends. I have no idea what kind of man he was but you are part of him so I'm saying that he can't have been that bad. He was your father and he loved you."
"Yeah I know, it's just...weird to see Snape as a victim and not the almighty evil bastard." He watched her lips twitch, "I know people grow up and mature and I figure Mum wouldn't have taken up with him if he wasn't a good man so he must have gotten better. So h-" he broke off as Ron clambered into the common room, red in the face and laughing.

"Oh mate you missed it! It was glorious!"

Hermione looked at Ron with wide eyes, the redhead was actually laughing so hard tears were running down his face. "Missed what Ron?" Either it was something really funny or really stupid that only Ron found funny, like the time Seamus had farted 'God Save the Queen'.

"Moody turned Malfoy into a ferret!" Ron made his way over to them, collapsing on the floor in front of the couch. "He tried to hex someone in the back and zap! There was a pure white ferret Moody was making bounce up and down. Well," he paused and scrunched up his face, "not really bounce more like levitate then drop."

"What?" Hermione's eyes grew even larger. "Moody can't do that! It's not allowed for teachers to transfigure a student into anything, especially not an animal." She was shocked...And sad she had missed it because Malfoy the floating ferret would have been a sight to see. "Levitate and drop, he didn't hurt Malfoy did he?" Hermione couldn't believe she was actually asking that, showing concern for king twat Malfoy of all people.

Ron couldn't believe it either from the look he gave her but he shook his head, "Don't think so. McGonagall came over, looked blazing mad too after she heard the ferret was Malfoy, and turned him back, not before he ran down Goyle's trousers trying to escape Moody though. Malfoy the incredible bouncing ferret."

Harry had to snort at that though it made him a bit worried. First there was that moment with Malfoy at the end of last year and then there was the fact that Moody had even gone that far. "I wouldn't wish what's in Goyle's trousers on anyone Ron, not even Malfoy. It's funny that he got turned into a ferret but..."

"But for a Professor, a professional Auror to do something like that without hesitation, for laughs...I don't like it. And no Ron, I'm not defending Malfoy here, I would feel the same regardless of the student." Hermione didn't know if she managed to convey the worry she felt properly. "Remus would never do something like that."

Ron flicked a tassel on the edge of the couch, his hilarity fading as he thought about it, "Yeah you're right. I was caught up in the fact that Malfoy was getting a little back but for an adult wizard to do that to a student...it's unstable." He sighed and leaned his head back to look at them, "Why is it Dumbledore usually hires nutters? You know other than the reason we already know about."

To most they'd think Ron meant that no one else would take the job but Harry knew Ron was talking about Dumbledore's manipulations, "I don't know Ron but I'm thinking we need to be very very careful around Moody."

Hermione nodded. "Something's off about him. It was the same in the class with those bloody unforgivables. It was like he enjoyed your fear of spiders Ron and Neville's pain. Moody was an Auror with Neville's parents, he knew what happened to them and still he didn't stop with his demonstration."

Ron scowled being reminded of that, "Plus pulling the Imperious on Harry. I thought Moody was going to pop a blood vessel when you shook it off. You're right, we need to keep an eye on that nutter. Turn his constant vigilance against him."
Harry nodded, "Agreed." He stretched his neck, "Alright then I'd best get to my homework, what about you Ron?"

"I've just got the Muggles Studies essay to do actually," Ron had followed Harry's example and dropped Divination, choosing Muggle Studies since he had his eye on being an Auror and he'd need to move easily in the muggle world for that. Not one like Mad Eye though. "After we sneak down to visit Myrtle?"

"Alright then," Harry pulled out his books, some parchment, and started on his Crystal Theory essay about the magical benefits of clear quartz.
Chapter 13

Harry saw Malfoy looking like someone was making him suck on a lemon as they all were stood outside waiting for the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang delegations to arrive. He caught sight of Orion, bouncing as usual and waved at him.

Orion waved back happily with both hands over his head and a wide grin. He missed Harry and the others a bit, school keeping him busier this year and knowing that Harry was even busier. He had his own friends of course, first and foremost Dennis but he couldn't talk to them like he could with Harry, Ron and Hermione, they knew about his parents and their situation. Dennis still didn't know Remus was his Dad. He turned his head forward again, waiting for the other school delegations to come. It was all so exciting and he couldn't wait to see how the students from the other schools were.

Harry watched as the ship rose from the lake and the large carriage pulled by the huge winged horses landed with a clatter and a thud and he couldn't help but think that had to have been uncomfortable for the students inside. His brows went all the way up when the hugely tall woman emerged from the carriage. He followed the lead of everyone as they all applauded and listened as she exchanged pleasantries with Dumbledore, marveling that there was actually someone out there who could match Hagrid in size. Then his attention was caught by the blue robed students shivering behind her.

Ron murmured, "I guess no one warned them about the weather here this time of year."

Hermione shook her head. "Ridiculous, wearing silk robes for school. They can't protect against anything really." She turned her head toward the ship as the Headmaster and students made their way off of it. "These students were clad in wool and fur. Much more sensible clothing. Hey...Isnt that the flying chap? From the Cup?"

Harry had poked her in the side at the comment on the Beauxbatons students robes but now his attention snapped to the Durmstrang students as Ron looked scandalized at Hermione.

"Flying chap? Hermione that's [i]Krum[/i], the best seeker ever, aside from Harry."

Harry snorted, "I've a long long way to go before I can get that good Ron." He watched the Durmstrang students file past, noting that Viktor Krum didn't seem too keen on his Headmaster's fawning and he didn't blame him one little bit. Soon they all were seated in the Great Hall, the Beaubatons students sitting with the Ravenclaws and Durmstrang with Slytherin. He had to smirk when Krum bypassed Malfoy's simpering offer to sit next to Orion instead, who beamed and shook the Quidditch star's hand before starting one of his mile a minute rambles.

Hermione had to smile at Orion too, Quidditch star or not, Krum would certainly get his ears talked off. "I didn't mean anything bad by calling him a flying chap, I couldn't remember his name, that's all." She was happy to note that Krum seemed to take Orion's chatterings with good humor and that he answered the boy's millions of questions with an easy going temper. "I didn't know he was young enough to still be in school, I thought he was older."

Ron watched Orion with Krum, a little envious but more amused than anything, especially when Orion rolled his eyes at Malfoy's glare and launched into what was obviously the story of Malfoy's ferret moment. "It's his last year, he'll graduate and according to the papers he'll be playing professional Quidditch full time."
Harry's lips twitched at Malfoy's red face and was glad to see that Krum didn't brush Orion off or treat him like an annoying little boy. That made him worth more in his eyes than catching all the snitches in the world. He outright grinned when Orion caught his eye and waved widely. He gave him a little salute back and nodded when he mouthed a request to hang out that weekend.

Seeing that Orion was fine and that Krum wasn't going to say or do anything stupid toward him Hermione let her eyes travel away from them. Malfoy, was red faced and looked embarrassed, humiliated and strangely enough almost desperate. Hermione didn't know what to think about that. The other students from Durmstrang was mingling well with the Slytherins as it looked, eating and talking.

Her gaze went over to the Ravenclaw table and the visitors sitting there. She hadn't been really fair to them when they showed up, she had to admit that to herself. Beauxbaton was located somewhere in the south of France and of course the climate was completely different there. Hermione hoped she would get to speak to both them and the Durmstrang students. Get to learn from them, what their customs and schooling was like.

Looking up at the Head Table she noticed that Snape didn't look at all thrilled at having been seated next to Headmaster Karkaroff, who wouldn't stop whispering in Snape's ear from the look of things. "Some history between those two, do you think?" She elbowed Harry in the side gently to get his attention.

He looked up to the Head Table and eyed Snape and Karkaroff before murmuring, "Oh yeah. Snape looks like he's swallowed a lemon." He didn't pay much attention to Dumbledore's speech, or the girl who laughed at the comfortable remark. When Hermione hissed about that he reached over and pat her hand, "They might have been made to come, you never know," he eyes flicked to Dumbledore, "what their Headmistress is like. Of course if it's purely by volunteering I'm with you, Boo, Hiss."

"Don't try and make me reasonable when I want to be petty." Hermione complained but grinned at him. Harry was right, she didn't know anything about the other students or if they even wanted to be here at all. "It's still rude to laugh out loud though, you won't sway me on that. I didn't laugh at their carriage though it looks like a grand onion." Deep, deep down Hermione could admit to herself that there was a tiny stab of jealousy at the bottom of her dislike. The girl who had laughed was probably the most beautiful girl she'd ever seen and it made her all too aware that she was...Not. It was highly unfair on her part, she knew that but couldn't really help herself.

Ron had to snicker, "Ooooh you get snotty when you want to be petty. Harry we have to expose her to the Beauxbatons lot more if this is the result. She's not perfect and it's too amazing to see."

Harry moved just a bit so Hermione could enact whatever revenge she wished on Ron just as Dumbledore's speech ended and the tables filled, new dishes that were obviously foreign among the traditional English fare.

Hermione had gotten her revenge, she was rather pleased with the hex that had left Ron's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, although she released it so he could eat. She wasn't so cruel as to keep Ron from his food. She was delighted at the foreign food and tried a spicy sort of red beet soup before moving on to the bouillabaisse, she'd eaten that a lot in France and she loved shellfish. Hermione rolled her eyes at Ron's suspicious looks. "Oh just try it, I promise it's good and it won't kill you to try something new."

Harry's lips twitched as Ron poked at it and he dished up some different foods of his own, "Never thought I'd see the day our Ron was reluctant to eat something." His eyes laughed into Hermione's, a funny tickle flickering through the back of his head that was dismissed almost as fast as it was
"You're a berk you are." Ron shoved Harry's shoulder then got a small portion of the stew and what looked like a pie that had been dipped in a puce color before dishing up his usual favorite.

"Oh please Ron, you're not in a position to call anyone else a berk." Hermione looked away from Harry and toward Ron. Her cheeks felt hot and she didn't even know why. She leaned in to pull on a tress of red hair to soften the sting of her words. "I'm proud of you for trying though Ron and if it's not to your taste then just leave it and eat the food you like."

"The pie stuff's not bad actually, I'm skeptical about the stew." He mumbled around a mouthful of the pie.

Harry had gotten a bit of that and nibbled on a bit of shellfish chunk from it thoughtfully before swallowing, "Ron please, for my appetite and Hermione's please, don't speak with your mouth full." He saw Hagrid come in and smiled, calling out, "Skrewts alright there Hagrid?"

"Thravin!"

"I'll say," Ron swallowed and eyed Hagrid's bandaged fingers, "think they tried to eat his hands?" He felt a tap on his shoulder and half turned, going red and almost choking on air when he saw the prettiest girl he'd ever seen standing there behind him, older and way, way out of his league but Merlin she was pretty.

Harry hung his head at Ron's stupefied look as the Beauxbaton student asked for the bouillabaisse. He picked up the dish as Ron seemed incapable of speech and held it out to her, "Here, have it."

The girl or young woman said a soft thank you and whipped around, white blonde hair flowing down her back as she walked back to the Ravenclaw table.

Hermione watched as Ron turned pale and red and pale again and she wanted to tease him, she really, really did but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Not when it looked as if he had difficulties even breathing. She pat him on his hand and turned to watch as another man lost his head over a woman. Seeing Hagrid blush scarlet and shoot the Beauxbatons Headmistress shy, longing looks was truly a sight to see.

Ron shook his head and hissed, "I think she's a veela!"

Harry glanced at the girl again and made a considering hum before turning back to the table, "Maybe, she's got the hair for it, but I don't see how it matters except if she makes it into the Tournament it might give her an edge if she can toss a fireball."

"According to the rules I don't think she would be allowed to use her Veela powers if she would have any and...Oh." Hermione caught Harry's eyes and realized that he wasn't serious. She scoffed when Ron went on about allure though. "Why would you be the only one affected then Ron? I seriously doubt that she's trying to seduce you by asking for the shellfish stew." As before Hermione couldn't help but notice that the girl was exceptionally pretty but as she sought her out at the Ravenclaw table she also saw she was sitting a bit away from the others, she looked somewhat lonely to be honest.

Hermione wasn't a Ravenclaw and she certainly wasn't pretty but she was a Gryffindor and making a decision she got up from her seat and walked over to the Ravenclaw table. Introducing herself in French to the pretty girl and asking her how she liked the stay so far. She couldn't be more than rejected she supposed and if that happened it wouldn't be the first time.
Harry watched as shocked surprise flickered over the blond girl's face before he saw her respond animatedly and smiled before returning to his food.

Fleur Delacour was not in a particularly pleasant mood having been 'requested' by the Veela council to attend for the Triwizard Tournament so she could smooth things over from the incident at the World Cup. If a Veela blood was even entered that would be excellent publicity. But still she did not want to be here, she would much rather be back in France helping her little sister through the transition of losing friends by the dozen as she began to come into her powers. The looks from the Hogwarts students were not helping her mood either. The boys gawking, the girls petty, jealous staring and the whispers she could hear about veela all made her want to turn and flee. The only bright spot so far was that, when the bouillabaisse at this table ran out before she could get any and she went over to the red and gold table, the dark haired boy had handed it over without blinking or staring or anything she'd have expected from any boy his age.

A voice caught her attention though and she turned to see the bushy haired girl who'd been sitting beside the boy who'd handed her the stew. She blinked in surprise as she was asked in French how the stay was so far. Here was a girl, about fifteen if she was right, not traditionally pretty though if her hair could be tamed and the teeth corrected she'd have a unique beauty but still nothing close to what Fleur knew was her own looks and she was not only speaking to her but asking how she was? No one did that. No girl at least. They were always so caught up in their petty jealousies that they forgot that Fleur had feelings and never did anything against them. She gave the brunette witch a tentative smile and replied, in French as well since she could better express herself that way, "Fleur Delacour, pleased to meet you. The countryside is very beautiful, if very cold. We were not warned of the weather but by tomorrow we should have better robes for the weather. I think," she glanced around at the other students being treated well by the Hogwarts people, "the others here seem very nice as well so I hope I will come to make good friends among the English."

Ron watched Hermione and the blond he knew had to be veela exchange pleasantries, "Well would you look at that Harry. I'll never understand girls."

"I don't think we have to understand them, just appreciate them."

Hermione smiled and sat down on an empty spot next to Fleur as she had introduced herself. "Oh I'm sure you'll make plenty of friends, we aren't quite as daunting as we may seem at first glance. Just a bit reserved perhaps, the stiff upper lip of the British and all that nonsense. I for one are happy you're here and I look forward to getting to know you and learn much more." She looked at Fleur's thin robes again. "If you need a thicker robes or anything at all until you've gotten the thicker clothes you need you are more than welcome to borrow some...I'm sure a few simple spells can take care of any size differences. Oh and please borrow a blanket at least, the nights are cold, even in the dorm rooms."

"Thank you for the advice and the offer to borrow a thicker robe. I will tell Madame Maxime about the blankets but she told us she already had thicker robes prepared," here she wrinkled her nose, "Apparently she wanted to have our normal robes on display for the first day."

"Wanted to make the best kind of impression perhaps, you should have seen the number of lipglosses, hair trinkets and ghastly jewelry that were confiscated here before you arrived." Hermione rolled her eyes. "I understand wanting to look nice, there's nothing wrong with that but trying to wear a flower bigger than your head on your collar is going overboard...I do fear it will only get worse now that they have spotted the celebrity from Durmstang." It was surprisingly easy to talk to Fleur and Hermione wanted to kick herself for having thought a single bad thing about the girl before even speaking to her.
Fleur laughed, this time the sound utterly delighted and much more pleasant, "I know! I feel for Mr. Krum to have so many fawning over you yet not really knowing who you are. Unfortunately I fear a few of my own fellow students might join in the silly bird display with fripperies far too large and bright. At least he seems to have found someone here who is unphased by his fame," she looked at the young boy who'd tapped Viktor on the nose with a soup spoon and left a dot of bouillabaisse on the end of the hook and giggled as the Quidditch star only wiped it off with a hidden smile and the little boy laughed.

Hermione looked over at the Slytherin table too and met the dark eyes of Viktor Krum for a second before she moved hers to Orion. "Orion couldn't care less about fame, not sure he'll be the best influence on Mr. Krum though, might lead him into mischief." Hermione's voice was filled with fondness though, it was absolutely impossible to dislike Orion. "I don't want to impose or intrude on your supper time but you are more than welcome to come meet my friends, you met Harry shortly at the table and Ron...Well once he find the use of his tongue again he's not that bad...I'm rather fond of him."

Fleur waved Ron's tongue tiedness off, "That is a common affliction around me I am afraid. An inherited issue from my Grandmother. If they are your friends I would very much like to get to know them."

Harry looked up from his cup of pumpkin juice to see Ron's eyes nearly bugging out, "Er...what's wrong?"

Ron gripped Harry's sleeved and hissed, "Hermione's bringing her over here!"

Harry glanced over, seeing Hermione and the blond girl walking towards them, "Well then breathe, don't swallow your tongue, and remember what your Mum would do if she saw you drooling like you were before at the Beauxbatons girl."

"Blimey she'd twist my ear off." Ron rubbed an ear and managed to gather enough control to only turn red this time as the French girl curtseyed.

"Bonjour, I am Fleur Delacour."

Harry smiled and offered his hand, "Nice to meet you Miss Delacour, I'm Harry, Harry Potter." He saw the quick flick up to his scar then felt a bit relieved when it was just a quick glance and not a stare, as if she was just confirming his identity.

Fleur took his hand, surprised by who he was but, having dealt with gawkers her entire life she avoided the trap of doing the same to him, "Pleased to meet you 'Arry."

Hermione shoved on Ron to make him introduce himself too and then so he would shuffle aside a bit so that Fleur had room to sit while she sat down on the other side of the table. She was thankful when both Harry and Ron slid into easy conversation with Fleur and she hoped it made the girl feel welcome and more at home in a strange country far away from home.

Ron managed to stutter his way through the first bit and then grew more relaxed, finding his tongue, though he kept it clean and polite to the point that his mother would be proud. Right now he was describing the Skrewts to Fleur, "I really don't know why Hagrid had to breed those things but I really, really hope he never makes another batch."

Harry nodded, "They are kind of...horrifying. Really if Hagrid ever offers to show you something interesting, you probably don't want to see it. We love him but he's got a unique opinion on creatures."
Fleur's eyes were wide, "Eet sounds like eet oui."

Harry noticed Neville a little further down giving them furtive glances and waved him over, "I hope you don't mind meeting another of our friends, this is Neville Longbottom. Nev, meet Mademoiselle Fleur Delacour."

Neville gave her a shy smile, "H-hello, I hope you enjoy your visit here."

Fleur noticed that, rather than the usual gawking or drooling stutters, this boy seemed naturally shy and not too affected by her small amount of allure, similar to Harry, and she found the way his hair flopped over one eye quite a bit adorable, "Enchante Monsieur Longbottom. Eef ze rest of ze school ez as wonderful as you and your friends I am certain I will enjoy my visit."

Soon Ginny and the twins had come over as well and Hermione was thankful that even Fred and George seemed to behave. Ginny was questioning Fleur about Quidditch and what her favorite team was, if she liked flying and if the boys were anything to have in France.

Hermione was happy she'd had the courage to walk over and say hi, she was so blessed with friends now she'd almost forgotten how it felt to be lonely, an outsider. No one should feel like that, especially not in something that was supposed to be all about unity and togetherness.

Viktor Krum sent furtive glance after glance over to the Gryffindor table, surreptitiously studying the girl who'd reached out to the Beauxbatons veela. She was not a raving beauty but there was a sparkle to her, a life that interested him. The way she'd just looked at him then moved on spoke of not caring about fame and the way she'd approached the veela spoke of a good heart. He wondered what her name was.

"Are you looking at Harry? Because he doesn't like that very much, to be stared at." Orion asked as he followed his new friend's gaze to the Gryffindor table, he couldn't see what would be so interesting over there aside from Harry Potter. Viktor had been surprisingly nice and easy to talk to but if it came down to it then he would choose Harry every time.

Viktor shook his head, "No, de girl. Vat iz her name?" He looked at the charming child beside him. Young Orion was a refreshing change from the simpering idiots he normally dealt with and the belief that he was less of a flyer than Harry amused him.

"Girl? If you mean the blonde then I don't know, she's pretty though. The redhead is Ginny and the brunette is Hermione." Orion scratched his head looking a lot as his Sire as he did so. "Did any of them say anything to you?" Orion knew that neither Hermione or Ginny were the fangirl type but maybe there had been some misunderstanding.

"No dey didn't. I vas just curious about de girl dat brought de Beauxbatons student over to de table. Not many vould have bothered." He studied the brunette witch again, Hermione. It was a nice name though he'd probably have trouble pronouncing it.

"Oh that's just how Hermione is, she wouldn't leave anyone to be lonely if she can help it. She's really nice and really, really bright but she's afraid to fly." Orion said the last thing as if it was one of the worst things that could possibly happen to someone. Ever since he'd gotten his broom from Harry he wanted to spend every minute available in the air.

"Vell de air is not for everyvone. Some are scared of heights others of de lack of control." Viktor hid another smile at Orion, "It is good dat she is dat nice." He heard the muttered 'mudblood' from behind him and turned to glare at the blond Hogwarts boy who'd said it. He'd never liked that word and he liked even less the people who flung it around like a banner. After seeing the boy shrink..."
under his gaze he turned back to Orion, "More people should be dat nice."

"They should yes." Orion agreed and glared at Malfoy. "Better watch it ferret boy, your nose only just healed completely, I don't think she'd mind breaking it again." Orion knew that he had promised not to single Malfoy out anymore but it was so hard to do nothing when the git wouldn't stop being an arse of the highest degree. Besides, it was Malfoy's father who'd forced his Daddy away from school and from a job that Orion knew that he had loved.

Viktor actually chuckled, "She broke dat boy's nose?"

Orion nodded. "Right hook, straight to the face when he would stop spewing shite." He sighed wistfully. "I wish I'd seen it in person."

"Dat vould have been a sight yes," it was spoken in a tone of approval, "enough broken noses and he vill learn on his own not to let his mouth get ahead of his brain."

"Could work, if he has one. I'm still not sure about that." Orion shrugged with a grin. "So my friends...Do you want to meet them? They won't gawk at you, I promise."

Viktor opened his mouth to agree but just then the Hogwarts Headmaster stood and began explaining about the rules of the Tournament. He murmured to the boy, "Tomorrow if dey vould like to."

"Of course they'd like to, you're very nice you know." Orion shut up after his Uncle sent him a pointed look and he listened to the Headmaster explain the rules, or at least he pretended to listen. He really wasn't all that interested since he wasn't able to apply and wouldn't even if he could.

George was quite bored too, until he heard about the prize money. "Imagine what we could do with money like that brother, the things we could create."

Fred grinned, "Why Gred I do believe this is an opportunity not worth missing."

Ron snorted, "You're not seventeen yet though."

"When has a tiny little detail like that ever stopped us before Ronniekins? Rules are made to be broken and we break them better than anyone, don't we Forge?" No false modesty there, George only stated the truth.

"How on earth do you plan to bypass the age line Dumbledore spoke of?" Hermione was more intrigued that outraged, Merlin she was being corrupted by the company she kept.

"I suppose you'll find out when we succeed won't you Granger." George winked at her.

Ron snorted, "If you prats succeed. I'm going to laugh if you don't, fair warning."

Harry shook his head and tuned out Dumbledore's explanation about when the Goblet of Fire would render up the names. It didn't concern him as he had no intention of so much as trying. Let others risk their lives for once. He was not interested.

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Harry waited in the stands for Orion, broom beside him, talking to Hermione, Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Fleur as they waited for the boy.

"Ze veela do not prey on men as ze old tales say. We 'ave one mate and zat ez ze only man we lay
wiz. Ozzers 'oo get caught in ze allure are, 'ow do you say, collateral damage?"

"Some collateral damage but I do understand." Hermione nodded. "The tales probably come from
men unlucky enough not to have been chosen as a mate to begin with, sour grapes and all that."

Orion came bouncing up the stands, broom over his shoulder and with a taller form trailing behind
him. "Hello guys, I hope you don't mind but I told Viktor he could come, I wanted him to meet my
friends and not get stuck with Malfoy and crew."

Ron nearly fell off the stand but stopped himself from gushing at Harry's elbow in his ribs. "Er
well can't blame you for that one. The gorillas are not fun companions."

Harry shook his head and looked up at Viktor, "He's welcome of course Orion. Nice to meet you
Viktor, I'm Harry. This is Ron," he flicked his thumb at the redhead, "Neville, Fleur, Hermione,
and Ginny."

"Pleasure to meet you." Hermione held out her hand and shook his. "How are you liking Hogwarts
so far?" She ignored Ginny's excited bouncing in the background. Gin was probably more
Quidditch obsessed then her brother even and Hermione could image the storm of questions about
maneuvers and such she had for Krum.

Viktor's solemn face softened just a bit, "It is a good place from vat I haf seen. Vith good people."

Orion leaned close to Harry. "I thought he should see how a 'real' flyer moves." He whispered.

Harry laughed and ruffled Orion's hair, "You're biased. I've got a long, long way to go." He looked
at Krum, "I hope you don't mind, Orion and I like to fly when we've got the chance," he nodded at
Ron and Ginny. "They decided we needed to have a mini game, though the numbers look skewed
to me," he eyed Ron.

"We're working on Neville mate! Come on Nev, we need another keeper."

Neville shook his head lips twitching, "I don't think so. Why don't you just have everyone act like a
chaser for a while and play with individual scores?"

Viktor nodded, "Dat is a good idea. Fair and vorks best for a small number."

Ron grimaced, "Thanks Nev, I was hoping to avoid Ginny throwing the Quaffle at me. Girl's got
an arm like one of filibusters fireworks."

"Not my fault you've got spaghetti arms." Ginny crossed her arms and sent her brother a glare.
"Now quit complaining and get on your broom." She swung her own coltish leg over her brom and
hovered just over the stands, she loved flying and getting to play with both Harry and Krum was
like a dream come true.

Hermione looped her arm through Neville's and sat down. "Will you stay and keep me company?"

Fleur smiled, "Keep ze boz of us company?"

Nevilled blushed and looked down, "O-of course."

Harry chuckled as Ron rose in the air and hovered in front of the hoops then pat Neville on the
shoulder, "Take care of the ladies then Nev. Orion," He gestured up at the sky, grinning as the kid
whooped and kicked off before following suit.
Viktor smiled and rose on his own broom into the air. He didn't often get to play only for fun anymore so this was going to be enjoyable. He eyed Harry's manner on the broom and understood where Orion was coming from just from the way Harry sat the broom like a professional. Then his mind was caught up in the game and the fun of flying as they all started taking turns trying to score against Ron.

Orion's cackling laugh was heard across the Quidditch pitch as they zoomed back and forward across the sky, doing their best to outfly each other and score.

Hermione had to chuckle as she heard it, the boy loved to fly, that was for sure and he was good at it. If Orion decided to try out for seeker next year then Malfoy might have a problem keeping his position on the team, brooms or no brooms.

She spoke softly with Neville and Fleur as they watched the others fly. After a while the chaser game got old and Ginny yelled for them to release the Snitch so Hermione did as she was told and watched the tiny winged ball zoom away, quick as lightning.

Harry and Krum exchanged grins and soon they were all off after the snitch. Orion was good but very unseasoned on his broom and Ginny's broom just couldn't keep up with two Firebolts so soon it was just the two seekers after the little golden ball.

Harry zipped and zoomed, following the snitch with his eyes and instinct, a wide grin on his face as he ignored Krum's diversionary tactics and soon it was just an all out race, pure skill against skill.

Viktor had a similar grin on his face, surprised and pleased that this boy was actually pushing him in much the same way he was pushed in a professional game. Though this was without the tricks used during those games and Harry had some learning there to do. A little more seasoning and he knew the younger boy could easily out fly him in an instant.

None of them noticed that a crowd had gathered, watching Harry and Krum fly against each other and the visiting schools gaping at Harry, amazed that he was keeping up with Krum.

Ginny, Orion and Ron were hovering mid air, happy for the front row seats as Harry and Krum duked it out. Orion was whooping and cheering for Harry at the top of his lungs and flailing so hard he was almost falling off his broom.

Hermione was on her feet, she might not like flying but even she recognized brilliant broomsmanship when she saw it and the two boys in the air made flying into an artform. She wished she had the omnioculours Harry had bought for them at the World Cup so she could see them up close.

The crowd gathered gasped as both Krum and Harry touched the grass with their brooms before turning and soaring bright into the brilliant blue fall sky again. Hermione holding on to the railing of the bleachers and cheering Harry on. She hadn't seen a smile like that on his face in a long time and she was happy to see it now. A movement from underneath the bleachers on the other side of the pitch had her eyes narrowing, wondering if it was a threat but then she smiled as she saw the shape of a huge black dog. Looked as if Snuffles was here to watch his godson fly.

Sirius had actually come to see both his son and godson fly but right now his tail was going a mile a minute and he thought his chest was about to explode in pride as Harry looped, dove, spun and flew against Krum. He rather thought Krum would win, just due to experience, but Harry was giving the Bulgarian a workout by Merlin!
Harry looked over at Krum as they made one last shot for the snitch then concentrated on trying to get there first, though he was certain he wouldn't. The wind rushing past his ears and blowing his hair back was all he noticed aside from the tiny glint of gold.

Krum was flying with equal determination and abandon when all of a sudden a bird was there in front of him, forcing him to swerve out of the way, giving Harry just that tiny extra lead so that, for the first time in a long while, Viktor watched someone else's fingers close on the snitch.

Harry felt the winged gold ball smack into his palm and tightened his hand around it before he even realized what had happened as he slowed to a hovering stop. Then he registered the thunderous cheering and looked around to see almost all of the student body of Hogwarts as well as the visiting schools in the stands. Ginny was nearly falling off her broom cheering, Ron had fallen off his broom, close to the ground thankfully, Orion was loop de looping in celebration, he saw a wildly barking Grim at the bottom of the stands, McGonagall was leaning on the Gryffindor stands and dabbing at her eyes surreptitiously, and Hermione was actually jumping up in the stands, a sight that made him grin wide before he realized that he'd just caught the snitch flying against a professional and his jaw dropped. His gaze sought out Krum, just a meter away, and he saw amusement glinting in the older boy's eyes.

"Vell done." Viktor saluted Harry, "Ve should land so your friends can congratulate you."

"I- w- how in the world? You were right on me, just ahead, what happened?"

Viktor pointed at a pigeon flying away, his lips twitching.

Harry looked at the bird, then back at Krum, then he burst out laughing as they drifted down to the ground. Once he touched down he gripped Viktor's arm in a handshake and said, "Bloody pigeon."

Orion tumbled off his broom and was on Harry with a shriek, hugging him and clapping him on the back. "You were both absolutely brilliant, like buggering brilliant but see Harry, I told you you're the best flyer ever!" He laughed and let go of Harry only to dance in place like a loon.

Hermione was making her way down the bleachers and over the pitch, which wasn't easy due to all the people who'd gathered to watch. She heard the girls from Beauxbaton ask just who the dark haired boy who'd beaten Krum was as they eyed him with intent and she felt like rolling her eyes. It looked as if Harry had won himself some more admirers.

Finally she reached the two seekers, hugging Harry and congratulating him. "You flew fantastically, the both of you." Hermione turned to Krum. "Bad luck about the pigeon, still it was a pleasure watching the two of you fly."

Viktor nodded at her, admiring the way her eyes sparkled, "Pigeons happen and it vas an honor and privilege to fly against such a talent."

Harry flushed at the compliment though his grin didn't fade, "Likewise," he looked around the filled stands as Ron and Ginny came over and oofed as he was nearly tackled to the ground by Ginny, "When'd the stands fill up?"

"Somewhere between that death dive and the triple loop you made." Ginny answered hanging off Harry's shoulder and grinning broadly. "Didn't you even noticed you'd attracted a crowd?"

"Why would he? His mind was on the game Ginny." Orion was still bouncing madly before rushing off to pet the Grim still sitting under the bleachers.

Harry blushed brighter, "I don't really notice the crowds once I'm on a broom. They're just...part of
the scenery for the most part Gin."

Ron was grinning, "You're mental mate but that was incredible! I don't think anything we'll see during the tournament is going to top that, not for me."

Fleur had joined them, Neville trailing behind her and the Weasley Twins were a few paced back grinning like loons. "Oui, zat will be ‘ard to top."

"You should have told us you were planning this mate," George slung an arm around his shoulders. "We've could've made a killing taking bets you know."

"Really George." Hermione huffed. "It's not like this was planned at all."

"Still the world will know." George pointed off the side of the pitch. "Reporters, they’re here for the champion ceremony tonight but they looked mighty pleased already don't you think?"

Harry grimaced, "Oh joy."

Ron pat Harry on the shoulder, "You don't have to talk to them mate."

"It is better iv you do not even," Viktor shifted so Harry was blocked from photographer view, giving the veela a nod when she did the same, "dey can not write about you iv you do not speak to dem villingly. Iv dey ask a question and you say no comment dey must not publish anyding but dat and de bare bones ov vat happened. To do more ven a minor refuses to speak to dem is illegal."

"Mr. Krum is right, as long as you don't agree to talk to them they can't write anything other than the basics of what happened." Hermione agreed and glared at the blonde haired witch, stretching her neck like a vulture trying to get her eyes on Harry. "I suppose you had to learn the hard way Mr. Krum." As a Quidditch star the press must hound the poor man.

"Da, but I learn quickly."

Ginny shook her head, standing next to Neville. "I still can't believe they let reporters roam Hogwarts grounds freely. It's not just the tournament...We, all the students, we live our lives here and it seem intrusive to me."

Neville nodded, "It is intrusive. Gran wanted to send a Howler about it but didn't in the end. We'll just have to deal with it for this year."

Harry squared his shoulders, "Well might as well face the horde and get inside then." He saw Snuffles trotting off from Orion and walked over to the boy, ruffling his hair, "Come on, I think there are some pumpkin pasties with our names on them don't you?" He ignored the shouted questions and the blond witch sidling closer as his friends, old and brand new, came up behind him.

"Yeah, that'd be great." Orion watched Snuffles slink away, standing so no reporter would see him not that they knew about his animagus form but still. Seeing Snuffles made him realize how much he missed him and his Dad. Orion loved school and his friends but he did miss his Dad. "Thank you for spending time with me today, I loved watching you fly."

The group flanked Harry and Orion so they were surrounded and walked quite hurriedly toward the castle where they could find privacy more easily.

Harry kept a hand on Orion's shoulder, "Hey you're my honorary little brother, it's no hardship to spend time with you."
Orion flashed him a grateful smile.

Fred moved to the front of the group, "What do you lot say we take this gathering to the kitchens. Much more private and fun in there."

"And the ability to choose what you want to nibble on." George added. "Come on, let's go tickle a pear."

They walked inside and managed to give both reporters and admirers the slip amongst students and hallways and ended up in the kitchens where they could relax knowing no one was watching them.

Fleur nibbled on her millefeuille in joy, "So 'Arry 'oo do you zink will be chozen as 'ogwarts' champion?"

He shrugged, "I'm not really sure. Not Marcus Flint for sure though. He's..."

Ron snorted and said it for Harry, who he knew was trying to be nice, "He's thicker than plum pudding and slower than a snail. My bet is on Diggory. He's a Hufflepuff, practically embodies the whole fairness in spirit thing, and according to her," he poked Hermione's shoulder teasingly, "he's bright and he's the Hufflepuff seeker so he's definitely fast on his feet."

"He is bright, not just according to me. Cedric Diggory has top marks and he's a prefect." Hermione spoke up, poking Ron back.

"It doesn't hurt that he's bloody gorgeous either..." Ginny looked around the table, making a face at her brothers disgusted grimaces. "Well he is, just saying."

Harry pat her hand, "We'll take your word. I don't swing that way so I can't offer an opinion."

Fred wrinkled his nose, "He's well looking enough but we don't like hearing that our baby sister-"

"Is ogling blokes much too old for her. There's a lot of big bad wolves out there and you're so ickle." George's expression matched his twin's.

"I'm thirteen!" Ginny huffed angrily. "It's not like I hide in corners flashing my goods and snogging any bloke that passes. I have eyes, I can say a boy is pretty just like I can see and say that Fleur is bloody gorgeous too. It doesn't have to mean anything more than that."

Fleur chuckled, "Merci cherie."

Ron leaned his head on Hermione's shoulder, "I don't need to hear this. I just want to believe that my little sister doesn't plan to date or ogle anyone until she's thirty. Let me keep my illusions until she does get a boyfriend please?"

"There, there." Hermione petted Ron with a smile. "She's completely innocent and still thinks all boys are yucky and full of germs. Is that what you want to hear?"

Ginny snorted. "You are a year older Ron, a year...I don't think you're in a position to say anything at all."

"Hush you, a year is an eternity at fourteen." Ron lifted his head, "And thank you Hermione, for indulging me, unlike someone I could name."

Harry snorted, "You'll be moaning and griping about Ginny ogling even when she's thirty. That's how it's supposed to work."
Fred grinned, "Too right Harry!"

"Isn't that wonderful Gin-Gin, you'll always be our innocent ickle baby sister and anyone at all you try to date will have to be researched and approved by your darling, caring, amazing older brothers?" George reached out and pulled on her hair.

"Dear Morgana, just kill me now and spare me the torture." Ginny dropped her head on the table with a mourning sigh.

Neville picked at a nut in his brownie, "You c-could always go to your Mum for back up Ginny."

"You would think so yes." Ginny looked up and smiled at Neville. "Sadly she's even worse than my brothers here. If she had her choice I would be a nun until she has chosen the husband that's right for me and who will give her the best grandchildren. Mum met the man of her dreams in school and is under the delusion that everyone's first love will be their only love."

"It would be nice if that was true," Harry chuckled, "but even I, hopeless as I am, know it's not."

Ron pushed a nut around the table and muttered softly, "Dad would back her up." He flushed at the looks he got, "What?! Just because I want to ignore that she's growing up doesn't mean I don't want her to be happy. If ogling Diggory makes her happy then, so long as I don't have to hear about it, I'm fine with it."

"Oh for goodness sake." Ginny sighed. "Thank you Ron for your support but I can't see why we're even having this conversation. I have never ogled Cedric. The boy is pretty, that's just how it is. Look at Orion, that boy is pretty too and no...I'm not ogling you Orion. Don't worry. I made a simple observation and believe me I am regretting it now."

Orion's eyes were wide but he nodded and reached for another cauldron cake. Pretty? Girls were pretty. Orion tried to decide if he should be offended or not.

Fred grinned and nicked a cookie, "Yeah but you think Harry's pretty too and you wound up with your elbow-"

Before George could open up to finish his brother's sentence as usual Ginny was there glaring death at both of them. "Another word and it will be my elbow in your [i]faces[/i]. Yes Harry is pretty...Draco Malfoy is very, very pretty and don't even get me started on Blaise Zabini. There are boys who are very nice to look at...Get over it."

"You think Malfoy is pretty?" Orion sounded absolutely shocked.

"He's a git but he's a pretty git yes." Ginny agreed.

"GINNY!" Ron looked scandalized, much to the amusement of everyone at the table, "I beg of you, please, please, please, please, please never say that in my earshot again. Ever...for all eternity."

Fred tapped his chin, "She's got a point though. The ferret is nice to look at innit he Georgie?"

George ran a finger down the length of his nose in consideration. "He really is yes, all blond and pale and no one can deny that he's fit."

Ginny tried her best not to giggle as Ron turned green.

Harry gave them an exasperated look, "You two are evil. Fit, pretty or not Malfoy is Malfoy and
until he pulls his head out I'd appreciate it if you don't completely break my best mate."

"Fine, fine." George raised his hands in surrender. "We'll play nice. You should ask yourself
tough little brother why you even care about Malfoy's looks."

"Please let us just change the subject before we scare our new friends away completely." Hermione begged.

Fleur laughed, "Zis ez not scaring me away. Eet ez refreshing to see."

Viktor nodded, "You are family. Not all by blood. It is special."

Ron nodded, "That's us, extended Weasleys abound. Once you get the jumper you're official, Nev
look for one this Christmas."

"Huh? Me?"

"Yup! Mum'll probably make it mmm," he tilted his head, "George what do you think yellow?"

"Hmm." George tilted his head to the side and watched Neville closely. "A warm sunshine yellow
would work nicely, you're right about that Forge."

Neville turned a flattering red, "B-b-but!"

Harry grinned, "No buts, you're our friend and part of the family now." He then turned the
conversation to Hagrid's love of all things large and dangerous, drawing Viktor and Fleur into it by
asking what sort of creatures were native to their homes.

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Sirius practically danced into the study, "Remus you'll never believe it!"

"Believe what?" Remus' stomach flipped at the sight of Sirius' smile, he hadn't smiled like that
for... Remus couldn't even remember how long. Something good must have happened. He turned
his in his chair so he faced Sirius fully, wanting to hear what the other man had to say.

He couldn't help it he had to go and perch on the arm of the chair Remus sat in, "Okay get this. Our
son and our godson, along with two Weasleys and Viktor Krum, decided to have some flying
practice then someone released the snitch. Orion gave it a good go but he's still got some seasoning
before he can chase a snitch and Ginny's broom was just outclassed so Harry and Krum were flying
against each other. I swear Remus you've never seen such flying and I haven't either. They were
almost evenly matched, Harry's got just that much natural talent!"

"That's brilliant, I wish I could have seen it." Remus grinned up at Sirius as he listened intently,
imagining Harry flying against Krum. "I know he's talented, I watched him play Quidditch last
year but to go up against Krum...That's incredible. Can you imagine James' pride, how he would
puff up and strut like a peacock? Who caught it then? The Snitch I mean."

Sirius wiggled like a dog when his master came home, "Harry, there was a pigeon involved but
Harry caught it. Oh yeah we'd have had to have called James Lucy for a bit he'd have been such a
peacock."

"Pigeon or no pigeon, I believe Harry could have caught it either way." Remus smiled brightly,
really wishing he could have been there to see it too. "Harry must have been so happy and I
imagine that our son was loud...He's been preaching about Harry's flying talent to the world since
last year."

"Oh he bellowed so loud the top boxes probably heard him." Sirius grinned at Remus, the excitement and happiness for Harry being added to at Remus' smile. Nothing had ever been more beautiful. "The twins were a little put out because Harry didn't warn them in time to get a betting pool going."

Remus snorted. "That sounds like Fred and George yes. You should have heard them bet at the World Cup, I actually think they won there now that I think about it. I'm sure pride overrides their betting urges though. Harry is practically their brother." Remus ran a hand through his hair. "This Krum guy then, did he take well to losing? He seemed rather...Fierce when he played for Bulgaria."

Sirius almost bounced, "He took it very well. I think Bambi's going to have a mentor in Quidditch this year," he jiggled his foot, "and he helped make a formation protecting Harry from the vultures of the media," he stuck out his tongue, "reporters, ugh."

Remus scrunched up his nose in dislike. "Couldn't agree with you more on that. It's folly letting reporters roam free among the students. If a reporter finds something juicy, you really think the students being underage are going to stop them from running with it?" He made a disgruntled sound. "I'm glad Krum seems decent though, Harry needs friends, real friends. Orion too."

"Our sprog has utterly charmed Bulgaria's star seeker and a French veela too, I don't think you have to worry about him making friends. As for the vultures, they might run with it but if they do they'll soon find themselves unemployed or sued to within an inch of their lives, especially with Hermione offering advice."

"You're right, I'm just over protective I suppose, remembering just the kind of damage the media can do," Remus smiled again. "I'm glad you told me about this and I'm glad it happened when you were there so you could see it." He looked down at his hands. "I miss them Padfoot, miss our boys." Remus wasn't even aware of using the old beloved nickname.

Sirius' heart gave a lurch at the name but he figured Remus didn't realized he'd used it so he didn't respond with Moony. His arms ached and his fingers tingled with the need to reach out and touch Remus to comfort him and he hated not being able to. "I know you do but we'll get to see Orion during the Hols and Harry'll pop by on Hogsmeade weekends, he promised."

"I know, I know it's how it's supposed to be, to let go a little and watch them grow up but it's so hard. I'm used to hearing Orion tell me all about his day, used to him grumbling when it's bedtime and used to looking in on him past midnight and tell him he really has to put his light out and sleep." Remus let out a weak chuckle. "It's so silly but if I'm not busy being Orion's Dad, I don't know who I am anymore."

"Remus John Lupin, brilliant translator, incredible former professor who should still bloody well be teaching and should absolutely at least write a few textbooks, clever of mind and quick of wit with a lovely mischievous streak that's normally hidden but wonderful when it comes out to play, endlessly patient, the best father a child could ask for, the best friend anyone could have, the best person I've ever known, and the strongest spirit I have ever had the privilege to encounter, that's who you are and it's just scratching the surface." It was said in a matter of fact voice though there was an edge of wistfulness as Sirius wished he dared mention the best and most giving lover imaginable that kept running through his head.

"Still got that gilded tongue I see." Remus said it with a smile though and reached up to run a lock of silky black hair through his fingers before letting go. "Now go shower, you smell like wet mutt,
I'll get the kettle going and you can tell me more about Harry's bout against Krum in detail."

"Yes sir!" Sirius bounced towards the shower, inside he was dancing and flailing and going 'He touched me! He touched me! He touched me!' in glee. It was a leap, a big one and even if Remus stepped back again it was still a moment that he would use to fuel all his determination to have a relationship with his Moony.
Harry sat comfortably in between Hermione and Ron, a smile on his face as the twins cut up and tried to coax Neville into joking with them. He looked over at Beauxbatons' delegation and saw Fleur smiling at them and returned it with a smile and a wave of his own then gave Krum over among the Durmstrang students a salute that was returned to him. He was feeling downright lazy and content and very little could ruin his mood right now, at least he believed so.

The Great Hall was buzzing with excitement, those who'd put their names into the Goblet felt nervous and eager to hear who would be chosen and Madam Pomfrey had finally managed to rid the twins of their meter long beards. Hermione thought Ron would never stop laughing as he saw it. Hermione really didn't care who was chosen, she would cheer for the Hogwarts champion who ever it turned out to be and if any of her new friends were chosen she would cheer for them to.

She took a sip of her pumpkin juice as the elaborate Goblet of Fire was brought to the center of the Hall, just in front of the Head Table and all three of the Headmasters walked up to stand next to it.

The same blonde reporter from before stood to the side of the Hall and whispered softly to her quick quotes quill as Dumbledore raised his arms and told everyone to quiet down, that the choices were about to be made.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled brightly, "Well it is almost time for the Goblet to make it's decision. I estimate it only needs one more minute. Now when the champions are called I ask them to come to the top of the Hall then go out that side door there," he pointed at the door, "Into the next chamber where they will receive instructions."

Harry leaned lazily back, murmuring to the twins then the Goblet sparked red flames and spat out a charred bit of parchment that Dumbledore caught.

"The champion for Durmstrang will be Viktor Krum!"

Viktor pumped his arm and got up to walk to the chamber the Hogwarts' headmaster had indicated. He would finally get the chance to show everyone that he was not just talented on a broom alone.

Orion hooted and clapped wildly as Viktor was chosen, next to Harry he really was an amazing flyer and Orion had no doubt he would do well in the Tournament.

Hermione clapped too, from the times she'd spoken to him she knew there was much more to him than the Quidditch star.

The applause died down and the Goblet sparked red again.

"The champion for Beauxbatons will be Fleur Delacour!"

Fleur stood up a bright smile on her face as she followed Viktor's path to the room off the Hall. She might not particularly want to be here but she would do her best and the whistles coming from Harry and his friends, knowing they weren't the lust driven whistles she was used to, made her feel confident that she might just win.

Soon a third parchment shot out and Dumbledore called out, "The champion for Hogwarts will be Cedric Diggory!"

The Hogwarts student body exploded into applause, even Ron despite his brief 'yuck' and Harry
started relaxing. The three champions had been chosen and now he could just sit back and watch them all compete and work on his plans to get strong enough to shake off Dumbledore.

Hermione smiled brightly and and almost felt sorry for Ron as Ginny leaned forward and whispered 'Yum' to him as she watched Cedric's bum as he walked into the side room. Ginny was just as wicked if not more so as her older brothers. This was nice, she was still suspicious about the reasons for bringing the Triwizard Tournament back but maybe, just maybe it could be fun to watch it from the sidelines, cheering the champions on. She'd just leaned close to Harry to ask him what he thought about the champions when the Goblet started to crackle and and multicolored sparks shot high into the air along with one more, slightly charred note.

Dumbledore caught it from the air and the whole Hall grew deathly silent.

"Harry Potter!"

Harry's jaw dropped, his face paled, though you couldn't tell with the dim lighting, and he dropped his head onto Hermione's shoulder, "Fuck my life."

Hermione wrapped her arms around him, not wanting to let him go up there. "I wish I could disagree but I can't. This is absolute bollocks!"

The Hall had erupted in whispers and every eye was on Harry. The reporters were whispering and scribbling furiously while Malfoy loudly exclaimed that his was just like Potter, attention whore, trying to take the glory away from the true Hogwarts champion. Hermione mentally cheered when Orion hexed his voice away, letting only the croakings of a frog come out every time Malfoy opened his mouth to spew more poison.

Ron reached over as Dumbledore called Harry's name again and pat him on the shoulder, "You'd better go on mate, we'll be waiting for you."

Harry nodded and gave Hermione a squeeze before getting to his feet, feeling heavy, and trudging up the Hall and through the side door. He met Fleur's eyes first.

"Arry? Do zey want us back in ze 'all?"

He shook his head and ran his hand through his hair, "No. I think I mentioned the other day how stuff always happens to me? Well if any of you have a line to fate could you tell the bloody bint to stop boning me sideways?"

Fleur's brows went up at the comment, she'd learned that Harry wasn't given to that crude of speech as a rule so for him to say that... "What 'appened?"

Karkaroff stormed in, followed by Olympe, Dumbledore, Snape and Moody. Karkaroff was not happy. "This is an outrage Dumbledore, an insult! I'm of half a mind to take my champion and leave. Why should Hogwarts be allowed to have two champions? It's a travesty, he's a runt, too young and he doesn't belong with true champions."

Cedric drew his brows together, listening to the Durmstrang Headmaster. "Did you put your name in the Goblet Harry?"

"Bloody hell no! By Merlin don't I have a hard enough time staying alive on a normal basis Cedric? Why in the name of Mordred's smelly socks would I want to enter myself in a tournament where I'd be facing death...again." Harry folded his arms across his chest, "If I wanted to risk my life all I'd have to do is go dancing round in front of one of Voldemort's old lackeys."
Maxime looked down at him arrogantly, "And ze fame and money mean nozzing to you I suppose?"

Fleur stirred herself about to snap at her Headmistress but Harry beat her to the punch.

"Um...Harry Potter nice to meet you. I've got enough fame thanks, same with money that I never bloody use. I'm not interested in fame or money. Really I thought I'd finally have a year where I could just sit back and be a spectator for once but nooooo," he scowled up at Madame Maxime, "someone decided to put my name in that ruddy Goblet and...how is it that it came out after Cedric's anyway?" He looked over at Snape and Moody who were arguing.

"Someone must have bespelled the Goblet, someone with vast knowledge of the dark arts. The Goblet is a judge, a judge that is not supposed to be able to be tricked or swayed. Yer name was called after all the others because really the Goblet knows it should only be three contestants but it still chose a fourth one. Dark magic I say." Moody glared at both Karkaroff and Snape and his magical eye swirled around the room.

"Who cares how or why it happened, the question is what are we going to do now?" Karkaroff hissed. "Obviously the boy can't compete."

Mr. Crouch coughed, "Unfortunately he must. No matter who put his name in the Goblet it constitutes a binding magical contract. He must compete."

Madam Maxime gasped scandalized, "But 'ogwarts 'aving two champions?! Zat ez monstrously unfair to Fleur et Monsieur Krum!"

Dumbledore looked at her, "What do you suggest we do dear Lady? The Goblet has gone out and will not light again for another five years."

Harry rubbed his temples as they began arguing again, the repeated line of him being a second Hogwarts' champion being a big bone of contention, "Oh for the love of...what if I compete but not as a Hogwarts' champion?"

Silence fell across the room and Dumbledore frowned, "What do you mean my boy? You are a Hogwarts student after all."

Harry nodded, "But Madam Maxime is correct. it's unfair for me and Cedric both to wear Hogwarts' banner."

The large French woman looked greatly mollified by that, "Zen what do you 'ave in mind Monsieur Potter?"

"Instead of competing in the name of Hogwarts," his chin lifted high and his gaze dared anyone to argue with what he was about to say, "I'll compete in the name of werewolf rights."

Both Madame Maxime and Fleur smiled, Krum grunted in approval, a faint glimmer of amusement entered Snape's eyes, and for just an instant Harry saw Dumbledore looking like he'd swallowed a live frog not made of chocolate before the old wizard pasted on an approving smile.

Moody cackled madly. "Aye, that will certainly prove you're not in it for the popularity. Werewolf rights are still a heated subject. As much as new laws and potions have come forward there are still a majority of wizards who thinks they should all be collared in silver."

"It's an acceptable compromise to Durmstrang." Karkaroff nodded shortly. Potter would not get a lot of endorsement fighting under that banner and the three true champions could duke it out
amongst themselves.

"You sure about this Harry?" Cedric walked closer. "I wouldn't mind sharing Hogwarts banner with you."

"Very sure." There was steel in his tone, not hostile towards Cedric but determined in his course, "It keeps things fair and lets the world know where I stand on at least one issue. Professor Lupin and the others like him deserve a fair shake, I don't care if it's an unpopular opinion."

Mr. Crouch turned three different shades of pale and spluttered before nodding in acceptance, "Very well. I'll inform the Ministry and the...oh Merlin, the press."

It wasn't long before the rules were laid out and they were all going back to their respective dorms. Harry, of course, walked into pandemonium in Gryffindor tower. He met Hermione's eyes and rolled his expressively before taking a plunge and standing up on a table whistling loudly to get everyone's attention, "Alright you lot this is the story. I did not put my name in the Goblet, nor did I ask anyone else to. The working theory is that someone confunded the Goblet into thinking there were four schools instead of three and put my name in as the only one of the fourth school. Since I'm stuck competing, some rot about a binding magical contract, and it's not fair for Hogwarts to have two champions, I'm competing for werewolf rights." Once more you could have heard a pin drop and he folded his arms across his chest, "You don't have to support me but if any of you preferred last year's DADA classes over Moody's you should, at least, understand my choice."

"BRAVO!" Hermione's voice was loud and she started to applaud, it wasn't long until she was followed by Ginny and the twins and before long everyone in the tower was clapping, a few more enthusiastically than others. Hermione made her way over to the table where Harry stood. "It still absolutely sucks that you have to contend and I wonder a little about that magically binding contract but if you are forced to enter than at least you are doing it under the best banner possible." She turned back to the room. "To Harry!"

"TO HARRY!" They all replied.

"We'll be your pack mate." George tossed his head back and howled madly.

Harry laughed and hopped down as a good third of the people in the common room howled as well. He saw Ron smiling tauntly over in a corner and frowned, wondering why he was getting that strained, tense look from his best mate. His attention was torn away from Ron by the swarm of excited Gryffindors who dragged him into their festivities. It was a solid half hour later when he and Hermione managed to excuse themselves and make their way up to the fourth year boys' dorm. As he'd expected Ron was sitting on his bed, flipping broodily through a Quidditch magazine. "Ron?"

Blue eyes lifted and there was that strained smile again, "Oh hey mate, see you got away from the madness down there. Wicked idea, the competing for werewolf rights an all."

"What's wrong Ron?" Hermione walked over to his bed and sat down, placing one hand on his knee and using the other to pull the magazine away. "You can't pretend with us so just tell us what's wrong so we can fix it."

"Not much to be done to fix it really," Ron let her take the magazine, frowning moodily at his bedspread.

Harry swallowed nervously, "You're not...well mad at me...are you?"
Ron's head shot up, "Of course not! Mate the ideas you get in your head at times," he shook his own head, red hair flopping about before he ran his hand through, "I'm worried, no, I'm out and out scared about this. Hermione said people have died in this thing before and considering what we know about your enemies...I hate that you're caught up in this sort of thing, again. Would it kill You-Know-Who to give you a year to just...be."

Hermione scooched up and lay down beside Ron on the bed, pillowing her head on his chest. "Sometimes Ron, sometimes you just are all kinds of wonderful you know." She smiled at him. "I'm scared too, worried sick about Harry and so angry that he has to go through this. You are right about the Bee but I think he's worried that if he let's Harry be then he'll slip out of his grasp. Now that things are the way they are though all we can do is support Harry, help him in any way we possibly can to make this as safe and endurable for him as we possibly can."

Ron pat her head, "Yeah I know I still wish it wasn't like this though."

Harry sat on the bed, beside Ron's hip, "Thanks mate. If I didn't have the both of you on my side I doubt I'd really have been able to concentrate well enough to do more than stagger through with copious injuries. But with you standing with me," he grinned, "I'm not just going to compete, I'm bloody well going to win. That'll stick it to the twats who want to collar werewolves."

"That's the spirit Harry, if anyone can do it it's you." Hermione cheered, her head still on Ron's chest. "Orion's going to flip when he hears what you'll compete for and Remus too. We'll be behind you every step of the way and whoever did confund the Goblet...Well they're going to regret it when you rule and win."

Ron chuckled, "Personally if they find out who it was I want you to have five minutes alone with them and your wand Hermione. I can't think of anything more terrifying except maybe spiders."

Harry laughed, just happy to have his friends' support.

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Sirius was brought out of a very pleasant dream, involving Remus and chocolate sauce, by Remus' voice yelling at the top of his lungs. His wand was in hand and he was down the stairs before he registered even being truly awake.

Remus was pacing the small kitchen, hair still mussed from bed and pyjama trousers hanging low on his hips. He muttered under his breath and shot wild eyed glares at the newspaper on the kitchen table. "Knew there was something fishy about the whole thing...Can't believe Dumbledore would go this far...What is the idiot boy thinking?"

Sirius was still groggy so he looked around, saw no threat, and yawned, "Okay Moony, where's the fire and who's thinking what?"

"Read this!" Remus shoved the newspaper in front of Sirius, pointing at the front page and the blaring headlines. 'Four Champions in the Triwizard Tournament' and right underneath in equally large font 'Potter for the Pooches'.

The animagus took the paper, his braincells starting to function as he scanned the article.

"As shocking as it may seem the Triwizard Tournament has become the Quadwizard Tournament with the addition of Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived himself being a champion despite the supposed age limit set this year. Even more questionable is Mr. Potter's decision to compete in the name of werewolf rights. A reliable source informed me that Mr. Potter felt it would be unfair for
Hogwarts to have two champions and so chose a cause to champion. However one must ask if Mr. Potter truly thought out his choice of cause. Werewolves are known to be-" here Sirius stopped reading, having long ago memorized that tripe as his mother had spouted it often. He set the paper down, "Well...chocolate, butterbeer, or firewhiskey?"

Remus watched the clock over the kitchen table, it was barely seven am. "Oh bugger it all, you get the glasses, I'll get the whiskey." He walked over to a cabinet and pulled out a dusty bottle. "It's a very noble thought of Harry but what in Mordred's warts is he thinking? He shouldn't be in this bloody Tournament to begin with."

Sirius set two shot glasses down on the table. "I get the feeling that he's not in it by choice." He sat down, grimacing at the pop of his spine, "The Goblet creates magical contracts, a name is put in, if it comes out well...the person is stuck. So I imagine he was thinking that if he's stuck putting his neck on the chopping block, might as well be for something near and dear to his heart."

"I get that he didn't choose it but that doesn't make me like it more." Remus filled up the two glasses and raised his toward Sirius before downing it with a shudder, smoke coming out of his nostrils and ears from the firewhiskey. "I'm worried Pads, someone has gone through a whole lot of trouble getting Harry's name into that Goblet. And werewolf rights...I love him for the thought but people won't be sympathetic to the cause." Remus rubbed his left foot over his right ankle where the scar from the silver manacle still was, just as red and bright as when he'd gotten it. "It's as if he's looking for even more trouble, the purebloods will have a field day with it."

"I know but I don't think Harry cares," Sirius studied the firewhiskey in his shot glass, "you know Harry's opinion of pureblood politics. He loves you Moony," he met amber eyes the same color as the liquor, "and he loves Orion and as much as he hates publicity, he's also got a slight inkling of how it works. He's drawing attention to werewolf rights and people will start taking a harder look at how those who suffer from lycanthropy are treated because The-Boy-Who-Lived is on their side. And that's just him competing, imagine if he wins," he took a sip of the firewhiskey, savoring the burn, "I don't like the thought of him in the tournament or of him putting himself out there like this either though."

Remus sighed and placed the empty shot glass back on the table. "Well he's there now, both in the Tournament and in the media's eye. All we can do is show him we support him and do our best to watch his back from the shadows."

Sirius nodded, "If I find out who got him into this, other than Dumbledore, I'm going to show them why exactly it is that a Grim is considered a specter of death." He downed the rest of his firewhiskey, "That or I'll arrange for them to find themselves at Miss Granger's wandpoint, I think she'd do a better job than I would of turning them inside out."

"I think that's a subject she actually studied after that whole business with Lucius Malfoy last year, how much of a person you can turn inside out and have them awake and aware to experience it." Remus didn't know if he should chuckle or shudder at that. "And if it's for Harry I think she would do it too. If I find out they might just find out first hand just why werewolves are as feared as they are and fuck the state of the moon."

"You're scarier when you don't use the wolf actually," Sirius turned his glass around on the table, "I remember when you and James would practice dueling, you always won because he just couldn't predict what you'd do next." He also remembered Remus taking his stupidity out of his hide after the incident with Snape, he still swore his arse wasn't quite the same. "You're downright terrifying when you're pissed off but not all wolfed out."

"You're a strange one Sirius Black, always were." It was said with fondness and disbelief as if
Remus couldn't really work the other man out. "Let's just leave it with the knowledge that if or when the culprit is found he or she will be punished. I'm sure Arthur and Molly will want a part of their hide as well...So breakfast, sadly I think we're out of bacon so you'll have to make due with porridge and jam."

"No bacon? What travesty is this?" Sirius gave Remus a little smile, "Where'd all the bacon go? Of course I'm grateful for just porridge and jam, ten times better than my previous diet, but bacon is food of the gods."

"All the bacon went into your belly yesterday and I haven't had a chance to buy more just yet." Remus' grin was wry and exasperated at the same time. "I'll try to make it to the shops today and get more of the godly food."

"You're far too good to me, always have been." It was said clean and straight, not even a hint of teasing, "I'm going to go shower then dig in my money bag to chip in," he called out as he walked away, "and don't argue. You feed my bottomless pit the least I can do is help foot the bill."

Remus was left standing in the kitchen, pot to make porridge in, in his hand. "Well fuck." This side of Sirius was all kinds of wonderful and Remus didn't know just how to shield himself against it. He was trying so hard to at least work their way back to friendship but he didn't stop wanting Sirius, wanting to touch him and love him. "One day at a time, one day at a time." He reminded himself and worked to have breakfast ready when Sirius was finished in the bathroom.

Harry rolled his eyes as he passed another one of the charming badges Malfoy had created and distributed that shifted between 'Potter Stinks' and 'Say No To Fur Fetish'. It didn't bother him really, he had his friends, which included the other champions, and he was doing excellent in his classes, even in potions. No his main problem was more that he had no earthly idea what he should be studying to get a leg up for the Tournament. So during their Chamber study sessions he still worked on trying to become an animagus. They'd moved on from theory into meditating, trying to find and 'connect' with their animagus form. Once they did that they could start trying to shift. He twitched as he saw the blond prat himself making his way toward him.

"Out all on your own Potty, or should I talk to you in barks and growls these days?" Malfoy smirked at him but his eyes looked kind of harried. "Not that, that would make much difference from before when it comes to you. What do you think of my badges? I'm actually proud of how they turned out."

"Kill them with kindness and the bullies just won't know how to react." Harry was all set to blast Malfoy with a scathing comment when he remembered something he'd once heard Petunia tell Dudley, who'd been upset over being teased about his weight. 'Kill them with kindness and the bullies just won't know how to react.' He wondered if that would even work with Malfoy but really, what did he have to lose? He smiled cheerfully at the blond, "Well while I don't exactly agree with the sentiment it is a rather good execution of transfiguration and charms."

Draco faltered at the sight of that smile and he blinked in confusion before pulling his face back into its usual sneering mask. "You really are dim aren't you? Quite hopeless." He wondered if that would even work with Malfoy but really, what did he have to lose? He smiled cheerfully at the blond, "Well while I don't exactly agree with the sentiment it is a rather good execution of transfiguration and charms."

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Harry blinked and half turned to watch Malfoy's progress. What in the world did Malfoy mean by that? Ron's scaly brother? He made his way to the Great hall for lunch, sitting in between Ron and Hermione and across from Ginny and Neville. "Hey Ron?"
"Mmf?" Ron's mouth was full of some sort of rolled meat dish if what was on his plate was any indication and fortunately he didn't open his mouth for that muffled huh.

"Do any of your brothers do anything with scales?" Harry drummed his fingers on the table.

"Harry, have you hit your head?" Ginny looked at him with wide eyes, her fork halfway to her mouth. "You know Charlie, you know he works with dragons. Why on earth are you asking?"

Hermione looked at him on curiosity as well. Wondering what had prompted that question.

He'd started to lift a fork to his mouth but at that his hand froze, his mind whirring. Why would Malfoy tell him to talk to Charlie? Matter of fact why would Malfoy tell him anything? And what was that about shaping up? The only thing he needed to shape up for was...the Tournament. The fork fell from his hand and clattered to the table, his face going pale.

"Harry, Harry what's wrong?" Hermione started to look around as if looking for a raised wand that could have hexed him. "Are you feeling ill? What's the matter?"

"I'm fine, library, see you in a bit," he grabbed his bag and rushed from the table, much to the gawking astonishment of those seated there.

Ron was the first to find his tongue, "Hermione I think you've infected him."

"I...Um...Well...Oh no, he's not getting off this easy." Hermione chewed her bread roll viciously before standing too, grabbing her back and following Harry out of the Hall and toward the library.

Ginny looked after her. "I think Harry broke her."

Harry had gone right to the magical creature section and was now perusing the books for a basic run down of a dragon's strengths and weaknesses. "Humans Are Crunchy? Never Poke a Sleeping Dragon? Do Virgins Taste Better? Who comes up with these titles?"

"Desperate authors wanting to sell as many copies as possible, Lockhart ring a bell?" Hermione snuck up behind him, looking over his shoulders at the books he was looking at. "Spill, what's with the sudden fascination for dragons and Charlie Weasley?"

"...Hermione that really did not sound right for a straight bloke like myself." He sighed at her look, "You'll think I'm mad."

"Nothing new there then, I already know you're quite mad and you could do worse than Charlie you know...Those arms...Mmmm." She smiled at him. "Just tell me Harry, if you need research done then I'm your go to girl."

"Okay but remember, you asked. I think the first task is going to have something to do with dragons." He told her about Malfoy and his comment, "I know it's crazy to think he might actually help me but...at the end of last year he showed...another side to himself. Not quite as pratty and a bit...vulnerable."

"Huh...That actually sounds...Really crazy and almost impossible to believe." Hermione leaned against the bookshelf. "Still, even if it came from Malfoy I don't think we can afford to assume he's just talking out of his arse. In Molly's last letter she did say something about all of her family being gathered again sooner than she'd thought...That would include Charlie...Who does work with dragons." She bit her lip. "Ask Hagrid, if anyone knows he will and he won't be able to keep his mouth shut to you."
Harry's lips twitched, "There is that. I just wonder what Malfoy's angle is if he told the truth." He looked at her and pulled a book off the shelf 'Dragons: Their Habits, Habitats, and Hordes' flipping through it, "Why would he give me a clue?"

"Maybe he asked the wizard behind the curtain for a heart?" Hermione sobered. "Seriously I haven't got a clue why Malfoy would do anything at all to help you. Maybe he considers you the least of all evils in the Tournament, maybe he did it just to stir things up and maybe whoever put your name in the Goblet told him to tell you...All I know is that we shouldn't ignore the lead just because of the source."

"Yeah. I'm half hoping he was just talking out of his bum because if not," he wrinkled his nose, "I'm going to owe him." He looked up as Neville came up to them.

"Hey Harry, you're wanted in the trophy room. Something about the champions and their wands."

"I'll stay here, look through the books and see if I can have something worth for you to read when you're done. Good luck." Hermione hugged him and started to hoist books into her arms, carrying them over to a secluded table.

He kissed her cheek, "I'd crash and burn without you Hermione, thanks." He pat Neville on the shoulder, "Thanks for coming to tell me Nev." He hitched his bag up and walked out of the library, leaving Neville to stare at Hermione's blush with amusement.

"Research...Yes." Hermione fought the urge to bring her hand up to cover the cheek Harry had kissed. "Lots and lots of research to do."

All the other champions were all there already, looking up when Harry entered.

"How nice of you to finally join us Mr. Potter." Percy Weasley looked up from the papers he was carrying to fix Harry with a stern glare over the rim of his glasses.

Harry narrowed his eyes, "You know Percy contrary to popular belief I am not super human. I can't get from one spot to the next in a flash. I was in the library and came as soon as I was told I was needed and I really, really resent you acting like I've deliberately wasted anyone's time."

Percy's face grew red and he opened his mouth to respond when a raspy voice interrupted him.

"No need to argue, everyone is here now so let's start shall we?" Ollivander shuffled into to view.

"How nice to meet you again Mr. Potter, gotten used to the holster yet?"

He smiled at the wand maker, "Yes sir. I hardly feel it now though I know it's there. So um...what's this about?"

"Procedure, I need to borrow all your wands and see that they are up to standard, make sure you are able to perform the tasks you are giving with your wand and make sure none of them are tampered with." Ollivander spoke in a low drawl and it was quite clear that he found the whole Tournament a waste of time. "Maybe we could start with your wand Mr. Potter?"

"Of course sir," He pulled his wand from the holster, relieved that he'd thought to polish it yesterday morning.

"Excellent caretaking." Ollivander gave Harry a look full of amusement. "Holly and Phoenix feather, slightly flexible." He raised the wand and shot rainbow colored sparks in the air with it. "Your wand is in perfect condition Mr. Potter, just as good as the day it chose you." He handed Harry his wand back and walked over to Fleur.
She smiled and handed over her wand, though Harry noticed that when Ollivander mentioned veela hair being too temperamental a medium her eyes flashed with insult and irritation and she practically cradled her wand like a newborn when it was handed back to her and Ollivander moved onto Viktor.

Having checked both Viktor and Cedric's wands as well Ollivander nodded. "All your wands are in working condition, none have been tampered with and you can put that in your report Mr. Weasley. Now if you excuse me I have a shop to get back to, my wands do not make themselves." After bowing Ollivander shuffled out without waiting for Percy to give any reply.

Harry just looked around, "So is that it? We can go now?"

Percy looked suffering. "Not quite yet Mr. Potter, I am sorry if the role as champion cuts into your busy schedule but it's how it is." He waved his hand and the blonde reporter entered the room. "This is Rita Skeeter from the Daily Prophet and she's here to ask all of our champions some questions for the readers at home."

Harry cut a glance at Viktor and received a short head shake, telling him he did not have to answer any questions. Remembering the name skeeter from a particularly nasty article about Remus he decided he wouldn't answer any either. He looked back at Percy, "Sorry Percy but I don't have any comment for the Daily Prophet or Ms. Skeeter."

"Not terribly surprising I must say." Skeeter hid her disappointment behind scathing remarks. "Not even the champion has any positive things to say about his chosen cause." She looked him up and down before giving him a razorsharp smile. "Something I of course have to convey to my loyal readers. Off you go then Mr. Potter while I interview the proper champions." She shooed him off with a slender hand tipped in crimson painted nails.

Harry's fingers twitched and he had to bite his tongue to keep from saying anything but a little voice in the back of his head that sounded suspiciously like Hermione urged him not to give her any ammunition. There was also a kind touch on his shoulder and he looked up at Fleur, "Oui 'Arry, as a minor," she gave Skeeter a speaking look, "you are not required to speak wiz any media unless you so choose." She leaned in and whispered, "Find a Ravenclaw girl named Luna Lovegood. 'Er fazer 'as a publication and she will be much more likely not to twist your words. Try out near ze lake."

Harry nodded and walked out, not even deigning to look at Skeeter. He headed down to the lake and saw an ethereal blond girl standing barefoot at the edge. "Um excuse me?"

Pale, pale blue eyes turned to him. "Oh hello Harry Potter, are you here to speak to the Gobblecrows? They are terribly chatty this time of day." She turned back toward the water and tilted her head as if she was listening to something.

"Actually I'm here to speak with you, if you're Luna Lovegood that is." Harry wondered if this girl was exactly all there but at the same time her very presence felt...soothing.

She scrunched her bare toes in the dried fall leaves on the ground and moved to sit down on a fallen log. "So Harry Potter, what do you want to speak to me about? And yes my parents named me Luna so it's probably me you're looking for." She fiddled with her necklace the pendant looking much like a miniature onion.

He sat next to her on the log, "Fleur, the Beauxbatons champion, told me that your father has a newspaper and that he wouldn't be like the other reporters around and twist my words into lies. I was hoping that maybe you could help me further my cause. Would that be alright? For your Dad's
"Your werewolf cause then...An exclusive with the Quibbler." Luna smiled a mysterious little smile. "Have you ever read my father's newspaper Harry Potter? We are not like other reporters and we pride ourselves on printing the truth as it is but before you agree to anything you really should read it." She moved her hands around his head in fluttering movements. "You really have the most cluttered aura I've ever seen."

He blinked, remembering about aura's from divination, then smiled a bit crookedly, "Well my life never has been what you'd call nice and neat so I'm not surprised. I don't suppose you have a copy of your father's paper on you if you want me to read it?"

"Hm...I usually don't go far without one...Security blanket if you will." Luna finished cleansing his aura to the best of her ability and rose from the log, walking over to a bag that could rival Hermione's in size. She rummaged through it and came up with two different copies of the Quibbler. "Here you are, I already solved the crossword puzzle...Sorry, the secret word was humprattler."

He took the paper with a murmur of thanks, "That's alright. I'm pants at crosswords anyway," he started to read and though his brows rose a few times and he recognized it as the wizarding world's equivalent of the Enquirer a slow grin started to stretch across his face and he looked up at her, "Luna I don't think any other paper could possibly do justice to my opinions. There might be plenty here that most don't believe but it's blunt, honest, and unapologetic and exactly the kind of journalism that'll work for what I want to say," he held out his hand, "So what do you say? Think your Dad would agree?"

Luna took his hand and shook it. A brilliant smile blossoming over her face at the praise of her father's newspaper, not too many wizards had good things to say about the Quibbler, they still read it though strangely enough. "I say thank you for the rights to your exclusive interview Mr. Potter and that Papa will be here with bells on as soon as I can get word to him." She rummaged through her bag again and came up with a badge shaped like a yellow moon with a black profile of a wolf on it. Suddenly the badge howled and the image shifted to show the text Harry's Howlers. "Will you sign my Howlers badge?"

Harry stared at the badge and grinned, "Well I haven't seen any of those about before." He took it from her with a charmed expression and rummaged in his bag for an appropriate thing to sign it with, "I've never signed anything for anyone before so if I use the wrong kind of ink and it rubs off just let me know okay?" He managed to fish out a quill with everlasting ink, signed 'Thanks so much Luna, your friend Harry Potter' and handed it back to her.

She took the badge and rubbed her thumb gently over the inked words. "Friend...I've never had one of those before, thank you." Luna looked up and smiled at him. "You are a very nice person, that's probably why the Wrackspurts are as drawn to you as they are. She bent down and grabbed her pack hoisting it up onto her shoulder. "I'm going to owl Papa and let him know about the interview, he'll be over the moon. I'll let you know when to expect him. Good bye Harry Potter, friend."

He smiled at her gently, "Take care Luna and if you don't think people would revolt you should come and sit with me, Ron, and Hermione sometime, or I'll come and sit with you, again if you think your house wouldn't mind."

"Who cares if they'd mind?" She shrugged and smiled that dreamy smile again. "You take care too." She slipped away on bare feet, humming some odd song or other as she skipped over the cold ground.
He blinked then grinned as she left. Luna Lovegood was absolutely unique and absolutely charming. He was glad Fleur had pointed him her way. He fully intended to drag Hermione, Ron and Neville over to the Ravenclaw table some time to sit with her. Remembering that Hermione was waiting on him he got up to dash back to the library, wondering what the always practical and grounded Hermione would make of the dreamy Ravenclaw. He knew Hermione would worry and fret about him agreeing to be interviewed but he had to say something and would not let Skeeter take her plans and run with them.
Chapter 15

Harry paused before entering the Great Hall and looked at Hermione and Ron, "The Quibbler issue with the interview is coming out today, same as whatever poison Skeeter is going to spew, so I’m going to sit at the Ravenclaw table with Luna. Will you come with?"

Ron had long known about the Lovegoods and as much as his Dad spoke well of them he always felt...awkward around Xenophilius and Luna. He just didn't know what to do or say when they started spouting...whatever it was they spouted but feeling awkward had no chance against his show of support for his friend. "Sure mate."

Hermione didn't understand Luna at all, all her invisible critters and things that couldn't be explained. That said she still liked her strangely enough. Underneath all that dreaminess she had a wickedly sharp mind and a dry sort of humor that appealed to her. "Absolutely we'll come sit with you and her." Hermione'd had her doubts about the interview until Harry had sat down and explained his reasons to her. As much as she worried about him she also recognized that he was smart enough to make his own decisions about things like this. It was his life, sometimes she just forgot that.

Luna sat at the far end of the Ravenclaw table, trying to eat her breakfast but every time she reached for her spoon someone found it amusing to magic it away from her, having her grasp thin air instead.

Harry saw that and narrowed his eyes before walking over and sitting next to Luna, snatching her spoon from the air and handing it to her with a smile, "Good morning Luna."

Ron carefully sat on Luna's other side. He found her a bit weird but he was incensed that people would do that, actually keep her from eating. No wonder she was so thin. He gave Zacharias Smith a venomous glare when he started to raise his wand to grab Luna's spoon again.

Hermione was livid, she didn't mind teasing when it was done for fun...For all parts but this was downright real bullying and she hated it. She sat down next to Harry and fished her wand out from her holster under the table, pointing it at Zacharias Smith and making his porridge bowl rise in the air and plonk down upside down over his head.

"Good morning." Luna didn't raise so much as an eyebrow at the show further up the table but took the spoon gratefully and commenced eating. "Did you all sleep well? I found the Nargles a bit too loud last night, made me sing along."

Harry didn't even look at the now flailing Smith as he dished himself some sausage, black pudding, eggs and toast, "Well if they're as loud as Ron's snoring then I can definitely understand having trouble sleeping. I've learned to use ear plugs."

"Oi! You're not much better mate, you talk in your sleep and not even the normal talking, you do the hissing stuff," Ron reached around Luna and gave a laughing Harry a playful shove in the shoulder.

"Hissing stuff?" Harry nibbled on a bit of toast, "Ron you're so eloquent."

"Yup, truly got a way with words." Hermione agreed and gathered some breakfast for herself, toast and tea. She feared she was terribly un-British since she couldn't stand the taste of sausage, black pudding or kidney pie. Every time she even tried it her stomach just turned. As she added lemon
and milk to her tea she couldn't help but wonder how it sounded when Harry talked Parseltongue in
his sleep and for some reason the thought made her blush.

"Can't wear ear plugs, always afraid they'll crawl too far inside and get stuck." Luna said calmly
and then turned to Ron. "Maybe you've got a throatgarbler infestation, they can make the words get
stuck some times."

He blinked and his brows furrowed, "Er...okay? I mostly just don't see the point in using a two
sickle word when a knut will do. So long as people get what I'm saying anyway."

She nodded. "Yes, I can understand that, mostly the large, fancy words are just filling anyway."

That Hermione couldn't really agree with but although Luna was a new friend she'd already learned
the folly of even trying to argue to get her point across. It just ran off the blond girl like water off a
goose. She looked nervously toward the windows, wondering when the owls would come with the
papers, wondering how Harry's interview would turn out and what sort of garbage Skeeter would
have written.

Harry hummed and looked up as owls swooped into the Great Hall delivering papers. He noticed
that a great many Prophet subscribers also got the Quibbler and he caught his own copies, opening
the Daily Prophet and then he started snickering at the headline.

MEET THE TRUE TOURNAMENT CHAMPIONS PLUS HEAR HOW HARRY POTTER IS
SUSPICIOUSLY SILENT ABOUT HIS CHOSEN CAUSE! by Rita Skeeter

He scanned down chuckling at her comment, When prompted Mr. Potter had nothing to say on
werewolf rights, one must wonder if he is truly committed to his cause or if he's just seeking
attention. He found it funny because in the Quibbler interview he not only spoke at length about
werewolf rights, thank you Hermione for the coaching, but also explained the reason he didn't
speak to Skeeter and he hoped it stuck in her craw because it was completely at odds with what
she'd written. He looked up as he heard several people spit out their morning pumpkin juice as they
picked up their Quibblers. He turned his head and smiled at Luna, "I'd call that a successful
headline on your father's part Luna."

"Papa knows what he's doing believe it or not." Luna answered with a smile and unfolded the
Quibbler, Harry's own face meeting them on the front page.

HARRY POTTER, HOWLING FOR HEART, HAPPINESS AND THE RIGHT THING TO
DO! by Xenophilus Lovegood

Grinning at the headline Luna scanned the text briefly, she knew most of what the article would
say but it was still different to see it in print. With all the commotion behind the Triwizard
Tournament, rumors and gossip the Quibbler had the honor and quite frankly joy to sit down for a
chat with the boy behind the famous name.

Hermione hummed in approval as she read the article in her own copy of the Quibbler, it was
actually very, very good. Lovegood had kept Harry's voice throughout the whole thing and pressed
subtly on the issues Harry cared for.

Ron grinned widely as he saw several Prophet subscribers scrambling for their nearest neighbor's
Quibbler. He especially found it amusing when Snape took points from Parkinson for shoving
Bulstrode's face into her porridge to get her copy. "Oh this is far too good. The Quibbler's going to
see a rise in popularity methinks."
Harry smiled, "Good. Mr. Lovegood more than deserves to have a successful paper, certainly deserves it more than Skeeter deserves her popularity." He took a bite of sausage and wondered what the reaction of Remus and Sirius would be to the Quibbler copy he sent them. He hoped Remus didn't mind him singling him out.

Sirius yawned and scratched his belly as he walked into the kitchen, not surprised to see that Remus wasn't there yet. It was coming up on the full moon so he was starting to feel a bit tired and draggy. Sirius pulled out the things to make breakfast. He was no great shakes at cooking but he could manage a simple English breakfast. He looked up from stirring the porridge when a pair of owls swooped in through the cat flap, one depositing the Prophet on the table then flapping out, the other Harry's familiar Hedwig, landed on his shoulder, hooting softly. "Hey girl what'd Harry send you with then?"

He took the paper from Hedwig's leg and opened it, spelling the porridge to stir itself as he unrolled the note from around it. 'Thought you'd rather read this than Rita's poison, tell Moony I'm sorry if I made him uncomfortable?'

A black brow lifted and he opened the paper, his other brow shooting up at the headline. He read the article, smiling over Harry's defense of werewolf rights and a couple quotes.

"I did indeed ask Mr. Potter what made him choose my humble, small paper rather than the larger publication of the Daily Prophet and his answer was, 'I've read the Prophet since learning about the magical world and I also researched the other papers and I noticed that later articles from them contradict ones printed before without referencing the previous articles, it seems a bit dodgy to me and then I looked into yours and met your lovely daughter Mr. Lovegood and both are refreshing in their honesty, something I appreciate. I knew you wouldn't misquote me. Plus the others don't have very many good things to say about werewolves and their rights. I prefer and value honesty and open-mindedness over the hypocrisy and bigotry.'"

But Sirius outright grinned at the answer when old Xeno asked if Harry knew any werewolves personally.

"I do and that's a bit of another reason I didn't give an interview to Ms. Skeeter. Last year our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was Professor Lupin, who's had lycanthropy since childhood, and I can tell you that he is one of the strongest people in spirit that I know as well as the kindest. He was also the best Defense Against the Dark Arts professor I've ever had. Don't get me wrong Professor Moody's good, just not as good as Professor Lupin was. Unfortunately he was made to leave his post because of his lycanthropy even though he didn't harm anyone. The day after, an article by Ms. Skeeter was published in the Prophet attacking Professor Lupin with so many lies I was hard pressed to find more than ten words of truth in the article. That is not someone I want to speak about my cause to and as a minor I don't have to. It made me sick and angry to see such a good man portrayed as a monster just to sell papers."

Sirius finished reading and set the Quibbler on top of the Prophet on the table, knowing Remus would stagger in and start reading what was there first. He tickled Hedwig's feathers. "If you'll stick around for a bit I've got some bacon with your name on it." He started frying that up and put a kettle on for tea since he knew the smell of cooking meat would wake Remus.

Remus groaned as the scent of sizzling bacon made its way to his nose. He was tired and achey and more than anything he just wanted to pull the covers over his head and go back to sleep but the loud growling sound coming from his stomach protested that thought avidly. Sitting up on the edge of the bed, he pulled a thin, worn t-shirt over his head and staggered to his feet. Now with the full
moon so close it was difficult to sleep at night, the knowledge that Sirius was just a room away wreaked havoc with his mind and dreams. It would be so easy to get up, go across the hall and slip into Sirius’ bed but he couldn't do that. Right now they got along, there was a tentative friendship building between them again and Remus wasn't going to wreck that, no matter what his heart and body wanted.

He blinked warily as he made it down the stairs and covered his mouth with a scarred hand as a huge yawn escaped him. When he saw the cup of steaming tea already brewed and ready by his seat Remus could have kissed Sirius feet. Remus plonked down on the kitchen chair, took a sip of the tea, brewed to perfection and opened the newspaper...Going perfectly still as suddenly alert amber eyes read the article from beginning to end and then all over again.

Sirius finished cooking the bacon and passed a piece to Hedwig, who flapped up from his shoulder onto a curtain rod. "Harry sent a note with that asking your forgiveness if he upset you by using your name." He dished up porridge, bacon, toast and eggs and set the plate at Remus' elbow before fixing one of his own.

Remus had never liked being the center of attention, always preferred to blend into the background but he couldn't be cross with Harry, especially not when it was for this cause. Orion was half wolf and even though he didn't change during the moon the stigma would always be with him. "Of course I forgive him, it takes a lot of courage to do what he did with this article and if I can help some little bit with loaning out my name and story then that's the least I can do." His foot went to his right ankle again, rubbing over the silver scar, it had become a nervous habit.

Sirius sat down and picked up his tea to do something with his itching fingers that longed instead to run through slightly coarse brown and gray hair, "This'll deal the other papers, and Skeeter, a blow. After all if Harry found inconsistencies others will be going back into issues and looking for some themselves, and they'll find them, and question the reporting. And Skeeter," he smirked, "oh she's already been made to look like a fool because she ran with saying that Harry didn't make any comments on his cause and now her other articles will be read back over looking for lies. Heh he definitely got James' Marauder ingenuity."

"That he does." Remus agreed. He had to admit he liked the idea of Skeeter being made to look the fool she was but he was a little worried what she would do to Harry in retaliation. Also he couldn't help the shiver running down his back at the thought of those at the Ministry reading the Quibbler article, seeing his name and maybe remembering him as the werewolf who'd snapped the neck of one of their Aurors...His worst nightmares consisted of being back there, strapped down and pumped full of poisons. He was a coward and he knew it. If he was recognized as the pregnant werewolf then the jump to Orion wouldn't be very far and that scared Remus even more.

"Hey," Sirius reached out, hoping he wouldn't be snarled at but he just couldn't stand the heartbreaking fear on Remus' face. His fingers ghosted over the back of a scarred hand, "It'll be fine. Don't borrow trouble."

Amber eyes snapped up to meet gray ones and Remus did his best to press out a smile. "Yeah...Fine, you're right. Now let's dig in shall we? It would be a terrible waste if the bacon went cold."

He searched Remus' eyes and nodded slowly, "The food of the gods should never get cold." If Remus wanted to keep things light they would but he couldn't help but feel bad that he couldn't do anything to take that hunted look away.

Remus' smile warmed, he was still worried but he was thankful that Sirius didn't press the issue, Sirius had enough trouble without Remus adding to it. He nibbled on a strip of bacon and wondered
how the rest of the day would play out. "I'm going to write Harry and tell him he doesn't have to worry about my reaction, and write Orion too, tell him to keep calm not get too excited."

"And you think that will work?" Sirius blinked innocently, "with my excitability that he apparently inherited?"

Remus snickered. "No apparently about it, he's got it without a doubt, just like you he can't keep still for a second...Hopefully though Severus can grab him by the collar and keep him somewhat under control."

"Mmm there is that. I don't mind telling you Remus, it feels weird to know that not only is my son in Snape's house, the snippy bat likes him and it's reciprocated. Never in a thousand years would I have seen that one coming. Can't say I mind it because, and if you tell Snape I said anything complimentary about him I'll shave you bald, he'll move heaven and earth to protect Orion and I know it. No one is better to have on your side within Hogwarts right now than Snape." He stuffed toast in his mouth and ignored Remus' startled look. He still nearly despised Snape but his son adored the snarky bastard so he had to deal.

"I'd never in a million years thought that Severus and I could be civil to each other, much less friends but he saved me Sirius, in more ways than one. He's a friend now, a brother and he's always going to have place in my life. You are absolutely right, Orion couldn't get a better protector or a more vigilant one." Remus looked at Sirius. "I won't repeat your compliment but I'm glad that you at least can deal with it, for Orion's sake if nothing else."

"Yeah well, baby steps," he wiggled his fingers, "I shall never like him nor he me but we'll pick our way toward tolerance and blah blah blah."

"No one expects or demands the two of you to be bosom buddies, baby steps and mutual tolerance is quite enough." Remus had finished his own bacon and snatched a strip from Sirius' plate, laughing at the outrage on the other's features. "Hey, hungry wolf here, deal with it."

Sirius muttered, "I could have made more you know," but his eyes were dancing to have Remus playing a bit. He glanced up at Hedwig, who'd decided to take an impromptu nap and reminded himself to write a note for her to take to Hermione. He wondered how the research into that 'leashing' spell for himself was going.

Hermione was holed up in the library feeling slightly frazzled. She had returned the timeturner but not dropped that many of her classes so she had a lot of schoolwork to do plus she wanted to be of help to Harry and research everything she could about dragons. She'd gotten Sirius' note and was back to figuring out the spell he could use. She had the basic idea of it but she had to work on it more and actually try it out before she could give him a spell. Right now she was hiding in the back of the library trying to get as much work done as possible in the time she had before she was to meet up with the others for more training in the chamber.

Papers fluttered to the ground as Hedwig landed on the table and dropped a little note from Harry. 'Hermione you've got to come see Myrtle now! You won't believe this! Trust me it's worth leaving the library!'

Hermione looked from the note to the mountain of books on the table and smothered a sob of frustration. She had so much work to do. Still she packed up, stroked Hedwig over her soft feathers and promised her a treat later on before she hurried to the out of order bathroom and down to the chamber. "Right, I'm here." She was slightly breathless from hurrying as she looked around wondering what the greatness she would be witnessing was.
Harry popped his head out with a grin and took her hand, "You are going to flip Hermione. Ron's still in detention for almost clocking Goyle but I'll show him when he gets out," he lead her down one of the large pipes off the main chamber and stopped at a stone door, hissing at it to open and then nudging her forward as it did, "Welcome, to Slytherin's Library."

Brown eyes saucer wide, Hermione looked at the shelves of ancient leather bound tomes. "Ooooooh." It was like every Christmas and birthday rolled into one, she could only imagine the kind of treasures were in there and all the things she could learn. She took a few steps inside and reached out her hand toward a book before hesitating. "May I?"

"Why do you think I called you down here?" He grinned at the light in her eyes, "Have at it. And the big book over there on the desk? It's an index."

Hermione sent him an utterly brilliant smile and was practically vibrating with excitement. She walked over to the desk and slowly opened the large book, looking through the index and almost moaning at what she saw. "Oh Harry...There are books on spells and customs here that have been lost for hundreds of years. Look at this, reading these books we can actually have a peek into how one of the Founders thought, what his interests were. It's absolutely priceless." She turned and hugged him. "Thank you, thank you so much for showing me this...It's...It's amazing."

He patted her back, feeling very pleased with himself that he'd found this and done something to make her happy. "You'll make the best use of everything. Only thing is I had to use a translation spell I found in the front of the index for Old English since most of the books from Salazar's time are written in Old English, that or Gaelic."

He moved to a book he'd gotten down from a shelf, "Riddle added to this library and I think he made the index. I was...surprised that the bulk of the books he added weren't 'Dark' there are a few on just light magic and a few on dark magic but most are neutral. And he first opened this chamber in his second year," He looked around at all the books, "It's like...something in him changed between his fourth and fifth year."

He tapped the book, "It's a journal, not like the other one don't worry. This one is normal, I made sure. Just old ink, parchment and leather binding. At the start of it is his fourth year and he sounds...cold, arrogant, sneaky, bit like Malfoy really, but not...evil. Then there's a big gap in time, I think he must have left it here over the summer and something happened," He sat down and flipped to the back, "The last few pages at the start of his fifth year it changes and he does sound evil, talking of killing the muggleborns and blood traitors, of making them suffer."

He drummed his fingers on the page, "and then it just ends." He met Hermione's eyes, "It's like the potential to become evil was always there but didn't...what's the word...manifest? Until his fifth year. Something happened to bring it out in him." His brows knit, "And now I'm wondering if Dumbledore might not have had a hand in it."

"That's a scary thought and the scariest thing about it is the fact that I think you might be right." Hermione's voice was low and even with all the wonder of the books and knowledge in the room she suddenly felt cold. "What if Riddle was Dumbledore's first attempt at a tool, something to use to get him where he wanted to be? Then it all went pearshaped or even worse...It went exactly like he'd planned it to. I can't...I get so angry Harry, so bloody angry. Who does he think he is, playing with lives like this and pulling strings like some grand puppet master?"

"I don't know but he'll get his in time. I know what he's up to now so he won't be getting me to become what he wants." He gave her a gentle hug. "And I've you and Ron and Sirius and Remus and Orion, and others to keep me from slipping into darkness so it'll all turn out right."
"I know, you're too strong for him and you know all of us will always be there to support you in any way we possibly can." Hermione leaned into him. "It just kills me that he even tries, that you have to go through all that you do for some secret agenda of his. What's he after Harry? Popularity? Leadership? Worship? I've been mulling it over and over in my head and I can't figure it out."

"Probably the only form of immortality you can really get without turning into Voldemort, the kind Merlin has. People to remember his name for eternity. Even Merlin couldn't take out two Dark Lords but if Dumbledore appears to do so..." he left it to trail off.

"Gods, it makes me sick!" Hermione actually felt her stomach roll dangerously. "So many lives lost and destroyed...All for some childish, insane notion of glory." To her horror she could feel hot tears of anger, sadness and emotions she couldn't even put a label on rise in her eyes and she did her best to hide them from Harry, blinking furiously and hoping they would recede. The last thing he needed now was some hormonal girl crying all over him.

"Hey," Harry pulled her round and wrapped his arms around her, giving her a gentle squeeze, "don't hide those. You see my temper tantrums, you shouldn't feel you have to hide your tears. Not from me."

Wrapping her own arms around his back, Hermione hid her face against his shoulder. "It's so silly, don't even know what I'm crying for really and you shouldn't have to deal with it. Not after showing me something as special as this room." Her voice was muffled but she didn't look up, instead she stayed with her arms around Harry, taking comfort in the fact that he was there.

"Hermione, you silly goose, I'd be very upset and maybe even a little insulted if you didn't let me 'deal with it'. We are friends right?"

"Of course we are, best of friends." Hermione's reply was instant. "Thank you for being here for me even during my mental breakdowns." She sniffed and pulled away, feeling a little more in control of herself now. She pulled a tissue out of her bag and dabbed at her eyes when something suddenly dawned on her. "Wait a second...What did you mean by Ron's in detention for almost slugging Goyle...What did Ron do? Why would he do that?"

"It was the most interesting thing actually," he tugged on a lock of frizzy brown hair, "Goyle called Luna Loony Lovegood and tried to take her books and before anyone else knew what was what Ron was stepping between them and taking a swing at Goyle. Snape saw and I'll give him this much, he gave detention to both Ron and Goyle."

"Good of Snape." And a very interesting reaction on Ron's part. The last sentence wasn't said out loud but Hermione thought it as she crumpled the tissue she'd used together and stuffed it in a pocket. "I can't even be upset with Ron for getting detention when he did it for Luna, also Goyle's had a punch coming for a long time."

Harry plucked another book off the shelf, this one in Old English, "I thought Luna was going to swallow a Nargle her mouth hung open so wide. She's never had people sticking up for her before." He flipped through the book, the translation spell still in effect so he could read it.

And the anger was back, along with a rolling wave of shame. "Before you met her I wouldn't even have been able to pick Luna out in a room of people. I've heard the words Loony Lovegood but that's all and I'm so ashamed. No one should be that alone and no one should be treated like that. Not anywhere and especially not at Hogwarts."

Hermione took a deep breath and released it to calm down. She was in Salazar Slytherin's library for Morgana's sake and she couldn't stop feeling emotional with a constant headache blooming
behind her temples. She realized she was wound too tight but there wasn't much to be done about it. She followed Harry's example and pulled out a book, the feel and scent of it soothing as books always were to her and walked over to chair covered in some kind of a soft black fur throw to sit down and read. Maybe that would help.

Harry levitated a bottle of butterbeer from his bag over to Hermione, "You're stretching yourself thin again Hermione."

"Thank you, I'm not even going to ask what you're walking around with butterbeer in your bag for." She picked up the bottle, opened it and took a sip, feeling warm smoothness spread through her. It was almost as good as a Pepper Up potion. "You don't have to worry Harry, I know what I'm doing."

"Uh-huh, the last time you said that you wound up so stressed you clocked Malfoy for relief. You need to take a few things easier, not that I'd dislike you clocking him again mind. You know Sirius wouldn't want you making yourself sick for him and I certainly don't." He got up and went around behind her to rub her shoulders, "You're more appreciated than I can tell you and I want you to be happy, healthy, and not going half out of your mind trying to shoulder an inhuman load."

Oh that felt nice, Hermione's head dropped forward against her chest as Harry rubbed her shoulders. "I'm not making myself sick. I want to help Sirius and of course I want to help you. I promised and really, I do it because I want to, no other reason. It'll be better as soon as I've gotten a few essays out of the way, you know all about midterm madness."

"You'll do brilliantly, you always do." He loosened a nasty knot in the crook of her neck with his thumbs, "And you've got this library at your disposal now so you'll knock the professors' socks completely off."

Her chuckle dissolved into a pleased groan as the knots were worked out. "There is that...Seriously Harry, I'm thinking about moving down here. Books all around me and no annoying roommates giggling about what they'd want to do with Krum. A bed, food and Crookshanks and I'd be all set."

"You might get one annoying chamber mate if Ron starts snoring any harder," he smiled at her chuckle. "Has the library been loud recently?"

"Like you wouldn't believe. I fear Madam Pince will snap soon." Hermione smiled. "It's not Viktor's fault really, it's just that where he goes...Girls follow, in packs apparently."

"I feel for him," he shuddered, "I've found myself with a few stalkers too. It's weird." He rubbed her arms, "Neck feel better?"

"Yes, much. Thank you." She tilted her head back and beamed up at him. "I've seen the fangirls following you around, both the usual Hogwarts crew and a few new ones from our visitors. At least you can hide down here at times, get some peace from it all."

He kissed her forehead. "There is that thank Merlin." He moved to sit at her feet with his book, "I can't be angry at them because they're all willing to actually think about how not all werewolves are the same and that they're people with rights just like us." He turned a page in the book, reading about how dragons were just as possessive of the gold and jewels they horded as they were of their offspring.

"That's good, at least they learn something and just being around you Harry, makes better people of us all." Hermione ran her fingers through his hair and opened the old book in her lap, almost instantly getting sucked into the the words printed there.
He turned a light red and concentrated on reading his own book despite the pleasant tingles her fingers left in their wake. He was halfway through when he read a notation Salazar had made in the margins of the book that had him grinning, "Well hello."

"Hm, what's that?" Hermione pulled herself out of the book she was reading and looked down on Harry. "Something interesting in your book?"

"Oh yeah," he tapped on the notation, "parseltongue works with dragons too."

Both of Hermione's brows went up at that and she leaned down over Harry's shoulder to look at the words Harry tapped at. "Well isn't that something...Though not really that surprising when you think about it, seeing as they are both reptiles. If Malfoy's right and the first task is about dragons this should give you an edge. Provided that the dragon will listen to what you have to say."

He nodded. "Yeah. This has a lot more on dragons than what the books upstairs do. There's even a section on the difference between freely given dragon blood, dragon blood forcibly taken, and blood from a slain dragon." He looked down and flipped to the section he was talking about, "Freely given it has sort of an opposite property to slain unicorn blood. It can provide protection from curses and dark rituals even after they've been performed as well as boosting the power of the magic of the person who consumes it. Forcibly taken it retains a bit of the power boost but not the protection."

By now Hermione was almost lying down on the seat of her chair, leaning over Harry to look at what he read and listen to what he told her. "See, why isn't any of this in our education or in the books of the library instead of virgins and other crap? This is actually useful." Harry's hair tickled her cheek as she leaned in even closer. "Not even Voldemort dared to go after the dragons, even with his Parseltongue ability, what do you think that means?"

"Well according to this book dragons value honor and the code of life." He flipped to that section, "The code of life is sort of like the law of the jungle in the Jungle Book. Kill only to sustain your life and the life of your clan or to keep from being killed. So I'd say that the Death Eaters' creed is pretty opposite that."

"I'd say." Hermione agreed in earnest. "Also from everything I've read and heard from Charlie, dragons are rather keen on free will. There's no way that Voldemort would get them to obey, at least I don't think so." She chuckled. "Oh, if Charlie finds out you can speak to dragons...He'll kidnap you and drag you back to Romania with him."

"Mmm except for missing you, Ron, Luna, Neville, and the twins I wouldn't be putting up much of a fight." He grinned, "It'd get me out of Dumbledore's clutches for a while that's for sure."

"Oh Harry." Hermione leaned her head against his. "If you went then I'd have to go and the dragons would probably eat me for asking them too many questions. Also, if Orion and Ginny finds out you left them out of your speech about who you'd miss...You'd be in so much trouble." There was a teasing tone to her voice. Better take that approach then to get upset again.

"You're joking right? I'd be telling Charlie to kidnap Orion, Remus, and Sirius with me. Your parents would be on the warpath if we took you along and Charlie answers to his mum so no Ron, that's the only reason I'd say I'd miss you lot instead of taking you along with me." He reached down and squeezed her ankle, "But yeah, you are too cute to be dragon chow."

"Silly boy." Hermione huffed, she knew very well there was nothing even remotely cute about her. "Still you're right... Oh Merlin, can you imagine Orion and Sirius in a camp full of dragons...Talk about disaster, or roaring success, I can't really decide there."
Harry laughed, "Yeah it'd be..." he blinked and looked down at the section on the properties of freely given dragon blood again, "Hermione, the ritual Dumbledore used to bind Orion's life to his whim...that would be a dark ritual right?"

"Oh yes, as dark as they come." All teasing gone Hermione looked down at Harry. "What brought this on n-" She broke off, her eyes widening and she looked down at the book in Harry's lap once again. "Do you really think it'd work? If a dragon would give blood freely?"

He gnawed on his bottom lip, "Maybe. Probably not enough to negate the effect completely but enough to keep Dumbledore from being able to kill him with a thought," he looked up, "I think maybe. It'd have to be rendered into a special potion and we'd need to know the exact ritual Dumbledore used but...maybe. It'd be a start at least."

"I'd say it's a very good start and you're utterly brilliant for even think of this. It didn't even cross my mind and it should have." Hermione's hand found its way back to Harry's hair. "Somehow we'll find out just what that ritual was, what he used and how he used it. I have been looking into rituals that require the victim's blood but I haven't found one that fits...Lots and lots of other nasty ones I wish I could forget though."

He leaned his head on her knee, "I'll talk to Snape about this idea next Occlumency lesson. I don't want to tell Remus yet, I don't want to get his hopes up for nothing in case we can't do it." He sighed, "I will probably have to ask him about what he smelled. He went over sight and sound and everything else but with his nose he'd have had to have gotten a good whiff of what was in the goblet. I re-really don't want to make him relive that again but there's not much choice. We have to narrow it down." He gave a slight humorless laugh, "It's too bad I can't pick Dumbledore's brain like I'm sure he's done mine."

"Hmm." Hermione made a soft considering hum. "Harry, have you ever heard of a Pensieve?"

He gave her a speaking look and lifted a brow before practically chirping, "Nope. So...what's a pensieve?"

"Don't get flippant with me young boy." Hermione pulled on a thatch of black hair in punishment. "A Pensieve is like a...Oh how to explain this. Like a large shallow bowl thingie, filled with a special Pensieve liquid. In a Pensieve you can view memories, sort of like a movie. You're transported in a way into the memory and view it as if you'd been there when it happened. If we could get a hold of a Pensieve and if Remus would be willing to share his memory of what happened with us, we could watch it, see what happened and Remus wouldn't have to go through it all again."

"Oh I like that idea better, much better. Put it on the list of things to ask Snape...it's really really weird to be going to Snape so much." He leaned his forehead on her knee, "I wish I could confide in McGonagall too but she's...she'd never believe Dumbledore's worse than Voldemort."

"No, no she wouldn't. McGonagall is great and she's the fairest woman I know but she believes the sun rises and sets with Dumbledore, so does the majority of the staff. Probably because he wants them to believe that." She sighed softly. "Even a year ago I would never have believed it but Snape is our best bet and our best ally within Hogwarts. No matter what, he does love Orion so he might be more willing to help on account of that."

"Yeah. I used to think Snape wouldn't know love if it jumped up and bit him on his crooked banana of a nose but I'm man...ish enough to admit I was wrong." He opened his mouth then jumped when he heard Ron bellow.
"Oi! Harry! Hermione! Where are you two?!

"In here Ron." Hermione hollered back lifting her wand and sending a spark out the doorway so Ron would see it. "Hero's finally free of detention? Did you manage to suffer through it without actually clocking Goyle?"

Ron's voice grew louder as he followed the bit of light back, "Goyle had his detention with Flitwick. I used to think he couldn't get angry but boy was I wrong. I had mine with McGonagall, boring as..." Ron trailed off as he reached the doorway and saw the massive amounts of old books, "Bloody hell, this is...unexpected. Did you squeal and jump up and down Hermione?"

"Um...More like shook and burst into tears actually so you didn't miss much. Still lost in wonder about it though. Seriously considering moving here, only emerging for classes...A book troll." She smiled at her redheaded friend. "It's absolutely fantastic Ron, you can't believe all the things written in these books."

Ron exchanged a look with Harry and flopped down into a comfy chair. "You wouldn't do that. Not when the first task is at the end of the month. You'll be right there, cheering for Harry." Ron pulled out a Quidditch magazine to read.

"Of course I will, I'll be right at the front line cheering at the top of my lungs, just as you will but a girl can dream now can't she." Hermione quirked an eyebrow at Ron who was sitting in a room full of the most interesting and valuable literature in the wizarding world, reading a Quidditch magazine. "You know Ron...I sort of adore you."

He glanced up blinking in confusion, missing Harry's grin, "Huh? What brought that on then? I mean not that I'm not terribly fond of you too. You're my best girl, just...huh?"

"Never mind, just had to say it." She smiled fondly at him. "Blame it on girlish hormones if you will."

"Ooooookay," he studied a broom in the magazine and poked at his mental balance of his savings. Maybe he could swing a broom by next year?

Harry went back to his book, "So what'd McGonagall have you do?"

Ron grinned, "That's the best part, she just made me finish all this week's homework for all my classes. Boring but not too big a punishment. She'd probably have had me polishing trophies if I'd actually managed to land the hit on Goyle...can't say I'd have minded though. It would have felt good to plow my fist into that gorilla's face."

"I can imagine it would yes...Just keep your thumb out of the way as you land the punch because I kind of twisted my thumb on Malfoy's pointed face." Hermione opened and closed her hand as if to show a point. "And getting a place to finish your homework without disturbance...that's a reward, not punishment at all."

"For you, maybe," it was said with a grin, "So what've you been working on for Snuffles by the way? I keep forgetting to ask and you get absorbed in detail before you can tell me."

"Basically a metaphorical newspaper whack on his nose when he's about to be a berk." Hermione nibbled on her bottom lip. "Snuffles just want to make sure he won't hurt Remus in a heat of the moment sort of thing. I'm modifying a compulsion spell to help him with that. The spell is ready but I need to know what kind of triggers to set it to."

"That's easy, first temper," Ron waggled his fingers, "anger always brings out the worst in people,
like me, last year, with you and Crooks and the rat," he made a huffy growl, "then doubt. If he starts doubting Remus, which he shouldn't ever, a big whack on the nose. Then, and this is a really big one according to Mum and Dad, complacency, if he starts taking their relationship or what Remus does for granted and not giving back enough go past the whack on the nose and straight to a boot up the arse," he turned a page in the magazine.

Hermione made a cooing sort of sound and in a second she was out of the chair and plonked down on Ron's lap, over the magazine and everything. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged tightly. "That's absolutely brilliant Ron, just what I needed. I stand by my earlier statement and adore you."

Harry was shocked by the slight stirring of jealousy he felt. Why would he ever, in a thousand years, feel jealous because Hermione was hugging Ron? Especially when Ron's ears were turning red in embarrassment.

"Er you're welcome."

Harry shook himself and smiled, "It is brilliant. You do have your moments mate, though usually they're on the chessboard." He laughed at the two fingered gesture tossed his way.

"It really was just what I needed, now I can finish the spell for Sirius and we can try it out. Still kind of shocked that you my little stone-age man would understand relationships that well." She grinned at him and got off his lap with one last smacking kiss to his cheek. "A Hero for Luna and now this...Maybe all hope isn't lost for you after all."

"Oi, just because I don't like to talk about feelings doesn't mean I don't understand them." He started straightening out his magazine, "six siblings plus Mum and Dad make for a good education in understanding feelings and Sirius is pretty simple. He's just like the dog he turns into, one big bundle of impulse and emotion that doesn't think before it acts. He just never got house broken so he winds up piddling on the rug."

Harry burst out laughing, "Oh Merlin, where's my quill and parchment? I'm writing that down and sending it to Moony. He'll appreciate the laugh since the full moon was a few days ago."

Hermione was chuckling too at the image Ron painted with his words but she sobered as she sat back down in the chair. "I hope the full moon went okay for Remus and that Sirius is pampering him now." Hermione still remembered watching Remus shift last spring and the utter pain she'd seen in his eyes.

Harry was writing Ron's quip down, "He'd better be or I'm going to literally whack him with a newspaper."

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Sirius tapped lightly on the door, not wanting to wake Remus up if he was asleep, and shifted the tea tray in his hands. Remus wasn't feeling up to anything more than tea and toast and a couple of potions for the aftermath as of yet so he came up every couple of hours with fresh tea and plenty of toast. He also had Walnut on his shoulder, the tiny owl having delivered a note from Harry to Remus that he'd set on the tray.

"Come in." Remus was awake but he didn't have the energy to get out of bed. Even with Snape's potions it seemed as if every transformation was harder and harder to recover from. Maybe he was just getting old or maybe it was the fact that he didn't have to shape up for Orion now. He felt achy and a little nauseous but with rest he'd be alright.
Sirius nudged the door open, "Hey you. I come bearing chamomile tea, toast, and a note from our favorite green eyed troublemaker." He sat down on the edge of the bed and settled the standing tray over Remus’ lap.

"Thank you." Remus looked up at him with shadowed eyes. "You spoil me." He took a sip of the soothing, smooth tea and broke off a corner of a piece of toast and handed it to his son's tiny owl. Then he opened the note, read through it with widening eyes before he broke out laughing madly, almost choking on his tea and holding his sides as he laughed so hard they hurt.

Sirius blinked then raised a brow, "What's so funny there Moony?" He was glad to see Remus laughing but he wondered what prompted it.

Remus looked up from the note he was still clutching, amber eyes filled with warmth and laughter. Really he didn't know why he found it so funny but he did, it felt as if this laughter was exactly what he needed. It was still impossible to form words around his laughter so he just handed Sirius the note with a shaking hand.

He pulled his eyes from his laughing companion and read the note. His lips flattened into a thin line and his hand shook holding the note, his eyes concealed and shadowed by his hair as he stared at the words. He soft slowly, in a measured, controlled tone, "Piddling on the rug..."

The laughter subsided and Remus grew more concerned than amused as he looked at Sirius. "I'm not laughing at you...Well I suppose I am but not really. It was the wording that was funny but I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable or upset. It's just a silly joke..." He trailed off not knowing what more to say.

"Moony I'm not," his shoulders started to shake, "not upset," he snerked and the dam broke, "Piddling on the rug!" He flopped back onto the bed, laughter spilling from him, "By Merlin it's scary that Ron's got my number!"

Relief flooded Remus and seeing Sirius laugh he couldn't hold himself back anymore and started giggling madly again. "Takes one to know one perhaps."

Sirius practically hooted in laughter and stole a muggle pen from Remus' bedside cup, writing that on the note and giving it to Walnut to return at his leisure. He grinned up at Remus, finding it amusing that he was looking at him upside down while the werewolf had managed to stay upright even in his hilarity. "It's bloody good to hear you laugh. I think I owe Ron some Honeydukes chocolate for that one."

"I laugh." Remus protested but even as he said it he wondered just when he had laughed that freely without Orion somehow being the cause of it. He looked down at Sirius and it was so right to see him there, to feel the mattress dip beneath the weight of him and Remus struggled to get his mind back on track. "And if you have Honeydukes chocolate, then I demand you give it to me instead of sending it away."

"Not like that you don't. As for the chocolate, you'll get your share, if you think your stomach is up to it?" Sirius wiggled a foot absently.

"As much as I am willing to do almost anything for chocolate, I should probably stick to my tea and toast for a little bit longer...I'll remind you of it later though. I never forget a chocolate promise." Remus picked up the teacup and took another sip of his cooling tea. "You really are like a big puppy, not still for a second." He smiled at the man on his bed.

"I've got a lot of energy, an excess of it really. I think it stems from being made to be still so much
as a child." He plucked curiously at a loose string on the hem of Remus' nightshirt, "And I know you'll remember the two full size chocolate bars I picked up at Honeydukes, you wouldn't be Remus if you didn't."

A sandy brown brow went up at Sirius' plucking with his nightshirt but he didn't mind, Sirius had always been like that even back at Hogwarts. "Remus John Lupin, chocolate junkie. You should witness the weekends and holidays with me and Orion. Place candy in front of us and watch the battle play out, it's raw, vicious and very nearly to the death."

He chuckled, "You bite off the bunny ears don't you?" He grinned up at the other man, "Poor Orion, never gets his bunny ears."

Remus' cheeks flushed more at the sight of Sirius' smile than any bunny ear accusation. "Until Orion was about...Oh say ten, I don't think he even knew bunnies had heads, not the chocolate kind anyway."

Sirius laughed, "Wicked man, I approve. I'd even give you the Padfoot stamp of approval if I didn't think you'd kill me for getting ink on you or your clothes."

"Kill no, beat and maim absolutely." Remus chuckled, feeling better than he had since the transformation. "Besides I have my doubts that the Padfoot stamp of approval is anything to strive after."

He razzed him, "Thanks so much for that. I do know quality though, had it battered into my head from a young age, and you are quality Remus Lupin." He liked seeing that smile on Remus' face, "Oh by the way, I finished the paperwork and Harry should be getting an owl from Marchbanks, Eyler, and Tonks sometime tomorrow morning informing him of his new property. I wonder what his reaction will be?"

Remus nodded. "Harry's not used to getting gifts, getting a house...I think you can expect a lot of are you serious Sirius and you're out of your mind notes." Every trace of smile and amusement vanished from Remus' features. "Somehow those horrible muggles have managed to beat it into him that he's not worth anything." Remus closed his eyes, his heart hurting for Harry and once again almost drowning under the guilt that he hadn't done something.

Sirius reached up and laid a hand on Remus' arm and spoke softly, "Don't Remus. I may not have known it before but now I do and you don't have anything to feel guilty for and Harry would have been the first person to kick your bum had you taken a risk."

"I know, I do know it logically but I don't think I'll ever stop feeling guilty. He was just a baby and when he needed someone the most I wasn't there. It doesn't matter that I'm shackled, it just doesn't matter. Luckily and though I don't deserve it Harry doesn't hate me and I won't let him down again." Remus kept his gaze on his empty teacup.

Sirius squeezed Remus' arm, "If you, who didn't have any choice, don't deserve his forgiveness then I'm absolutely screwed." He waited until amber eyes met his, "I went after Peter. Instead of taking Harry and going to the Ministry immediately to get my guardianship of him solidified, like I should have done, I let my rage rule me and went after Peter. If I hadn't they'd have had no cause to arrest me, much less throw my bum in Azkaban, you wouldn't have been abducted and tortured, I would have been there to see both Orion and Harry grow up and spoil them and you rotten. I was such an unforgivable idiot." Gray eyes gleamed silver with unshed tears of regret.

"No, no, no, no Pads." Remus shifted and stretched until he could wrap his arms around Sirius. At the full body shudder that went through the other at his touch, Remus had to wonder how long it
had been since anyone had hugged him. "You acted rash but I did too when I just handed Orion away to Dumbledore. And no one no one at all could have knows how things would play out, with you being railroaded and sent to Azkaban without a hearing and trial. We made mistakes, plenty of them but much of it was out of your control."

Sirius' eyes closed and he pressed his face against Remus' shoulder. Gods it felt so good to have Remus' arms around him, to have that contact. He wanted to cling but had no idea how Remus would react to that so he just leaned into the gift of the embrace and let his arms lie limp. "But what was within my control I handled very badly, and why the hell wouldn't you have handed Orion to Dumbledore? It's not like there was something painted on the bastard's forehead saying 'I'm an evil manipulative git about to take advantage of your trust and put your child in danger'. He'd never given any of us reason not to trust him."

"Hindsight is a bitch." Remus stated dryly, his arms still around the man he loved, always would love. "I don't think there's a time turner in existence powerful enough to fix the mess in our past so I suppose we have to move forward. Take Dumbledore down. Be there for Orion and Harry in any way we can be and anyway they need us to be." He was quiet for a while. "Fuck Dumbledore and fuck Voldemort too! They don't know who they are up against."

Sirius smiled against the worn cotton of Remus' shirt, "They'll learn though and only once it's too late for them. I want very badly to kill Dumbledore with my bare hands but then there's this little voice in the back of my head insisting that's not enough." He nuzzled his cheek on Moony's shoulder, "I want to make him suffer but not through physical pain. I want to be instrumental in seeing him stripped from history so that no one remembers his name."

"That would be the thing that would hurt him the most. His reputation, the way people look at him in awe is the thing most important to him...We will be part of taking that away from him. If his name is remembered it will be in shame and scorn." One hand came up to stroke over softer than silk black hair.

"Mmm, I wonder if maybe there's a way to get Skeeter on his arse like a clinging vine." His head lifted as it occurred to him there might be and a wicked smile crept across his face, "Moony, isn't the owner of the Hog's Head Dumbledore's brother?"

"Aberforth? Yes he is but there's bad blood between the two of them which makes me instantly fonder of him." Remus' arms fell away, not so much because he wanted to but they ached, being lifted for so long. "What's going on in that wickedly brilliant mind of yours?"

Sirius' foot wiggled again, much like his tail would have been wagging in dog form, "Bad blood is even better. Let's say Skeeter gets an anonymous tip that there's bad blood between them, the owner of a shady pub and Hogwarts' esteemed," he mimed gagging, "headmaster and that there might be a deeper reason than what's obvious. What do you think she'd do?"

A slow smile that reminded everyone that looked of the wolf inside Remus spread over his lips and amber eyes gleamed. "She'd jump on it like a dog with a bone and run with it as far as it takes her. Dumbledore invited her into Hogwarts...Let him enjoy the consequences."

"And we get the bonus of her taking less time focusing on Harry." He returned Remus' feral smile, "Mind if I borrow your desk, some parchment and ink then?"

"By all means Mr. Padfoot. Go right ahead, what's mine is yours." Remus inclined his head, feeling almost giddy, like back in the Marauder days.

Sirius bounced up off the bed and over to the desk to pen the letter to Rita. He was going to relish
whatever chaos that woman brought down on Dumbledore.
Chapter 16

Hermione stretched and felt her shoulders pop, it didn't matter though she had finished. All essays were written, she might add things but they were written, Sirius' spell was done and sent as well. Someone sat down next to her and she smiled, thinking it was Ron and Harry. It wasn't, it was Viktor, followed as usual by his throng of admirers and she was very happy her work was done. It was not easy working with a library full of people. Hermione's smile didn't disappear at the sight of Viktor but it did change character, she didn't feel as comfortable with him as she did with her boys, then again she didn't feel as comfortable with anyone as she did with Harry and Ron. The three of them just knew every side of each other.

"Hello Viktor, everything alright?" She closed her books and gathered her scrolls of parchment. Already dreaming about sneaking down to Slytherin's library again.

"Da...I mean yes." He shifted a bit in embarrassment. He wasn't used to speaking with girls even in his own language. Trying to speak to someone he wanted to impress in English was thrice as awkward. "How are dings vith you?" And wasn't that oh so smooth. He felt like an idiot.

"I'm well, things are good." Her smile warmed, he looked so miserable, like a wet little...er, large kitty. "Just finished some torturous essays so I'm in a celebratory mood." She didn't mention or ask anything about the task or preparations for it. If they were to be friends then she didn't want the Tournament to get in the way, it was the same with Fleur.

"Dat is good. De essays vere alvays de most difficult vor me. I am better at practical magic." He relaxed a bit, giving her a very slight shy smile.

"I don't mind essays, rather like them normally but when they all come in bulk it can be a little daunting." He looked much younger and very much sweeter with that smile and he had dimples. Hermione would never have guessed. She smiled back him. "What kind of practical magic is your favorite?"

"I favor charms and vell, what is called dark magic it is not vat..." he paused trying to figure out the right way to word it, "de English call all bad or evil spells 'dark' magic ven dat is not de case. So the dark magic learned at Durmstrang is not bad or evil but falls under de old definition."

"I understand and I guess Old magic is probably a good word for it. Magic here has been twisted, used for horrible means and so people have grown afraid of it, call it dark," Hermione chewed on her bottom lip. "Most magic is not dark, it's the things that they are used for and those they are used by that make it bad. I'm not excusing all kind of magic, I've seen what it can do but I do believe that we've lost a lot of good things too, claiming it all as dark." She flushed. "I'm sorry...I have a tendency to lecture when I feel passion for a subject, bad habit."

"No it is a good ding," he paused, "charming. You should vant to speak of vat you feel passionate about. It is only overboard ven you repeat yourself."

"Stick around long enough and you'll hear me repeat myself both once and twice, another bad habit...I'm a nag as well." She colored slightly at his charming comment. She'd been called a lot once she got going but charming was not one of them.

He chuckled, "I haf learned dat dose who 'nag' do so because dey care. It is not alvays a bad ding."

"You are much too kind but thank you. I might ask you to repeat that to Harry and Ron sometime."
Hermione smiled again and pushed her hair behind an ear. It was easier than she'd expected to talk to Viktor, it seemed as if he actually really listened to what she said. Still it was strange to have a conversation with girls hiding behind the shelves, doing their best to listen in and glare holes through Hermione's skull.

Viktor started to say something else but stopped when Harry turned a corner looking half frazzled, half pleased and all red in the face. He studied the younger boy pausing and obviously considering just leaving as soon as he recognized that Viktor and Hermione were having a discussion.

"Harry, come, sit!" Hermione grinned and motioned to their table, getting an angry shush from Irma at her loud exclamation. It made her shrink back and give the librarian a sheepish smile. She wondered about Harry's expression. "Has something happened Harry?"

He looked between her and Viktor, feeling that very strange prod of jealousy again, "Um are you sure? I don't want to interrupt."

Viktor shook his head, "It is fine Harry."

That was all Harry needed to sidle into the seat on Hermione's other side and hand her the letter from Sirius' barrister he'd just gotten, "He's crazy. What is he thinking?"

"He's thinking that no matter what happens now, you'll have a place that is all yours. Something no one can take away from you." She leaned in closer, whispering in his ear. "If things get intolerable in the summer you have somewhere to go. It's yours and Bee can stuff his wards up his stinger." Hermione pulled back again. "I think it's excellent news and I'm finally starting to get why Snuffles was considered brilliant."

"But he I mean, gah!" His head clunked onto the desk, "It's too much! I don't deser-" he hissed a bit when he felt something whack the back of his head.

"Don't you dare!" Hermione released the book she'd used to whack him with. "Don't you dare say that. You deserve it Harry, deserve this and so much more. You haven't had a home since you were fifteen months old. The rest of us take that for granted. Of course you deserve it. Snuffles loves you, feels bad that he was unable to care for you. This...This is as much about him as it is about you, if you refuse it he will feel that you're refusing him, his love and his attempt to make something up to you that should have had all along."

Viktor's lips twitched as Harry muttered an ow and his hand went to rub the back of his head without him raising it from the table. From what he could gather Harry had just been given a house by someone and probably didn't know what to do about it.

"What about the adorable mini Snuffles bouncing round the school then? Shouldn't it belong to him seeing as he's his biological son," Harry turned his head to look at Hermione.

"Since Snuffles is the only heir to that particular...Kennel, do you really think there's just one house? This is a townhouse Harry. In Kennels like those there are most likely a main Mansion and several holiday homes. The pup is not going to end up house less." Hermione was starting to feel downright ridiculous, talking about Kennels and dogs and she sent Viktor an apologetic glance.

Harry looked across her at Viktor and sighed even as he sat back up and cast a privacy charm, "In case you're a bit lost here, Snuffles is a nickname for my godfather who's apparently given me his townhouse. It's a long story I'm not at liberty to share as to why we call him Snuffles."

"Dat is alright. If you would like some outside advice, accept de house. It vill give you both shelter..."
ven you need it and, if you would want to, a source of income if you choose to lease it to someone."

Harry's brows lifted and he pursed his lips in consideration. "Still feels weird though." He looked back at the letter. He was barely just now getting used to receiving a Weasley jumper every year. He just did not know what to do with getting gifts.

"Listen to Viktor, he's right." Hermione smiled at Viktor and reached out to pet Harry's hair, mindful of the spot where she'd whacked him. "You do deserve it Harry, you are wonderful and worth getting gifts." She pulled the letter close again and read through it. "Besides, if it makes you feel better there seems to be a little work required in getting it liveable. Pour any guilt you have into fixing that and write Snuffles and thank him."

He stuck his tongue out at her, "He's still crazy." He eyed the letter again, "I guess I should also write the Auror department too and see if they can get out there to look through the place and clear it of anything nasty." He looked back to Viktor, "So, moving on and ignoring my drama, how are you Viktor?"

Viktor noticed some of the girls outside the privacy bubble Harry had made looking near tears as they tried to hear what was being said, "I am vell, better now dat dey can not hear my every vord. Vat spell vas dat?"

"Mm? Oh one that Neville taught me actually, his Gran taught him as soon as he manifested enough magic for it and it seemed like a handy spell to know so I asked him if he could teach it to me and yes," he smiled affectionately at Hermione, "I promise I will show you how to do it later Mione."

"Thank you...You know me so well." Hermione grinned and she fluttered her lashes at him, her fingers already twitching with the urge to learn a new spell. She looked over Harry's shoulder at the girls ushering as close as they could in an attempt to snip something up of their conversation. "Um...Actually I think I'm going to be on my way before I get lynched for hogging two champions all to myself."

Harry pulled a face and dropped the privacy charm, "Actually I need to discuss something with you and Ron so I'll have to go too. Besides I think Malfoy's hunting for me after his cauldron blew up when he tried to toss something into mine and it rebounded," he fluttered his eyes at her, "protect me? No one's quicker with a wand than you and there is always the chance to see you clock him again." He grinned.

"Oh yes, because you really need someone to protect you." Hermione huffed and refused to recognize the fluttery feeling in her belly when Harry bat his lashes at her, even if it was all for fun. She packed up her things and turned to Viktor, placing her hand over his. "Thank you for the talk and the company, it was really nice and hopefully we can do it again." Smiling she got up from her seat and hoisted her bag high on her shoulder.

"I vould like dat." He glanced at the other girls around, who'd backed up after being reminded just how dangerous Hermione was with a wand, "Vor now I dink I vill return to de ship however."

Harry kicked the weird tickle of jealousy to the back of his head for the third time since the moment in Slytherin's library and gave Viktor a friendly pat on the shoulder, "See you round then." He followed Hermione out of the library and they made a few false turns to shake anyone following them and then found Ron talking to Myrtle in the bathroom.

"So you talk to Luna a lot then?"
"Oh yes." Myrtle nodded. "She's a fellow Ravenclaw and she never laughs or looks at me funny for my lack of...Substance. Sometimes, I even follow the pipes to the edge of the lake to talk to her. I don't do that for just anyone you know."

He nodded, "She's definitely one of a kind," the way he said it you could tell he approved, "I just don't get why her own house members bully her so much. I mean Malfoy actually doesn't bully her, though his gorillas don't seem to have a problem with it," he scowled over that, "but Malfoy himself doesn't so you'd think Luna's own house members would be more...you know," he waved his hand as he tried to find the right word.

"'Tolerance for what's unknown has never been a Ravenclaw motto." Myrtle seemed to droop a little. "She's bright, Luna is but she refuses to fit into any mold and when they fail to categorize her they do their best to push her out of their mold instead. As for the Malfoy boy...As horrid as he is, he won't go against blood. It's not done unless something unforgivable is done."

Harry exchanged a confused look with Hermione as Ron tilted his head.

"What do you mean?"

Myrtle looked extremely, extremely pleased to be the one at the center of attention and bring news. "Well Luna's mother was a Malfoy. She and the little Malfoy are cousins of some sort."

Both of Hermione's brows went up in surprise, that was certainly news to her.

Harry's jaw dropped and Ron, well he'd choked on his own spit and was coughing trying to get air into his lungs.

"Wh- Luna's Mum was a Malfoy?" Ron looked like someone had just smacked him in the face with a fish, "I think my world was just turned on its end. Luna...related to Malfoy..." he scrunched up his face, "I can't see it. I mean she's so...so not Malfoyish."

"She's as far from Malfoyish as you can get." Hermione agreed, still reeling a little from learning that sweet, strange Luna was related to Malfoy...And Malfoy Sr. "Aside from coloring I can't see it at all."

"Well back in the day Xenophilius Lovegood was quite a catch, old pureblood family, money...He had it all and both families highly approved of their match. It was from love though, I remember them in school and they really were in love." Myrtle nodded. "When You-Know-Who first rose to power and the Death Eaters started gaining ground Xenophilius and Leandra stepped away from all of it, loudly declared that they wanted nothing to do with it or its views."

Harry grimaced, "That can't have made them popular among that set and definitely not with Malfoy's father. It takes a lot of courage to do that."

"It does and it cost them everything. Family support, inheritance, everything they were used to. They never wavered though, made it through and built a new life for themselves...Until that terrible, tragical accident. Lucius was the only Malfoy who came to the funeral, people say it was just to check that she was really dead but once Lucius really cared about Leandra so I don't know. It's all hearsay. I can only be sure of the things happening within these walls." Myrtle floated to sit on her favored sink again.

Harry fiddled with the letter from the barrister, "Well I'm starting to see no one is all good or all evil and that bad people probably weren't always so. We'll give the young Lucius the benefit of the doubt and say he really cared about Luna's Mum once upon a time."
Ron's nose twitched, "Ugh that makes me consider that Malfoy is really human after all. I'm supposed to hate him not think about him being more than a prat."

Harry chuckled, "Ron you're just as much one of a kind as Luna I think."

"In the best way possible." Hermione added. "And you can still dislike him heavily I think. I mean okay, he doesn't actively bully Luna but he hasn't lifted a finger to make things better for her either. He just pretends she doesn't exist." To Hermione that was just as bad as bullying someone.

Harry hummed, remembering Malfoy's words at the end of last year. There was a look that had been familiar to the blond's face that he couldn't quite place. "Well down to the Chamber? Luna's part of what I wanted to ask you and Hermione about Ron."

"Of course." Hermione nodded. "Will you join us today Myrtle?"

The ghost shook her head. Even with her friends down there she didn't feel comfortable in the chambers of the creature that had killed her. "I'll keep guard as usual."

Hermione smiled at her before following Harry and Ron into the chamber. It was strange how homey it had begun to feel. Hermione felt more comfortable there than in their common room now.

Ron flopped into a leather chair in the chamber's library and waited for Harry and Hermione to settle, "So what's this about mate?"

"Well," Harry'd put his things in the chamber earlier so now he just pulled his bag over to himself, "I've been thinking and I'd really like your opinions. I think I want to tell Luna, Neville, and Fred and George about the Chamber and the library and have them start joining us here. I'm leaving Ginny out for now because...well I'm like you Ron, I'm wanting to protect her."

The twinge Hermione felt at those words came completely from the knowledge that it wouldn't be just the three of them anymore. It had nothing to do with Ginny and what Harry said about wanting to protect her. "Please warn me when she's about to find out then because heads will roll. Even if you do it to protect her she's going to be livid...And hurt and I don't want to be around when she explodes." Hermione picked at her nails. "Other than that, you should tell them, they could be of use and well, it's the right thing to do." She was a selfish, selfish girl for wanting to keep these moments to herself and she knew it.

Ron rubbed the back of his neck, "I'm gonna say something really, really twatish. I don't want that. I like it being just the three of us down here, it's something that's just for us but I think they can be trusted and that if we're going to work to get you out from under the big fat bumblebee's thumb, we need them. So I think you should, I'll just shove my bratty desire not to share deep into the back of my mind. And...bring Ginny in on it too. Much as I hate, I mean really truly hate the thought of her being in the line of fire, she'll find out eventually that something's going on and the consequences just aren't worth it."

Harry gave him a smile, "I'm going to miss it being just us too. You sure about telling Ginny?"

The redhead nodded.

"Okay then. Oh and um...Hagrid wants me to meet him at the edge of the forest tonight. So, just a heads up if you don't see me in bed Ron."

"Okay mate."

Hermione felt a flood of warmth toward Ron for saying what she felt but was too ashamed to admit
and for making sure Ginny would be included. Even if other people were to join them now it helped that Ron and even Harry would feel the loss of it being just them too.

"Any guesses what Hagrid wants to show you? Something scaly and firebreathing perhaps?" Hermione leaned her head in her hand and looked over at Harry.

Harry shrugged, "Let's just say I'm hoping it's something a little less dangerous but then again he used the word 'amazing' and had the Norbert gleam in his eye so...I'm betting yes."

"Mum said Charlie would be here this week so I think that's about right," Ron flicked his wand in the summoning charm Hermione had drilled into both their heads and caught the book on strategy that came flying towards him.

Harry smiled. Ron had taken to reading a few of the books down here, mostly strategy and tactics with a little defense magic thrown in. He noticed that when his friend didn't have twenty different things to distract him he liked to open a book or magazine while talking to someone and he thought it probably had to do with the way Ron was always so restless and fidgety. He always had to be doing a lot of things and in a library, there were a ton of books so why not read one of them?

Hermione looked at Ron with an approving gleam in her eyes before she Accioed the thick tome she was in the middle of to rest in her own lap. She did her best to concentrate and get lost in the book, she really read but she felt as fidgety as Ron and finally she closed to book loudly and looked at Harry with pleading brown eyes. "I have been patient and good. Please, please, please teach me that spell you used in the library." If there was a spell and she didn't know it then Hermione was absolutely not beyond begging.

He chuckled and got up, setting his quill aside from his homework, "Alright, but I do have a tiny requirement." His eyes twinkled.

Ron closed his own book and got to his feet, "Uh-oh Hermione, Harry actually wants something. Think we should run?"

"Maybe, but we both know we won't." Hermione smiled and got up as well. "It's actually a good thing if our Harry here learns to want things for himself and ask for them...If we do what he asks is another matter entirely." Her eyes glittered. "So what so you want from us oh great teacher of spells?"

The twinkle faded and he grew serious, "I want you to work on learning the Patronus Charm. Both of you. I don't want either of you to be made vulnerable because dementors are around and it seems like Voldemort and the Death Eaters have some sort of control over them."

Hermione swallowed, remembering how Lucius Malfoy seemed to have control over the dementors that attacked them last year. "I promise Harry, we'll work on it until we've got it down. Right Ron?" She turned to the redhead, learning the Patronus charm wouldn't be easy, she knew that but if they worked on it together they should be able to do it.

Ron nodded. He knew that himself and Hermione didn't have the sheer strength and amount of magic that Harry did and that would make learning and casting a patronus more difficult but Harry was right. It was something they needed to do. "Of course mate. Gotta ask you to teach us that one too though," he smiled at Harry.

"Gladly, we'll start with the easy one. It's sort of similar in intent to the shield spell only instead of casting a shield around an object or yourself to block out physical objects, you're making a sound and sight barrier between yourself and the outside world. The incantation isn't in Latin or anything
else we use in class. It's Welsh. Llen fi," he said it slowly, drawing it out so that they could both hear the nuances of the words. "And the wand movement is just a little circle," he held his wand up straight in the air and made a tiny circle with the tip of it.

It was almost so she wanted to whip out her old muggle notepad and take notes but instead Hermione settled for listening and watching intently. She pulled her own wand out of its holster and mimicked Harry both in words and movement. Welsh had never been a strong point but she hoped she didn't butcher the words too badly. Hermione could see a flickering circle settle around Harry and then she couldn't hear what he said, only see his lips move vaguely but the image even though it was clear made it impossible to read lips as well. Oh this really was a handy spell and Hermione couldn't wait to master it.

Ron had an easier time with the Welsh. It was one of the old languages that a lot of pureblood creeds were in and even though his family was all for muggleborns being equal they did have pride in knowing their history so he'd been drilled a bit on those mottos. The motion gave him a bit of trouble though. He tended toward larger motions and expressions so the smaller and more subtle a motion was, the more difficult it was. It made him wonder how anyone could manage wandless magic. He saw Hermione manage it out of the corner of his eye and smiled. No surprise there. He doubted there was a spell she couldn't master. He put a little more concentration into it and made the little circle with his wand tip and felt the funny curtaining off from the others. "Wicked."

Harry dropped his spell and walked into Hermione's privacy bubble, "It moves with you but since it's not a solid shield, someone can walk into it. Like I just did."

"I understand and it's useful that it moves with you." She bit her bottom lip. "How do you prevent just anyone to walk into it though? What if you're talking about something really sensitive and someone just stumbles into your bubble and hears everything?" As always Hermione wanted to learn it all, every little detail.

"Well Nev didn't have an answer for that so I came up with one." He cast the shield spell around the privacy bubble with a grin.

Hermione smiled slowly in reply, eyes gleaming. "Oh I do love how your mind works at times, this is rather great. I have to thank Neville too and his Grandmother because I have a feeling this is a spell that will come in handy. Thank you Harry for teaching it to us."

"Keep things simple," he kissed her cheek then dropped the shield spell to give Ron the same information. Once that was done and the privacy charms were down he nodded, "Okay well. The Patronus is hard mostly because you have to believe that you can cast it. You can't just think you could, you have to know and be completely confident that you will. It's made of positive emotions so thinking of something that makes you happy helps. Professor Flitwick told me that all magic is fueled by emotions and the better you feel the easier it is to cast. Thinking of a happy memory when facing a dementor and trying to cast the patronus gives you a bit of a shield, some room to cast it because the more joy or love you feel the more they have to 'eat' to incapacitate you." He explained a little more and demonstrated it for them both, smiling at the lioness that leaped from his wand and stretched, padding around them lazily before disappearing.

Ron grinned at Harry's patronus. "Lion through and through you are."

"Well I don't know about that," Harry rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, thinking of how the Sorting Hat had wanted to put him in Slytherin. "But let's get to work, I'll be finishing my homework while you two give it a go."

Even when Harry's homework was long done and their stomachs had started to rumble there hadn't
been much progress. As much as she concentrated and focused on the happiest memories she could think of, it didn't work. Hermione had known it wouldn't be easy and she'd known that even Harry with all his strength and magic reserve had struggled but it still frustrated her to no end. She knew it wasn't possible and she knew that Ron and Harry didn't care if she wasn't perfect but she was still driven by this urge that she had to do everything perfectly. Logically she knew that wasn't possible but unfortunately the rest of her didn't seem to agree.

Ron had managed to produce a tiny, sad looking tendril of silverish smoke, it wasn't much but it was something. Hermione got nothing. She knew there would be a privacy bubble around her bed that night, and lots and lots of practicing.

Ron wasn't as frustrated as Hermione, just the opposite. He felt a little smug and proud of himself for even that sad little tendril because he remembered just how mad Harry went last year trying to learn the spell so even that little tendril made him happy and he'd get better as time went on. He blushed as his stomach gave a loud grumble, "Er break for dinner do you think?"

Harry laughed, he'd been focusing on his animagus magic once finishing his homework. It was just there, at the edge of his consciousness but he couldn't quite reach it just yet. He got closer every time though and knew that soon he'd be transforming into whatever creature he was. "Yeah. Hard to focus on an empty stomach."

"I think dinner is a good idea." Hermione didn't admit defeat but it was time to stop, her own stomach was grumbling, she ached from standing and trying to cast the Patronus for hours and if she didn't get some food she would be more than a little cranky. That combined with her frustration would make her very poor company and she wanted to avoid that.

Ron beamed, "Well let's go then." He grabbed his bag and waved Hermione and Harry ahead of him, much to their mutual amusement.

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Harry flopped face first into the Gryffindor common room couch, casting the privacy bubble around himself and his two best friends, "It's worse than I'd have thought I swear."

Hermione made a soft noise in the back of her throat and leaned forward in concern. "Worse? What on earth did Hagrid show you last night?" She reached out and petted unruly black hair since his face was buried in the couch.

"Yeah mate, what's worse than dragons?" Ron's eyes were wide in worry.

"Oh it is dragons but not just any dragons," he turned his head to look at them, "nesting mothers." He let that sink in and saw that Ron got it at once, not surprising considering that Charlie probably held forth on the subject of the creatures he worked with.

"Nesting mothers?" Hermione didn't get it right away but then her eyes widened and she paled, remembering what she'd read in the book Harry had found down in Slytherin's library. "Oh, nesting mothers are very protective aren't they? Like a mother bear...Only much bigger, with claws, teeth and...Fire?"

Ron snorted, "Charlie said once that a nesting mother dragon is moodier than a woman going through 'the change' who's just been called fat by her husband."

Harry had to chuckle weakly, "Your brother has a unique turn of phrase, no wonder he's single."

Hermione had to smile at Charlie and his phrase though she wasn't really sure that she shouldn't be
offended by it as a member of the female species. "So, back to the matter at hand, I'm thinking the task is to get one of the dragon eggs. Isn't that cruel? Steal a baby?"

Ron shook his head, "Can't do that. It's illegal in every country in the world to take a dragon egg that's not been abandoned. Maybe something put with the eggs though?"

Harry groaned and turned onto his side, "Probably, or something inside a false egg. Either way the dragon isn't likely to listen to me, not in this case."

"No, she will see you as a threat to her eggs and not listen to anything you say. We need to figure something else out." Hermione nibbled her lip. "Do the other champions know? About the dragons I mean."

"Krum and Fleur definitely, Hagrid brought Maxime with him, which is why he told me to wear the invisibility cloak, on some sort of mad date and Karkaroff was sneaking around and you can bet they'll tell their champions." He frowned, "Diggory won't know though."

Ron shrugged, "Oh well? Let's hope he doesn't get fried?" He dodged Hermione's swipe, "I'm joking! Bloody hell woman."

"That's not funny, nothing to joke about. Cedric Diggory hasn't been anything but nice to any of us." Hermione waited for a while before she delivered a blow to the back of his head that he couldn't dodge. "I want Harry to win, to have an edge of course I do but joking about someone getting hurt is tasteless."

Harry chuckled weakly as Ron whined about the damage to his skull, "I'm going to tell Cedric. It's only fair he knows about the dragons."

Ron groaned, "Harry you're a Gryffindor, not a Hufflepuff!"

Hermione raised her hand again and felt a sliver of satisfaction when Ron winced. "It's the right thing to do Harry and I'm proud of you. Don't listen to Berky McBerk over here."

"Nice or not I can't help it Hermione. Harry deserves the edge and I doubt Diggory would tell Harry about the dragons if their situations were reversed no matter what his house is. He's not exactly done anything about his entire bloody house wearing those ruddy Potter Stinks badges now has he? House of fairness my lily white freckled bum."

"I told you, I want Harry to have an edge too, I want him to beat Cedric into the ground and stomp on him. How would you feel though if Cedric ends up hurt or even worse because he was the only one not prepared? How do you think Harry would feel? I have enough faith in Harry to know that he can win anyway, with an even playing field." Hermione sniffed and raised her chin stubbornly.

"Well yeah, he's Harry after all. Impossible means nothing to him, never has. An yeah I know mate," he slid a look over to Harry, "you'd be wallowing in guilt if Diggory got hurt because he wasn't prepared. That's just how you're built. Still I've a very long wide petty streak and I'd not be too fussed if his bum got a little blistered, that's how I'm built and I'd consider it karma for his just letting his house members put you down." He shrugged, "Love me, love the petty bits of me?"

Harry's lips twitched and he hid the amused look in the couch cushion. Only Ron would admit to being petty with pride.

"What are we going to do with you Ron?" Hermione honestly didn't know whether to laugh or rage. "I do love you though, even the petty bits." She shook her head in almost disbelief.
"I'm just too cute," he bat his eyelashes, laughing at the playful swat he got from Hermione then, "Alright moving on from Diggory, Charlie says that nesting mothers don't budge from the eggs, not one bit, unless there's a clear and present danger, a predator or something. So first Harry, you need to figure out how to get her away from her eggs for a little bit."

"A distraction that will give you enough time to sneak behind the dragon and get...Whatever it is you'll be getting. Something that will get the dragon to move away but not be a real danger to the eggs." Hermione twirled her hair around her fingers as she thought about it. "Maybe there's a spell or a charm we can find, conjure some sort of illusion or something..." She trailed off.

Harry lifted his head, "What? I recognize that look Hermione, you've thought of something brilliant."

"It's so simple, well it's simple if it works but it should work." She was babbling and she knew it but she was so excited she couldn't help himself. "A lioness is a predator right? Should be enough to make dragon mama take pause and move to protect her eggs."

He grinned widely, "Yup, thought of something brilliant. Not to mention dragons can feel and scent magic so it'll make her even more ready to pounce on a predator made of magic. So I'll use the patronus to distract her. Then what?"

Ron snorted, "Run in like a bat out of hell and grab whatever you're made to fetch?"

"I can't run that fast Ron...." a gleam entered his eyes, "but I can fly. I can summon my Firebolt before I cast the patronus then fly in, grab what I need to and fly back out."

Hermione hummed. "It's a good idea but it seems like a lot of unnecessary work. Instead of summoning your broom, which will take some time, why not just summon whatever it is you're supposed to get and then do as Ron says and get the hell out of there?"

Harry grinned and snickered, "Hermione I adore you. I can just see the looks on the other champion's faces too, want to bet they'll be using complicated plans and magic? Can't you just see the 'I'm such an idiot' looks when they realize they could have just summoned it?"

Hermione snickered. "It will be brilliant, oh I can't wait to witness it...Maybe I do have a petty streak too." She grinned even wider and wiggled her toes happily.

Harry chuckled and reached out to brush his fingers over her cheek, "It's cute on you."

Ron noticed the look on Harry's face and the slight difference in tone and the blush on Hermione's cheeks and his brows shot up before he schooled his expression into fond amusement. He'd keep what he'd just seen to himself until one of the two sitting across from him started bollocksing things up.

She blushed so hard it felt as if she would actually burn. Hermione frantically thought of something, anything to say to change the subject until the blush was gone and things were back to normal. She knew Harry didn't mean anything when he said things like that but it still wrecked havoc with her insides...And outsides too. "Oh I forgot to tell you earlier but I sent Snuffles the spell earlier today. I do hope it will work like he wanted it too."

Harry smiled, "I'm sure it will Hermione. Give yourself credit for your brilliance will you? We can ask him how it worked when we visit Hogsmeade before the First Task."

"Yeah, it will be nice to visit them. See Snuffles out of dog form and see Remus, it's been too long." Hermione smiled back, feeling almost back to normal again.
Ron leaned back and grinned, "Toss in the fact that I really want to beat Snuffles in a game of chess. He's suppose to be one of the best."

"Just don't whine when he wipes the board with your arse," Harry laughed at the two fingered salute he got from Ron, "Before we visit them though I've got to pick up my robes for the First Task from Gladrags." He'd footed the bill for them since he'd chosen his own cause and had chosen amber gold and silver as the colors of the robes and a howling wolf embroidered in black on the back. He wanted Moony's opinion of them in case he misstepped. Plus Snape had offered his own Pensieve for Remus' memory of the ritual and that wasn't something Harry was going to ask for in a letter.

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Sirius breathed in nervously as he painted the last rune in the circle around him and prepared to cast the spell Hermione had sent him. He'd had to wait until Remus was out doing some shopping because he didn't want him to try stopping him. He needed this reassurance that he'd stay on his new chosen path of maturity. He held his wand straight up in the air above his head, closed his eyes, and intoned the incantation, "Ligatus fuero tempero!" He felt the gentle threads of his magic weaving and warping to fix the spell to him, to bind the warning to his anger, his suspicions, and his habit of taking things for granted.

Remus was coming home after his weekly shopping trip throughout the shops of Hogsmeade. He was just about to enter the little house he'd rented to be close to Hogwarts, Harry and Orion when a surge of magic came from inside. Dropping his bags where they were, Remus hurried inside, worry rose inside him and he tore inside took the steps in wide strides, wand drawn and ready. "Sirius! Are you okay? What's happening?" He stormed into Sirius' bedroom to see the other sitting calmly on the floor. "What are you doing?"

Sirius' eye shot open and connected with Remus', the irises nearly glowing as the spell settled and his magic finished binding it. He couldn't risk saying anything until it was finished, all the way finished. He didn't want to adversely affect the spell. Trust Remus to be so bloody efficient at shopping he only took half the time Sirius would have and come back early. His lips tilted in fond amusement at that thought and he shook his head, bringing the finger that wasn't holding his wand in air to his lips in a gesture that conveyed to wait just a moment.

Brows furrowed and wand still drawn, Remus waited impatiently. What the hell was Sirius up to, why did he need to perform any spells at all in his bedroom? Remus didn't like it, didn't like not knowing. Worrying that something was wrong, that something had happened. He leaned against the doorjamb and watched carefully as the spell, whatever it was settled and the hum of magic in the air calmed down.

Sirius lowered his wand, erasing a couple of the runes in the circle and breaking it before tucking it back into the holster, "You worry about me too much Remus," he got to his feet and gestured to the spot between Remus' brows, "You've got the worry line going."

Remus' frown only deepened at that. "I don't think that's strange. I was scared something was wrong, still not sure nothing is." Remus' eyes searched Sirius', "Are you okay Pads? What's with the casting circle?"

"I'm fine. I'm sorry to have scared you. I was trying to get this done before you came back," he gave a crooked smile, "so I wouldn't worry you." He nodded at the circle, "This is part of a spell I had Hermione fix up for me. A bit of peace of mind in a way."

"Nothing to alter you in any way or cover up something that's wrong?" Remus stepped closer and
placed a hand against Sirius' cheek. He didn't want to pry or for Sirius to believe that he wanted to control what he was doing. He just wanted to make sure that Sirius was safe.

Sirius leaned into the touch, "No, nothing like that. Just a spell to give me warning. I...I don't trust myself, my temper, so I asked Hermione to help me find or create a spell that would give me a warning when I was about to let my temper get the better of me. It doesn't change anything about me or tie my temper down, it just whacks me on the nose to let me know I'm letting my temper control my brain."

"Okay...Okay." Remus' hand went to the back of Sirius' neck and he pulled the other wizard close, wrapping his arms around him. "Fuck you scared me. I can't say anything about that spell I guess, especially not now that you've already performed it. It's a bit like my Wolfsbane around the moon I guess, anything to keep in control of yourself...But Sirius, you don't have to change anything you are, really."

Sirius nuzzled the edge of Remus' jaw, "I know but...I'm afraid. I hurt you so much Remus because of my temper and stupid suspicions and because I started taking you for granted and I never ever want to hurt you again but I'm terrified that I'm not strong enough to keep control on my own. If I hurt you again...it would kill me."

"Oh Sirius." Right then and there Remus broke down, remembering the cold months before everything fell apart and all the lonely years following. He didn't know what he was doing, only that he clung to Sirius and cried for everything lost and everything still in front of them. Crying, completely unable to stop.

Sirius' arms locked around Remus and he rocked him gently, murmuring apologies over and over, "I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry." One hand lifted to stroke soothingly over Remus' hair as he cried himself out. Any other time Sirius would be trying to get Remus to stop crying but he recognized the catharsis for what it was and knew it was needed. That didn't stop tears from escaping his own eyes or his heart from clenching at the proof of just how much pain his idiocy had caused his Moony.

He didn't know how long it took but once the tears finally subsided but they were both on the floor by then and Remus was still clinging. "I'm sorry too and I'm terribly, terribly sorry for falling apart on you." Remus felt exposed, naked and very embarrassed but also lighter. How awful as it was to behave this way it felt as if it was needed.

"That's nothing to be sorry about Remus," he nosed the top of his head, "it's been a long time coming I think." He didn't move his arms, keeping them firm around the other man.

Remus stayed quiet even though there was so much he wanted to say. How he'd been terrified that he'd never get to see Sirius again and terrified that he would. That he loved him, that he would always love him more than anything except for their son. But even after this Remus wasn't entirely sure where to go from here. Going back to what they'd once had was impossible and frankly Remus didn't want that back. He wanted to move forward and as difficult as it was he needed to take things slow. Sirius wasn't the only one who'd be destroyed if things cocked up again, Remus really think he could handle it either. "The bacon is on the street." It was such a stupid, silly thing to say and all Remus could manage to press out.

"Oh, well we can't have that," Sirius pulled out his wand, "Accio groceries." He gave Remus a squeeze. "We do need to have snacks for the little ones when they come visit this weekend."

"Yes, absolutely. Lots of snacks." Remus gave a watery laugh but didn't move away from the floor or Sirius. "I look forward to seeing them, don't tell them you called them little ones though.
Remember when you were fourteen? You thought yourself to be very mature and worldly."

Sirius snorted, "I was a berk and a prat and I'm barely much better now. Harry's more of an adult than I ever was." He rested his chin on Remus' shoulder. He wanted to tell Remus so much, wanted to tell him that in that dark cell in Azkaban the only thing that had kept him sane was thinking about their times together, wanted to share a thousand hopes and dreams and fears but he knew this wasn't the time for it. Knew that it was too soon. "Come on then. I'll put the groceries away and make some tea while you tell me that I'm turning the oatmeal the wrong way or that the sugar goes one cabinet over."

"You make me sound like a nagging housewife." Remus grumbled but he smiled as he said it and made his way off the floor. "Tea does sound good and I splurged and bought Jaffa cakes, nothing like a chocolate biscuit to better the mood." He followed Sirius downstairs, closed the door that was still open and carried the grocery bags to the kitchen table.

Sirius put the kettle on and began putting away the groceries, "Not a housewife, you do not in any way resemble a woman," his 'thank Merlin' was spoken under his breath, "Or a nagger. Just a tiny bit OCD. It doesn't bother me," he nestled the box of sugar into place in the exact spot it's predecessor had been, "actually I need it or I'd go spare." He picked up a jar of olives, "So long without a choice in even when I could relieve myself...it makes it a little...overwhelming to suddenly have hundreds of choices all laid out before me. The structure helps."

Remus was torn as he heard that. "I'm glad if the structure helps but Sirius...I don't ever want to take control over what you do or make your choices for you. If I do without thinking about it, punch me...Hard." He brought out their usual teacups and a platter to put biscuits on.

He shook his head, "You're not. You help me narrow things down enough to where I'm comfortable enough to make a good choice. If not for you I'd wind up buying twenty jars green olives and forty different brands of gouda and I hate gouda." He put the olives up, "You don't leash me Moony so don't worry that you do okay?"

"Okay." Instead of worrying to the point of obsession, Remus needed to listen to what Sirius told him and trust what he said. Start with the small things and work up toward the bigger ones. "Just tell me if I overstep...After being a parent for so long I have a tendency to treat everyone around me as a child. I actually cut Snape's meat for him once when he was over for dinner, he was not impressed."

His lips twitched, "I'll let you know if you start treating me like an ickle bitty one Remus, promise." He put the bacon and other perishables in the ice box. "That must have put an interesting expression on his face. What does he do, when not terrifying the carrier monkeys and haunting bel-" he paused and rubbed the tip of his nose, the slight sting telling that the spell had definitely worked, "not brooding into a cauldron?"

Remus gave him a curious look at the nose rubbing but didn't mention it. "Except risking his life daily being a spy you mean?" A brown eyebrow rose. "Mostly though...I think he's actually brooding into a cauldron, making all kinds of potions no one else knows how to make. Orion is afraid he's lonely, wants to set him up. Last year he thought Severus and I were lovers...Silly, silly boy." Remus chuckled, remembering Severus' face when he had told him about that conversation.

Sirius stuffed the jealousy that tried to rise at that mere suggestion very very far down, "I'm pretty sure he's straight truth be told." He remembered just how fixed Snape had been on Lily and he recalled vaguely the only time he'd ever felt sympathy for him during their school years. It had been a bit after that time they'd dangled him upside down and he been looking at Lily after she'd passed him in the corridor, completely ignoring his very existence. He'd looked...gutted. It had
been the only time he could ever really recall thinking of Lily in less than glowing terms. "That or he was just...Lily-sexual and wouldn't she kick her boot up my bum for saying that?" He brought the brewed tea over to the table and poured some in cups.

"She would, so far up you'd need an archaeologist to dig it out." Remus grinned. It felt nice to be able to remember Lily without it being followed by gut wrenching pain. "I hope he's not just Lily-sexual, that will leave him pretty much screwed. This time I think Orion is right, I hope Severus will find someone who is right for him one day. So he won't be alone." Remus waited until Sirius sat down before pushing the biscuit platter closer to him, after nabbing a few for himself of course...It was Jaffa cakes, how could anyone resist?

Sirius nibbled lightly on a biscuit, "Hmm. I wouldn't hold my breath on that were I you Moony," he held up a hand when a scowl flickered over Remus' face, "I don't mean that in a bad way. There is probably someone out there who could wiggle past the exterior defenses and all and not care that their tail feathers get singed. What I mean is...well how likely is he to be open to being with someone while he's still walking his barbed wire tightrope?"

"No, you're right." Remus looked sad and somewhat resigned. "As long as he has to balance on this knife-edge the way he does he won't let anyone come that close. No matter how much he might wish to." He took a sip of his tea, hot and brewed to perfection, Sirius knew exactly how long to let the tea leaves steep, making it strong enough without becoming bitter. 'Maybe someday, things will be different. We can at least hope right?' Remus looked up into Sirius' beautiful eyes, he'd always found those silver gray eyes surrounded by long, thick, pitch black lashes absolutely stunning and that hadn't changed. They could be completely and utterly ice cold, dancing with laughter or smoldering with lust. Oh why did his mind have to go there? Remus had never been with anyone but Sirius, his one and only lover. Hadn't had sex since the night Orion was conceived but he was a healthy, youngish man and living so close to Sirius was...hard, in more ways than one. Remus found himself watching Sirius more and more, taking in every detail like the angle of his jaw and they way his hair curled around his neck and he'd dream about it at night.

"More than hope Remus. I believe, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that things will change for the better." The expressive gray eyes roamed the scarred planes and edges of Remus' face, taking in every beloved, and sexy to his mind, detail. He'd always held Remus in his heart, tucked up safe and warm even against dementors. He'd also always had thehots for him. That was something he'd never told Remus, that he'd not once accepted any of the blatant invitations for a roll in the sheets with anyone. It hadn't been until he and Remus had gotten together that he'd had sex, though he'd done more research in books than he liked to recall, and even though there had been the occasional offers in Azkaban, people often used sex to create feelings to drive away the dementors, he'd still only ever had sex with the man across from him. Being in the same house played hell with his libido, had it shaking the bars and howling to be let out of the cage, and the fact that Remus just looked even more fucking sexy than he had thirteen years ago didn't help. Long and cold showers were his friends and that looked to remain the case for a while to come.

"I believe you." Remus' voice sounded a little hoarse, since his mind had gone places they shouldn't go, not with the object of his fantasies sitting right across from him. "I believe things will get better too. Believe in Harry and even in us, that we'll be able to help him, show him that he doesn't stand alone." Suddenly both tea and biscuits tasted like ash and the only flavor Remus craved was the taste of Sirius' skin when he licked him. No this wouldn't do, Remus was well on his way to absolutely embarrass himself and he tried frantically to get his mind onto a different track.

"His little lady will help with that I'm sure," Sirius' eyes twinkled in humor, despite the touch hunger he was suddenly swamped with, "think those two will figure out that they don't like each
Remus released his bottom lip that he's been sucking on absentmindedly. "I don't know, for all her brilliance and all his bravery I think this might be one of those toe around each other, denial until the very last minute sort of deals. It's cute to watch though, they are so smitten, the way they look at each other and all those casual touches that aren't casual at all." He chuckled. "I think there was more than learning Bill to knock behind the whole turning him blue plan after the World Cup. Do you think he'll invite her to the ball come Christmas?"

"He might since he's not particularly comfortable with girls he doesn't know, though I wonder if he even knows there's going to be a ball. Some things escape his notice and he's more focused on staying in one piece than on the other details of the tournament." Sirius' eyes had dropped briefly to Remus' lips before he wrenched them away and shifted in his seat. It would be a cold shower tonight. "Think we should give him a heads up when they visit? I don't think he knows how to dance truth be told. It's not exactly included in Muggle education."

"Yeah." Remus tore his eyes away from the hollow of Sirius' throat and how his adams apple moved when he spoke. "I think a hint would be a good thing. At least then he can be a little prepared. I hope he won't ask Hermione just because he's not comfortable around girls he doesn't know though, if I was her I wouldn't be impressed by that. Still that's none of our business, I know better than to start playing cupid."

Sirius snickered, "Better than James that's for sure. Do you remember when he tried to set up Frank and Alice? I think he had trouble sitting for weeks after Alice was through with him." He sipped at his tea and found his eyes lingering on Remus' hands. He loved those hands, the solid strength, the square fingertips with their nibbled on nails, the way the tendons shifted under the skin, the calluses on the pads of the fingers from hard work, the sprinkling of hair over the back. Sure confident hands that he could remember trembling when they touched him, shaking when he slid his fingers between Remus' as he'd joined their bodies. And he really needed to get his thoughts away from that before he had an embarrassing problem that refused to go down. "And I don't think Harry would think like that. He might ask her as a friend without thinking of it that way though."

"Mmm, the question is how Hermione would see it though. The mind of a teenage girl is a scary, complicated place." Remus smiled, his eyes still getting stuck on Sirius' neck. It was so long and proud and Remus remembered how it had looked marked with his bites. He cursed his mind for not being able to go in a different direction. His nose was filled with the warm, spicy scent of Sirius until he was almost high with it and his hands ached to touch, his tongue to taste. "Remember Marlene? She was so in love with you and when you asked her to that dance as just a friend...Merlin I was so jealous of her back then." And that wasn't supposed to slip out, it was something he'd kept to himself for twenty years. What was wrong with him today?

Silver eyes lifted from Remus' hands in surprise, "You were?"

Well no point denying it now when he'd already blurted it out. "Yeah, desperately so." He looked down at his scarred hands, remembering the feeling when Sirius had come up to the dormroom and told them he was going to the dance with Marlene. It had hurt almost as bad as the transformations on the full moon.

"Well I wish I'd known that. I only asked her because I didn't want to be without a dance partner and I thought you'd tell me to go chase my tail...that or you'd hit me on the head with one of the books." Sirius shook his head with an amused sigh, "Course according to James I wouldn't have known someone was interested in me if they hit me over the head with a clue bat. I didn't know about Marlene until after the bloody dance when she dashed away crying her eyes out. Lily almost
killed me at first thinking I'd upset her on purpose.”

"Yeah I remember that, she stood watch outside the portrait hole to twist your ear.” Remus knew Sirius hadn't hurt Marlene on purpose, he really was as oblivious as James had said he was. "And if you had asked me back then I would probably have hit you over the head with a book, thinking it was a prank. Didn't stop me from being jealous though." He smiled a bit ruefully.

Sirius stuck his tongue out at him, "I was fortunate that Lily was in more of the quiet deadly mood. If she'd been in her turn him into a burning pyre temper she'd never have noticed the completely clueless expression I'd had. Fortunately she did and took pity on my thick skull."

This was bad, it was so, so bad when even the sight of Sirius sticking his tongue out in jest became a seductive, arousing thing. Remus all but groaned. "I loved Lily like she was my sister but she was always a bit quick to judge, to let her temper speak before her mind. In a strange way James mellowed her out, even with all his energy and temper of his own."

"Mmm not so strange actually, at the first neither one wanted to ignite the other's temper out of fear and the other energy they just wore each other out, then later they just didn't want to hurt each other. They were so much alike that they sort of fused together instead of being like Molly and Arthur."

"You're probably right." Remus nodded. When it came to relationships that didn't involve himself, Sirius was surprisingly insightful. He finished his tea and since his body and mind seemed to be on a treacherous path today Remus thought it better to flee while he still could, before he did something truly stupid. "Thank you for today Sirius." He meant both the breakdown and the talk, it had been a very long time since he'd been able to talk with Sirius that openly. "I'm afraid I have to go get my newest translation done, patience is not something the wizarding wing at Oxford is known for."

Sirius met his eyes and gave a small smile, "That's not something you have to thank me for Remus but you're welcome. Thank you for letting me," for letting him listen, for letting him hold him, for taking the risk and he knew well it was a risk, "You go on and translate that dusty old dry bit of academia but Moony?"

Remus stopped just as he'd risen from the chair, looking down at Sirius. "Yes?"

"Think about writing a textbook yourself. You've got the talent and knowledge to make an excellent Defense Against the Dark Arts textbook and I can guarantee it would be more profitable than just translating for Oxford." He passed Remus the last Jaffa cake, "Just something to think about. You're worth a lot more than you get."

Blushing Remus broke the Jaffa cake in half and stuffed one half in Sirius' mouth. "Don't know about that but thank you I'll...I'll think about it." Remus ran, while he still could, going to the tiny study and closing the door behind him, leaning against it and willing his heart to slow down and his legs to stop wanting to go back downstairs.

Sirius chewed the biscuit and swallowed then cleared the table and charmed the dishes to wash before going upstairs for that cold shower. After that he planned to write his goblin adviser, thank you Goblin Nation for neutrality, and ask about what it would cost to fund the author of a textbook and what return he could expect on it as well as the percentage of payment for the author. He knew Remus wouldn't want to accept him funding him, and he hoped he wouldn't have to, that others would do it for him, but if he did he wanted to have all the figures there to prove to Remus it wasn't out of pity and that he wouldn't be giving Remus more out of his feelings for him. He wasn't about to assault Remus' pride like that.
Ginny practically stumbled up the stairs as she hurried toward the common room, she jumped from foot to foot while she waited for the fat lady to accept the password. Once she was in she looked around until she caught sight of the people she was looking for and ran over to the couch they were sitting on.

"Harry, Ron, Hermione is in the infirmary...I wasn't there but they say it was something about an argument with Malfoy and a hex."

Ron opened his mouth but before he could get even a squeak out, Harry was out of the common room so fast he was surprised he didn't see a vapor trail, "Bugger. Ginny go find Malfoy, and as bad a taste as it leaves in my mouth, if Harry goes after him before I catch up, stop him. This close to the Task Harry doesn't need bad publicity." With that he was on his feet and squeezing her shoulder in thanks before he tore out of the room after Harry.

Neville, who'd been at the bottom of the stairs to the dorms, came over to Ginny, "I'll go with you. Harry wouldn't hurt a girl but Malfoy wouldn't exactly be willing to be defended by one."

"Thank you Neville." Ginny smiled at him, feeling a bit relieved. She wasn't afraid of Malfoy, not in the slightest but she was still happy Neville was willing to join her. "A girl would be bad enough but a ginger Weasley, I think he'd rather run into the pointy end of Harry's wand than to be defended by me."

In the back of Harry's mind he'd already slated several hexes to use on Malfoy, some of them learned in the Chamber library, but that was for later. First thing was getting to the infirmary and seeing what Malfoy had done to Hermione. If he'd so much as caused a bruise then he was going to turn Malfoy into a ferret again and make sure he stayed that way. His hand slapped against the closed door of the hospital wing, making it fly open and the three ladies within jump and look at him. He saw annoyance on Pomfrey's part, fading surprise and approval on McGonagall's face, but his attention was all for Hermione, who'd slapped her hands over her mouth and looked miserably embarrassed.

"Mr. Potter, I do hope you didn't cause my door permanent damage." Poppy's voice was dry, she did not like to be interrupted while she was in the middle of a consult. She understood the girl's embarrassment but luckily it was an easily reversed hex, in her time at Hogwarts she'd seen much, much worse.

"What are you doing here Harry?" Hermione didn't remove her hands and the words came out strange and muffled.

He gave McGonagall a grateful look as she moved a bit out of the way so he could go stand next to Hermione, "Ginny said you were in the hospital wing after you had an argument with Malfoy and he hexed you." His eyes were almost cat green as he searched the soft brown of hers, "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm fine." Looking into Harry's eyes she knew he wouldn't take her word for it, she also knew that Madam Pomfrey couldn't do anything to correct the hex as long as she had her hands in front of her mouth. Cheeks burning red with embarrassment and humiliation she removed her hands, showing the teeth that grew down past her chin. "He didn't hurt me." She looked down at her lap, feeling the horrible prickle of tears in her eyes that Harry had to see her like this.
Harry studied the results of the hex Malfoy had thrown at Hermione then hopped up to sit beside her on the cot, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and giving her a squeeze, "You know I find myself really not caring. He could have hurt you. What if his hex had hit the teeth further back in your mouth?" The fingers on his free hand flexed, fistig then releasing as he breathed in slowly to get a grip on his temper. He looked up at McGonagall, "Please, please tell me Malfoy's being punished, otherwise I'm going to have to get in trouble."

"Snape, I mean Professor Snape was really angry. I haven't seen him that angry, he docked points from Malfoy on the spot even though it's his own house." Hermione had to speak in Snape's defense and she had a feeling Malfoy's punishment would go beyond detention and the loss of point. The pointy git had looked absolutely stricken at his head of house's anger and disappointment.

"Right then, let's correct this shall we?" Poppy had her hands on her hips, wand at the ready. "You can stay Mr. Potter since I know you won't leave anyway but no more talking until I'm done."

He gave the medi-witch a smile, "Thank you," then mimed zipping his mouth shut and locking it just as he noticed Ron, looking out of breath and red in the face, stepping into the doorway, blue eyes going with, then furious at the sight of Hermione's teeth. Harry could almost see the invectives going through Ron's mind at the sight and he had a feeling that Malfoy's hex had been more dangerous than he or Hermione knew.

Hermione saw Ron from the corner of her eye but she didn't turn to look at him since Madam Pomfrey had one hand on top of her head, tilting it backwards while she pointed her wand at her over long teeth with the other. "This shouldn't hurt Dearie, possibly tingle a little but nothing worse than that. We'll take it gradually and you can tell me when your teeth feel like they did before."

Poppy started and she was right, it didn't hurt but there was a slight tingling buzz. She was vain and selfish enough to keep Madam Pomfrey going even after her normal teeth were back, she'd always wanted her overbite corrected. Finally she told the medi-witch to stop and ran her tongue over noticeably smaller, even teeth. "Thank you Madam Pomfrey."

Harry's lips twitched and he knew Ron's were doing the same. Pomfrey didn't know Hermione well enough to know about her overbite but they certainly did. He'd never thought it looked bad or silly but he knew it had always bothered Hermione a bit, not to mention the taunts he'd heard from time to time when others thought they couldn't hear them, so he didn't say a word and he noticed McGonagall didn't either. He mimicked Sirius and Orion and gave madam Pomfrey puppy eyes before pointing at his mouth, asking if he could talk again.

The medi-witch rolled her eyes in reply but her lips were twitching, with the amount of time Harry Potter has spent in her infirmary she'd developed a soft spot for him. "Yes Mr. Potter, you are allowed to speak again. You too Mr. Weasley."

Hermione was giving McGonagall a grateful look, thankfull she hadn't spoken up regarding her teeth.

The Deputy Headmistress gave Hermione a slight wink then straightened her robes and resumed her stern demeanor, "Well I've some exams to finish grading before the weekend trip to Hogsmeade so I'll get out of your infirmary Poppy. I would suggest you three do much the same." She looked at the three Gryffindors who always seemed to get into trouble before striding out of
the wing.

Harry hopped down and absently offered a hand to help Hermione do the same, "Thank you for letting me stay Madam Pomfrey, and not hexing me for abusing your door."

"It's fine Mr. Potter, don't take this the wrong way but I do hope I won't be seeing you up here any time soon." Poppy smiled and made a shooing motion with her hands at all three of them. "Now get going, the infirmary is for the ill, don't need the three of you here causing havoc."

Hermione thanked her again and took a hold of both Harry and Ron's hands and lead them out of the hospital wing.

Harry squeezed Hermione's hand and once they were well enough away from prying eyes and ears he stopped, causing Hermione to turn towards him in surprise and Ron's face to get the expression of impending doom. He wiggled his hand out of Hermione's and tugged at a lock of her hair gently, "You two go ahead to the common room. I've got to take care of something first."

"No." Hermione reached out for him again. "What are you planning to do?" She looked at him searchingly. "I know you Harry James Potter and I'm not going to let you do something stupid because of a stupid little hex that didn't hurt anything but my pride."

Ron nodded, "She's right mate, it's too close to the first Task for you to-"

"I am not," he met Ron's eyes, then Hermione, "going to leave so much as a mark on the ferret. I'm not going to prank him, hit him, use any magic on him, or otherwise cause any sort of physical harm, annoyance, or vague discomfort to him. I give you my word of honor."

Ron's mouth snapped shut, knowing that once Harry gave his word it was practically written in stone.

"Okay." Hermione knew as well that Harry's word was gold, he wouldn't break it for anything within his control. She reached out and cupped his cheek. "Do what you have to but don't do anything stupid then, Ron and I will wait for you in the common room if you don't want us to go with you."

He reached up and squeezed her wrist, "It'll have more impact if I do this alone. Go, work on your S.P.E.W. manifesto, I'll be up soon."

"It really is an important issue you know, the elves deserve equal rights as any other magical being and...This isn't the time to preach to you. Go on then." Hermione took a step back "Be too long and we'll come looking."

"I won't be too long and I'm not teasing or arguing about elf rights." He looked at Ron and nodded before walking off in the direction of the dungeons.

Ron blew out a breath knowing Harry was asking him to keep Hermione occupied and pulled on Hermione's hand, "Come on then. I've a question though, equal rights means that you're supposed to listen when someone tells you how they feel right?"

"Yes and I know where you going with this Ron Weasley but I won't get into an argument with you. Even if they are happy to serve they deserve to be paid for it and have rights." She looked after Harry before following Ron toward Gryffindor Tower.

"I'm not arguing against them having rights that protect them from being beaten or abused but you're smart Hermione, there's got to be a reason the current system for house elves came about."
He looked over his shoulder at her, "So what is it and why haven't the elves already risen up to change it?"

"Sometimes I really hate it when you're logical and show that you actually have a brain underneath all that hair." She reached up and pulled on a fiery red lock. "I don't know, as much as I hate to admit it, I don't know but I will find out. Someway or another." Hermione leaned into him. "Now be nice and treat me to one of your hidden chocolate frogs, I haven't had the best of days so far."

"Aw you don't have to pull the guilt card. I don't mind sharing, so long as I'm not down to my last frogs, besides we've got the weekend so I can get more even if that was the case." He hugged her, "I'll even help you make those spew buttons while we wait for himself to come back from whatever it is he's doing."

Harry knocked very briefly on Snape's office door after having shaken Ginny and Neville and didn't wait for permission to enter. He just turned the handle and snapped it open, eyes green lasers pinning Malfoy to his spot in the chair opposite Snape's desk. He noted Snape's own glare at him and walked over in measured steps to lay his wand on the desk in front of the man, "Professor I apologize for barging in but I have something I want to say to Malfoy."

Snape lifted a brow and pondered a moment before nodding. Essentially agreeing to turn a blind eye to this. As much as he knew Draco hated disappointing him, his godson held Lucius' opinions far above his. Only Narcissa's opinion was more important in Draco's view than his father's but he knew his godson also held Potter in esteem despite the hostility between them. "Very well."

Gray eyes widened at Snape's agreement and Draco looked at the man in utter betrayal before raising his chin proudly, getting ready for the curse or hex he was sure he was coming. "So talk, though I doubt you have anything worth while to listen to."

"You're pathetic," Harry's voice cut like a whip through the damp, cold air of the office, "a tiny little bully playing at being bigger and badder than everyone else because you think it will make your father proud of you. Your father, a man who used to lick the boots of a half-blood megalomaniac and is so foul that dementors listen to him, but he is your father. You should ask yourself though if that will ever be enough, if you really think following in his exact footsteps will get his approval and if his approval is really worth damning your soul. I'm not finished," the flames of the candles in the room flickered as his magic wavered under his fraying control, "You hurt people and gain enemies left and right by your actions, people who would have been solid, honest friends. Do you know that the Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin," he nodded at the shocked gray eyes, "that's right and I asked to be put in any house other than Slytherin. Any idea why I asked the hat to put me in another house?"

Snape's hands had steepled. He'd not known that. He'd never once guessed that Potter could have been in Slytherin.

Draco's mind was reeling. Potter in Slytherin, not wanting to be there because of him. He didn't know why that thought hurt, it shouldn't matter. Nothing Potter did should matter to him and Draco couldn't figure out why it did. "I didn't know I had such an impact on your life and decisions Potter. Turning your back on a whole house on account of little old me, that's not very tolerant or broadminded now is it?"

Harry moved to brace his hands on either arm of the chair Draco sat in and leaned down until they were nearly nose to nose, his eyes flashing, "I would have been your friend, I would have accepted your hand on the train if you hadn't treated Ron the way you did. You reminded me of the same small minded bigoted bully my Muggle cousin is and no, I did not want to share a house or a dorm
with that same sort of person," he knew the muggle comment would incense Draco's pureblooded sensibilities, "Voldemort is not dead and I wouldn't be surprised if your father had already told you that, so sooner or later you'll have to make a choice. Grovel at the feet of a half blood who's father was a muggle, oh yes he was," he nodded, "Voldemort's real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle, his father was a muggle named Tom Riddle, I'm sure you can do your own research from there. So you can choose to hit your knees for him and lick his boots the same way your father does, or you can stand up and be your own person. If your father's pride and approval is anything worth having then he'll be proud of you for that. If Lucius Malfoy is any kind of man or father he will love and protect you no matter what."

"So, is this the part where I'm supposed to see the error of my ways? Where I'll break down, take your hand and ask you to lead me to the light?" Draco looked straight into green eyes. "I am a Slytherin, did you really think I didn't know about Riddle before this? I don't think you were placed in the wrong house after all. You don't see Potter, don't know anything. You can preach about pride and love all you want to but it doesn't make a difference. I don't give a shite about the enemies I make, the people I piss off because no matter how much they loathe me, hate me...It's still better than what I'd have to face at home if I behaved in any other way. Father love and protect me...Please don't make me laugh. I am a pureblood heir. Something to bargain with, to gain favor with and to use as a scapegoat when things go wrong. So take your road to light and love and shove it."

"No you're the one not getting it Malfoy. I don't give a shit what you do with your life, I'm laying out your options so your tiny little snake brain can ponder and twist them around. I don't care what happens to you," his voice was soft quiet and sincere, "hexed, beaten, roasted alive, poisoned, or living happily ever after, doesn't matter to me. It might have, had you not been a bullying bigoted prat but now, I could not care less. So no, this isn't the part where you're supposed to see the error of your ways, this is the part where I give you a warning," he used a trick he'd been practicing, making his magical aura felt, and it filled the room, pressing a weight down on even a half shocked Snape, "you ever, ever go after my friends again Malfoy and I will give exactly what you deal out back to you threefold."

"Are we done? Have you made the point you wanted to make?" Draco went for droll though inside he was impressed and just a little scared about the power Potter flung around as if it was nothing. A part of him, deep, deep down wanted Potter to save him, change him...He didn't even know what he wanted but it wasn't this. No matter, he was used to not living life as he wanted to. This was just another setback. "Because if you aren't then Professor Snape better damn well dock off time on my punishment because what's more terrible than having to listen to you?"

Harry smirked and moved back, letting his power fade from the room and picked up his wand, running his fingers over it in subtle threat, "I suppose time will tell if I've made my point or not." He walked towards the door but paused tossing a disdainful look over his shoulder, "You're not much of a Slytherin if you let others bargain with your life you know. At least I am working to get out from under the people who want to make me their little puppet, but you?" He laughed just a bit, "You're dancing right along to their merry little tune." That said he opened the door and walked out.

Draco gritted his teeth and stared straight forward, he tried to tell himself that Potter didn't know anything about his life or to what tunes he 'danced' but even his own assurances felt hollow. Damn fucking Potter, he had no right to make Draco feel, to force him to take a closer look at the things he didn't want to see. "Go on Professor, finish my detention schedule so I can get out of here."

Snape lifted a brow, "Would you like to add another week onto that schedule for that comment?" He let the question hang for a moment, "Your final week will be tutoring the Gryffindor first years
in potions, without snapping at, insulting, mocking, or otherwise upsetting any of them."

"Why not just skin and mount me now?...Sorry, I meant skin and mount me now Sir." Draco honestly didn't care what his godfather added to his punishment at the moment. "So, same question I asked Potter. Are we done...Sir?"

Severus waved a hand toward the door, "I would advise you avoid lingering in the common room. Mr. Moonstar is very fond of Miss Granger." He called an elf to bring him some tea while he finished grading essays.

Moonstar, that little shite was an ever present thorn in Draco's side. Still he didn't get punished for hexing his fellow Slytherins now did he? Draco scoffed as he left, he was filled with anger and self pity. Plus he couldn't stop thinking about what bloody Potter had said either. Draco hurried to his dorm room and his four poster bed, spelling the curtains shut. Potter was right about one thing...He didn't want to be a puppet, things needed to change in that regard and the person he needed to speak to first of all was his mother. He pulled out parchment and a quill and started to write her a letter.

--------------------------------------------

Sirius muttered crabbily as he dug through the little cupboard for the chocolate he'd stashed there to give to Remus later, "Oh come on I know I put it in here. It's not like it could have gotten up and walked off!"

Harry paused in the kitchen door and shook his head, "Dignified Snuffles, real dignified."

A loud clunk was heard followed by a vicious swear word as Sirius' head came up and hit the roof of the cupboard.

Hermione chuckled. "And smooth." She watched as Sirius rubbed his head and looked at the three of them. "We knocked, several times but there was no answer so we let ourselves in." She looked around the parts of the small house she could see. "Where's Remus? Oh and hello by the way."

Sirius wiggle-backed out of the cupboard, "He's probably in the study buried in translations if he didn't hear the knock and answer."

Ron grinned, "What about you furry? Those pointy ears losing a bit of hearing?"

"Ha-ha, I challenge you to hear a knock when you're tossing things about in that bloody cupboard trying to find hidden chocolate."

"Chocolate?" A gleam entered Ron's eyes.

"It's for Remus, no touchy red." Sirius angled his head to shout back into the house, "Moony! The kids are here!"

"Coming, just finishing this paragraph." A voice called from somewhere inside the house.

Hermione looked strangely pleased. "It looks as if the two of you are getting along." She turned to Ron. "Ronald we came from the shops, you have plenty of chocolate of your own, right there in your bag. No need to try and mooch."

Remus came rushing into the room, hair disheveled as if he'd run his hand through it and ink on his nose. "You're here, so good to see you all." He moved to each of them in turn, hugging them tightly. The only thing that would have been better would have been if Orion was there too.
Harry returned the hug hard before stepping back and tapping his own nose, "You've got ink," his grin was wide and beaming as he heard Ron replying to Hermione.

"I can't help it, someone mentions chocolate I get interested. It's an automatic reaction!"

"A man after my own heart." Remus rubbed his nose clean of ink and turned to Ron. "Nothing like chocolate to gain and hold your attention." His smile was almost ridiculously wide. "You're staying for supper right? We got chicken."

Seeing Remus reminded Hermione of how much she missed him at school, it just wasn't the same with Moody as professor.

Ron grinned back, "Course we're staying for supper. Oh," he dug into his bag and pulled out a small bouquet of fudge lollipops in the shapes of an autumn leaf, "Honeydukes were giving these away so we brought a few for you guys."

Sirius stuck his tongue out at Ron, "You may try to steal my thunder but the milk and mint chocolate bars I hid for later giving outshine fudge pops since they're Moony's favorites, if I can find them any way."

Hermione laughed, she couldn't help herself. Sirius was just darling, he looked more relaxed than she'd ever seen him in human form.

"There, there, I have room for any kind of sweet. No thunder stealing needed." Remus cheeks turned pale pink. "Thank you very much for these," He took the lolly pops. "they look delicious. And your hidden chocolate bars are in that cabinet." He pointed to a different one from the one Sirius had rummaged through. "I can smell them."

The confounded look on Sirius' face made Harry laugh, "Why didn't you just shift to animagus form and sniff them out Siri?"

The man growled playfully and caught Harry into a headlock, giving him a noogie and mussing his already wild hair.

Ron stepped behind Hermione for protection, and started calling out encouragement to Sirius, ignoring the green glare Harry sent him. "He's beyond ticklish along his fifth rib on the right!"

"Ron I'll kill you! Gah Sirius stop!"

"I won't protect you, if Harry comes after you for this I might even help." Hermione looked over her shoulder at Ron cowering behind her.

"Go for his back Harry, right in the middle he has a freakishly ticklish spot. Weird place I know but then again all of Pads is weird." Remus called out to even the field a little.

"Boys!" Hermione huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. She was smiling though.

"Moony! Augh!" Sirius squirmed as he tried to gain the upper hand but that spot wasn't just ticklish, it made his knees go to water and he had to let Harry go to prevent a faceplant.

Harry pulled his wand, flicked it at Ron, then put it back up, content with the 'punishment' for his best friend. A little blue hair never hurt anyone and it would fade by the time supper was over.

Remus grinned, Ron looked oddly charming in electric blue hair, red freckles standing out even more. "Sorry Pads, had to make it a fair fight." He moved to check on the already roasted chickens,
Ron tugged a lock of his hair into view and glared at Harry, "You prat."

"At least I didn't betray your weak spot." Harry grinned then both he and Ron spoke at the same time to answer Remus' question.

"Fried please."

Sirius blinked then shook his head, "Boys don't do that." The way they'd spoken at the same time had reminded him of the many, many times he'd done the same with James and it still hurt remembering that he didn't have his best friend to pull silly, stupid things like that with anymore. He still had Remus but Remus had never been just a best friend to him and there were times when you needed your best friend more than the person who held your heart in his hands. He made himself grin to throw off any worry, "It's creepy."

Remus threw Sirius a worried glance, knowing perfectly well that the last grin was an act, that something had happened but this was not the time to push things. Besides he had a suspicion what it was and no matter what happened there was nothing to be done to bring James back. "Fried it is then." He said instead, purposely keeping a cheerful tone.

"Don't worry about it Sirius, they are creepy most of the time." Hermione still had her arms crossed as she looked at her two best friends.

Harry chuckled, "Well we love you too Hermione." He'd caught the flicker over Sirius' face though and decided to tease so as to bring him out of it, "So a spot right in the middle of the back? Was that before or after you became a dog because I seem to remember seeing-"

"Oi! Brat," Sirius tossed a dish towel at Harry, his eyes regaining the humor of before, "I have always been vulnerable there thank you very much. As himself there," he pointed at Remus, "well knows. It was first year I think when he poked me in just that spot to get me moving. I don't think he was expecting what happened at all."

Ron flipped a chair around and sat, "What happened?"

"Knees just folded beneath him, straight down he went. Unfortunately we were at the top of a staircase so he took quite a tumble. I felt guilty for weeks...Until I learned he was faking his injuries to make me look after him and carry his books." It was humorous now but Remus could still recall the feeling of dread when Sirius' legs had given out from that single poke in the back and how he'd gone tumbling down the steps. It had been horrible, thinking he'd caused damage to the first friend he'd ever had.

"I only faked after the first week," Sirius mimicked Ron and sat down draping his arms over the back of his chair while watching Remus, "I liked having your attention focused on me."

"Like you needed to fake injuries to have that." Remus said softly. His attention was always on Sirius...and on James and Peter too. Back in first year he'd been completely in awe that someone wanted to be his friends and he wanted so desperately to fit in with them while keeping his 'condition' a secret. Scared to death that they would turn away from him once they find out the truth of what he was.

Hermione stepped up to him. "Is there anything I can do to help you with supper Remus?" She threw a pointed glare at Ron who'd simply sat down. "We didn't come to cause extra work for
"It's okay Hermione, I like to cook and most of it was prepared in advance. You can chop the salad if you want to, that would help." Remus nodded toward the vegetables already lined up on a counter.

"Of course." Hermione rolled her sleeves up and went to work.

Harry shifted. he wanted to offer to help too but...he wasn't what you'd call confident in the kitchen. Yes his relatives ate what they made him prepare but they never had anything but bad to say afterwards so he just didn't know what to think about his abilities there. "Er how about I set the table then?"

"Thank you Harry." Remus smiled at him and waved his wand, making the doors of two cabinets open. "Plates in the right one, glasses in the left. Cutlery in the top drawer. You don't have to do it though. You're our guests. We're just very happy to have you here."

"I don't do idle," Harry went to the cabinets and stacked five plates in one arm, plucked out the cutlery to hold in one hand, three glasses fit on top of the plates, five napkins set on top of those, and he carried the other two glasses with his other arm, moving to the table with a practiced step that had Ron staring just a bit.

The redhead had never seen anyone carrying supperware like that, his mum used magic and whoever set the table at the Burrow had to make several trips when she didn't. "Blimey Harry where'd you learn to do that?"

Harry looked up from where he was placing the plates, glasses, flatware, and napkins with a confused tilt of his head, "Do what?"

"Carry plates and glasses like a professional waiter." Hermione added and stabbed the tomato she was cutting up a little more viciously than needed. She understood very well where he'd learnt it and she wanted five minutes, just five minutes all alone with his relatives and her wand. She hated them for what they'd done to Harry, really hated them. Harry was extraordinary in every way and he didn't even know it thanks to those trolls putting him down, treating him horribly all the time.

"Oh. Um well," he looked back down carefully folding the napkins and setting the table expertly, "I just kind of...learned when making dinner and fixing the table for the Dursleys is all. They like to eat a certain time so doing it all together was simpler and Aunt Petunia didn't like having broken dishes so," he shrugged, "just practice I guess."

Sirius had to bite back the growl that he wanted to make. He'd like to wring Petunia Dursley's neck for what she and those fat sods had done to his godson.

Hermione continued to take out her rage on the poor vegetables, hissing under her breath as she stabbed and cut.

Remus was filled with anger too and the usual feeling of powerlessness. He wasn't going to let this dinner turn sour though, not when it had been so long since since he'd seen Harry and his friends. Both he and Sirius had looked forward to this and Remus wanted it to be nice, wanted the three teenagers to want to come back and visit them again. "Well you do it very well Harry, I am utterly impressed. Orion can carry one without dropping it...Therefore all of them have unbreakable charms on them. Easier to take the time and charm everything once instead of having to replace it all the time." He smiled gently at Harry and remembered what he and Sirius had talked about before, about giving Harry a hint about the ball.
"It's sad that you can't come visit over the Holidays this year. I'm sure Molly thinks so too. Have you thought anything about the ball? What kind of dancing there will be and who to take?" He looked away from the pan where he was frying potatoes to meet rather startled green eyes.

"Er...what? Ball? Dancing?" He looked from Remus to Hermione in the first stages of panic, "Hermione? Do you know anything about this?"

Ron felt for his friend, he hadn't heard about this either, but the squeak to Harry's voice was rather funny.

Sirius had to look away, his lips twitching. Poor Harry looked like...well like a deer in the headlights.

"I didn't know, I mean I wasn't sure." Hermione shook her head, feeling sorry about Harry's panicked look. "I suspected, what with the Triwizard Tournament being held and the Dress Robes we bought before term started. I had no idea it was to be held over Christmas though.

"It's a formal ball, live music, dinner the whole thing. It's supposed to be in honor of the champions but mostly it's to give all of the students a chance to let lose, dance and have some fun." Remus said, almost feeling bad that he'd brought the whole thing up seeing Harry's reaction to it. Still it had to be better to know, to be prepared.

Sirius decided to be helpful, well not helpful so much as give a bigger heads up, "It's called the Yule Ball and I'm sorry to tell you Bambi, but you'll be required to go and, more than that, open up the dancing with the other three Champions."

Harry turned sharply, ignoring Ron's snickers over the 'Bambi' comment and took the few steps towards Hermione then hit his knees, "Great goddess of wisdom I throw myself upon your mercy and humbly request you teach me to dance." He looked at her amused expression, "Please, please, please, please, plleease save me from myself."

"Oh please, get up from the floor, you'll ruin your trousers." Hermione flushed looking at the boy kneeling before her. "I already promised to teach you to dance this summer, I'm not going to go back on that now."

Remus looked away from the blushing girl and exchanged an amused look with Sirius. "You'll be fine Harry, you only have to make your way through one dance really, after the first dance you can choose if you want to dance more or not."

Harry got to his feet and gave Hermione a hug before looking at Remus, "Yeah but that probably wouldn't make any girl I take happy. I mean according to everything I've seen or heard girls like to have fun at a dance and part of that is, ya know, dancing."

"A pure poet you are mate, such raw eloquence," Ron snickered.

Harry gave him a two fingered salute that had Sirius laughing.

"Yeah Moony, remember how girls take not being paid attention to," his look clearly reminded Remus of Marlene before he turned his attention back to Harry, "There'll be another Hogsmeade weekend before the ball so after Hermione drills the basics into you we'll help you polish the rest up."

"He may be a berk but he is a berk who can dance." Remus nodded toward Sirius. "Dancing class since you were what? Two?" He shot Sirius a grin and stirred the potatoes before they burned.
Sirius wrinkled his nose, "Blech yes and in those hard as hell pinchy toe shoes with the heels."

"See Harry, nothing to worry about." Hermione smiled. "We'll get you dancing."

He smiled at her and did what was becoming a habit, tugged on a lock of her hair, "Thanks," he moved back to the table to finish setting it, "And you wore heels Sirius? Is there something you want to tell us? Is there a pretty, pretty dress in the back of your closet?"

"Oh Ha-ha, remember the wizarding world is still stuck in Elizabethan and Victorian times in regards to fashion. Men wore heels back then if they were rich so now it's a status symbol. It's still stupid though. Heels do nothing for men who aren't short."

"Thankfully I've never been rich enough to need the status of heels." Remus chuckled. "But look at Lucy's shoes the next time you see him." He waved the wooden spatula in the air as he spoke.

"Lucy?" Hermione mouthed to the others, not really sure what Remus was on about.

"Or Lucy's son," Sirius looked at Hermione, "I understand Harry had quite a talk with him after he hexed you. I believe Orion was hiding in Snape's potion closet and his words were and I quote, 'Harry was wicked scary! He even made Uncle Severus turn green for a second and Malfoy looked near to pissing himself! Though I don't know if it was cause he was scared or angry about the parting shot.' You have, once again, impressed him wildly."

Harry's cheeks took on a slight red tint, "Someone had to call him out, so Lucy would be Malfoy's father?"

"That would be correct yes. Lucius, Lucy Malfoy. The hair, the clothes...The 'shoes'...Believe me, Lucy is more fitting." Remus nodded and looked at the blushing boy and girl. They really were adorable. "Though I think I really need to have a talk with our son about what he was doing in Severus' potion closet to begin with."

Hermione didn't know what to say, Harry hadn't said anything about what he'd done after the hexing incident.

Ron peered at Harry closely, "What was the parting shot mate?"

Harry looked down to perfectly position a napkin, "I said he was a lousy Slytherin if he let other people use him as a bargaining chip and then I laughed at him."

Sirius whistled lowly, "No wonder Orion said he looked near to pissing himself. That's a heavy insult for a Malfoy Bambi."

"Struck right at his pride, Malfoys are eighty percent pride and twenty percent ambition and evilness." Remus nodded, silently thinking that another talk was needed with Orion too, one about language and what words not to use.

Harry settled lightly into a chair, ready to jump to his feet to help as soon as it was needed, "I'll agree with the pride and ambition bit but...I think evil grows, takes root in the heart after being exposed to it for too long. There might possibly be a little bit of hope for Malfoy junior," he held up his fingers with a tiny space between them, "like this much. Maybe."

Ron wrinkled his nose, "Personally I prefer him as a ferrety little git, means I don't have to be nice."

"Sometimes though very seldom in between I think I can glimpse something human in Malfoy."
Hermione brought the finished salad to the table, putting the bowl down before sitting down next to Harry. "He doesn't bully Luna and he did clue you in on that thing Harry...Then he opens his mouth and I wonder if there's anything but shite filling him."

Remus pulled the chickens out of the oven and brought them and the potatoes over to the table along with a pitcher of pumpkin juice. "Everyone dig in please."

Sirius was staring at Hermione, "My word Hermione, you cursed." He passed Ron the potatoes.

Ron scooped up a hefty serving, "She curses every now and again, usually when it's a subject that makes her blood boil though."

Hermione flushed. "I never claimed not to curse. Mostly though, it's just these two having corrupted me. It's difficult keeping proper language around cursewords, belches and worse." She piled chicken and salad on her plate with a soft spoken thank you toward Remus before passing the chicken to Sirius.

Ron passed Harry the potatoes, "Mostly me you mean. Harry only barely curses more than you do and every time he does he gets that half startled look as though he's surprised he dared to do it."

Harry snorted, "Oh the same look you get when you cursed at the Burrow you mean?"

"Hey I'll have you know that Mum's mouth Scourgify is feared in seven counties."

Sirius chuckled and passed a bottle of soy sauce to Remus. He'd never understand why but his Moony preferred soy sauce to salt.

Remus took the soy sauce and dripped it generously over his meal while he chuckled. This was nice, a meal with family surrounding them, easy banter and conversation. "There are worse things than cursing, though you don't have to tell Orion I said that."

Harry smiled, "We won't and we do watch our language around him. Ron's almost as scared of Hermione's Scourgify as he is his Mum's and I know you'd kick my bum to Ireland and back if I corrupted his language."

Sirius gave Remus an exceptionally fond look, "That he would."

"Orion is perfectly capable of corrupting himself without outside help." Remus shook his head in exasperation. "Don't know where he soaks it all up but thank you, all of you for being there for him and looking out for him."

"It's our pleasure, Orion is a joy to be around. He has a tendency to brighten your days." Hermione noticed Sirius' fond expression when he looked at Remus and wondered just how the two of them were getting along. If they were just friends or something more. She wouldn't ask but she couldn't help but wonder either.

Ron swallowed his mouthful of chicken, to avoid Hermione kicking him for bad manners, and said, "He is that and I'll point my finger at the snakes for the corrupted language. I've heard Malfoy say things that would make a grizzled old smuggler blush."

Sirius snorted, "He'd better hope his mother never hears him. Narcissa isn't the sort of woman who'd let her child get away with 'coarse' language."

"You know Malfoy's mother?" Hermione looked up at the older wizard in surprise. She'd only seen the blonde woman shortly at the World Cup but both she and Lucius Malfoy looked...Almost
otherworldly. The fact that they were actual, real people was difficult to understand.

"She's my cousin," he ignored Ron's choking on his chicken, "One of the more adored cousins at that. My mother was heavily into the pureblood hype and I was the 'black sheep' of the family for not falling in line with that. She loved Narcissa and her two sisters, well until Rommy married a muggleborn, gasp the scandal." He rolled his eyes, "and she doted on my younger brother."

"It really seems as if all you purebloods are related to each other one way or another." Hermione reached out and pounded Ron on the back none too gently to make him get over his shocked coughing fit. As always Hermione was curious and she longed to ask and know more but it wouldn't be proper to continue to ask Sirius about his family ties. "Did you know Luna Lovegood's mother too? Myrtle told us she was a Malfoy."

"We are all related. That's the problem." Sirius waved his fork, "See if you want to marry a pureblood your pool is limited, there aren't all that many pureblood families around anymore, the bulk of them petered out, turned squib and such. So whoever you marry is going to be related to you on varying levels if you're both purebloods. For example, Ron's my cousin about twelve times removed, Harry's the same only about twenty times removed because the Potters had brains and married half-bloods, muggleborns, and even just plain old open minded muggles. You ever wonder why so many purebloods seem insane, well there's your answer, inbreeding. Purebloods, in the asinine attempt to keep the lines pure, are destroying their line's sanity and magic generation by generation."

Harry was staring at him in surprise, "That's...."

"Warped? You'd better believe it. My mother was my father's third cousin. It's amazing I'm not stark staring bonkers like cousin Bella." He shuddered at the thought of that woman.

Hermione blinked and looked down at her plate. "I really don't think they have the right to call people like me mudbloods after hearing this. I can't see anything pure about inbreeding." She shook her head again before going back to eating.

"Truer words were never spoken." Sirius toasted her with his pumpkin juice.

Ron wrinkled his nose, "If I'm related to you and you're related to Malfoy...Merlin save me. I didn't need to know this."

Sirius chuckled, "No worries you're so distantly related to him that it actually doesn't matter, same with Luna and Neville. Luna, Neville, and mini Malfoy could all marry Weasleys and there'd be no great impact on the offspring."

"EW! Snuffles I don't even want to think about Malfoy ever, ever getting it on with any of my relatives!"

Harry laughed at Ron's expression. It was just too priceless.

Remus chuckled and then couldn't help himself, he did have a wicked streak after all. "Oh but I don't know Ron, I heard from Orion that your sister and at least two of your brothers find the littlest Malfoy pretty and fit so you never know...He might end up a brother one day." He toasted the redhead boy with his pumpkin juice.

Hermione hid her wide grin behind her napkin.

Ron glared at him, "You're an evil, evil man Professor Lupin. Gods that's just...ugh."
"Ron come on. Malfoy would have to make a total about face before Ginny or the Twins do more than ogle his bum, do you really see that happening?" Harry speared a tomato from his salad.

"Hmm good point mate." Ron tucked back in to his food. After all what were the odds of Malfoy ever pulling his head out of his arse?

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Narcissa made another stitch in her embroidery while tuning out Lucius' rage over Severus giving Draco detention. She might not like that her baby was being punished but if he could not keep from being caught or misbehaving than he needed to be, so he would learn.

Lucius stalked across the polished marble floor in front of the fireplace. "A month of detention and tutoring first year Gryffindors in potions, for hexing a good for nothing mudblood...It's ridiculous."

He had his hands behind his back, fisting the silver head of his cane. "I told you we should have sent him to Durmstrang or hired a private tutor, Hogwarts is going downhill and it's going fast." He stopped pacing and pierced his wife with a cold stare. "All the signs are there, his Lordship is returning. We can't afford to have Draco being questioned as anything but top blood quality. He's worthless then."

Her smooth movements of the needle didn't falter nor did she otherwise betray her utter fury toward her husband for saying such a thing. She simply made another stitch and spoke in the cold tones she'd learned at her mother's knee, "Durmstrang may not accept mudbloods Lucius dear but I was not about to have our son under the mileu of that traitor Karkaroff," she changed her thread with efficiency, "with Dumbledore we know precisely where he stands and so it is a better environment as we know what to expect. I have no desire to repeat myself on this subject again."

"Fine." Lucius inclined his head. "But you should talk to your son on what's proper behavior. If he wishes to torture the mudbloods and bloodtraitors he should know better than to have witnesses or be stupid enough to get caught. I will have a conversation with Snape. I know he has a role to uphold but there's one thing to play a part and another entirely to cross the line. One of these days he's going to have to make certain where his loyalties lie."

"Hm." She might be interested in that conversation. It was always interesting to see her husband out Slytherined by the potion master. She had a feeling she knew precisely where Severus' loyalties lay but unless his actions toward his goals truly endangered her son she had no reason to share that information. Lucius might enjoy groveling at the feet of a madman but she was not the type to bow to anyone, much less a half-blood who spouted such hypocrisy as pureblood supremacy. Her attention was caught by a gentle tap on the window and she raised her head to see Draco's eagle owl waiting patiently. She picked up her wand and flicked it to open the window, taking the letter from the owl as he landed on the back of her chair.

Lucius eyebrow went up and he wondered why their son had written his mother, probably to complain about unfair punishments. He didn't ask his wife though, one of their many agreements was that their owl correspondence was utterly private. The two of them were a united front to the world but other than that they lived their separate lives. Narcissa was an admirable woman, strong of magic and blood. They had both married for gain, not for love but they were both in agreement of that. A marriage was like any other business, it was all about choosing the right partners. "I will leave you to read your letter, see you at dinner." He bowed shortly and walked to his study to work out just what he was going to talk to Snape about.

She waited until he was out of the room to open the letter, her expression betraying pleasure simply at hearing from her baby. Draco was the only thing from this marriage that she truly valued, the only being on the earth that she truly, honestly loved with all her heart and soul. Never had she
expected to care so much for her child. She had always expected to be the same as her mother, to care only about how well her child upheld the proper image and to swiftly lose interest once that child was of schooling age. Instead from the moment she'd realized she was pregnant she'd felt a fierce, protective, intense love for her child that still shocked her. She would kill for her son, die to protect him, damn her soul to hell to keep him safe and sound. For her child she would go toe to toe against the Dark Lord himself and would hold no regrets in that if she must.

Her ice blue eyes read the letter, picking apart the convoluted implications her son had hidden cleverly in the event of interception and then laying aside the letter. She looked down at the handkerchief she'd been embroidering, a dragon in a field of daffodils, and nodded before standing up and going to her writing desk to pen a response. She would advise her son to seek out allies who could aid him most in the coming war. One thing Lucius was quite right about was that the Dark Lord was returning and she wanted her son well out of harm's way before that event.

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Draco read through his mother's letter again, fighting the urge to bite his thumbnail, a Malfoy didn't have anything less than perfect nails. Ally himself with with those who could aid him. Sadly that wasn't as easy as it sounded. Vincent and Greg were out, first of all they didn't have a brain to share between them and they followed their parents in blind obedience. Blaise turned his coat after the wind, outwardly neutral but aligning himself with the winning side underneath it all. Pansy was stalwart but her parents were even worse than Lucius and as bright as she was, Draco didn't think the two of them to be able to do much.

Sadly his best bet was Saint Potter and his merry band of do gooders. He couldn't just walk up to Potter and become part of their group and more than that he didn't want to. He narrowed his eyes as he tapped the letter with his wand in thought. Maybe he could continue as he'd started...Slipping Potter clues about the Tournament and his father's cronies. It couldn't hurt to have the boy wonder indebted to him, no it couldn't hurt at all. Potter's honor would make him have to repay those debts when Draco called them in. Leaning back against the silk pillows in his bed, Draco started to plot where to go next.
Chapter 18

Harry fidgeted, his knee bouncing up and down as he went over his main plan in his head again. He still didn't know what they were going to be getting from the dragon's temporary nest so he had no idea if his first plan would work. He was keeping his broom summoning idea in reserve in case he couldn't summon whatever object it was they were tasked to get. He looked around the tent at the other champions, Fleur was pale and jumpy, Viktor had wedged himself into a corner and was glaring into space, and Cedric kept pacing the tent. They were all nervous and he could hear shouts outside as dragons were wrangled and shifted about. This was insane.

There was a scratching on the tent flap and both Hermione and Ron snuck in. Hermione walking straight to where Harry sat and hugged him tightly. "You should see the crowd Harry, it's absolutely mental out there." She looked them over. "Are you okay? Feel confident in your plan? You're brilliant Harry and you'll do wonderfully." She bit her bottom lip to keep from panicking.

Harry tugged on her hair with a slight smile, "Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?"

Ron punched him in the arm lightly, "Probably a bit of both," he waved at Fleur, who offered a nervous smile in return, and Viktor who nodded.

"I believe in you Harry, it's just...This is so big." Hermione was still gnawing on her lip but she waved to the other champions too, offering Viktor a shaky smile.

Cedric was looking almost green in complexion and he was pacing to himself in a corner of the tent, practicing some sort of spell quietly under his breath.

"Dean and Lee have drawn this huge banner and the twins have charmed it so no doubt you'll see where we're sitting when you get out there...Not to mention the howls from the twins badges." She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him again. "We can't stay but be safe, you hear me. Don't do anything stupid Harry, just make it through in one piece." She sniffed into his shoulder.

Harry pet her hair and murmured softly, "Hey, I've got a back up plan just in case. You're not getting rid of me all that easily."

Before anyone could say anything else a flashbulb went off and a sickening, sweet, nails on a chalkboard coo echoed inside the tent. "Oh young love! It must be so difficult to see the boy you like go off into such danger I know." Rita Skeeter nodded sympathetically and her quick quotes quill was scribbling a mile a minute. "Anything the two of you would like to say for our readers?"

Harry squeezed Hermione's arm and pointedly turned his back on Rita.

Hermione glared at the reporter but she stayed silent too, if she opened her mouth it would only give the horrible woman something to write about, not matter what she said. She was happy when Viktor practically herded the Skeeter woman out of the tent saying it was only for champions and their close ones.

Finally Crouch and Percy walked inside the tent and Hermione was forced to let Harry go. She grabbed Ron's hand. "We'll be out there, cheering for you Harry. Good luck."

"Thanks Hermione. Tell the twins I'll do my best to make them a pretty Knut."

Ron snorted, "Oh they'll love you for that. Take care mate," he pat Harry on the arm then looked over at Percy. Okay he was a prat and turning into a git but he was still his brother, not to mention
the look on his face would be worth it so Ron made three quick steps and gave Percy a hug, "We'll get out of your way now. Later Perc." He let Hermione pull him out of the tent then.

Percy stood stock still, looking as if someone had smacked him in the face with a fish as he followed Ron with his eyes as his brother exited the tent. He only snapped out of it when his boss cleared his throat and asked him to bring out the small sack with the miniature dragon figures in it.

"This sack holds a miniature of what you're about to face out there. It will have a number around the neck, that number will be the order in which you'll perform your task. Please come here and pull your number and opponent."

Fleur reached into the bag first, her fingers trembling as she tried to get a hold on one of the writhing miniatures inside the bag. She finally managed it and pulled out a slender little green dragon. The Welsh Green, least dangerous of the lot though when it came to a nesting mother dragon that really didn't matter. They were still more deadly than anything she could think of.

"Note that Miss. Delacour will be the second champion to face her task." Percy called out, motioning to the tiny number two around the Welsh Green's neck.

The next one to step forward was Cedric, he swallowed loudly when he reached into the sack and closed his fingers around a strangely warm little form. He pulled his hand out and stared at the bluish/gray dragon. A Swedish Shortsnout. The number around its neck was number one and Cedric sighed, knowing he would be the first one out there.

Viktor reached in and pulled out a screaming red, long bodied, low slung dragon, the Chinese Fireball, and grunted at the number three around it's neck. His brows furrowed, a mirror of Fleur and Cedric's expressions as he and the others realized exactly what was left.

Harry clenched his jaw and pulled out the Horntail, which hissed, snarled and flicked its tail at him, the number four gleaming around its neck. He just nodded and looked up at Mr. Crouch.

"Each dragon has been given a golden egg to protect, an egg which contains a clue without which you can not hope to complete the next Task. Get the egg as quickly as possible, your points will be decided on by time, ingenuity, and damage incurred."

"Best of luck to you all." Percy added. "Medics are standing by should something go wrong as are several dragon handlers but out there for all intents and purposes you are completely on your own. When the cannon sounds it's time for Mr. Diggory to get out there, then with each sound of the cannon it's the next one's turn." He straightened his glasses and followed Crouch out of the tent.

It wasn't long before a loud bang was heard and with a sharp inhale of breath, Cedric gripped his wand tightly and left the tent.

Harry sat, watching the miniature of the dragon pace around his hand, and couldn't help but think that, as Sirius and Remus were in the stands, Sirius in dog form and Remus glamoured, that they and Hermione were going to shit bricks when the Horntail was brought out and he was the only one left who had to face their dragon. He heard gasps, screams, oohs, ahhs, and the announcer's occasional comments as the others went out and faced their dragons. He heard the almost painful roar that came during the end of Viktor's turn and wondered what had happened. Finally the cannon went off for the fourth time and he slipped the miniature into his pocket, cast the shield charm around himself, and walked outside, into an arena. On the other side was a full size Horntail, curled round a clutch of eggs, yellow eyes darting around looking for danger. He quickly hid himself behind a large boulder before she could see him and pulled his wand, whispering the incantation for the Patronus charm and sending the silver lioness leaping out and stalking towards
the nest.

He peeked from behind the boulder as his patronus lured the Horntail away from her clutch with a savage snarl and quick as a flash, as soon as he saw the golden egg, "Accio Golden Egg!" He grinned as it zoomed towards him, unfortunately catching the Horntail's attention just as it was in his arms. He dashed for the exit, rolling under a spurt of flames and back onto his feet and managed to dive to safety with his egg in the nick of time before a tail slammed down, mere centimeters from the exit.

The crowd was on their feet, roaring with approval at the quick solution and clean get away. Hermione was completely weak in the knees and she held on to Ron so tightly that her nails dug into his skin. She wanted to see Harry but knew she couldn't get to him right now. When she'd first seen the Horntail she had nearly fainted, it was huge and lethal looking. Harry had pulled it off brilliantly though.

Orion was practically bouncing out of his clothes and screaming at the top of his lungs. Remus in his glamoured form had a hard time holding on to the wildly cheering boy. His breath was caught in his throat and his heart was pounding. He was so proud of Harry, so proud but also livid that a fourteen year old had to face a dragon in the first place.

Sirius' tail was wagging wildly and he was nearly bursting with pride but oh he wanted to bite Dumbledore and bite him hard for Harry being put in this position. Now wasn't the time for those thoughts however, now was the time to celebrate. He jumped up and licked Orion's face then, what the hell, did the same to Remus as the crowd cheered and nearly lost their minds around them.

Remus blinked as he wiped dog slobber of his cheek but he didn't say anything, just smiled and cheered. So happy that this task was over and that it had gone well.

"Oh sod this, I'm going to see him." Hermione stomped her foot and started to struggle through the crowd on the bleachers and since she still hadn't released her grip on Ron he had no choice but to follow her.

Ron just laughed and let her drag him along, calling out to the twins, "Alright you berks, go collect your winnings!"

Fred grinned fiercely, "We plan on it little brother."

Harry was letting Madam Pomfrey poke at him and make sure he was all in one piece and privately grinning over the looks on Fleur and Viktor's faces over the summoning charm he'd used when Hermione and Ron came into the medic tent. He waved, "See, told you that you'd not get rid of me so easily."

Hermione sent Madam Pomfrey a question look and when the medi-witch nodded she ran over and practically bowled both Harry and the cot he was on over. "Bloody hell Harry, that dragon...You did brilliantly but I...And you...Tail..." It was impossible to hear what she was saying as her voice turned into an almost desperate squeak as she hugged the life out of him.

"Oof!" He just ran his hand over her hair in amusement, letting her have her freak out moment. His brows went up when Luna and her father came into the tent, "Hello Luna, Mr. Lovegood. I'm glad to see you." And seeing Ron's ears turn red as he jerked around to see Luna smiling her slightly spacey smile just made the day better.

"Hello Harry, we just wanted to congratulate you. Papa is here as a journalist but don't worry...I can handle him." Luna smiled again and looked up at her father. "The stadium almost exploded with
shrieking snazzlers when your dragon came out but you made them calm down again quickly. Great work." She nodded sagely.

Xenophilius chuckled at his daughter. "I'm only here to cover the task, no interviews, I promise."

Harry grinned, "Mr. Lovegood you're a journalist I'd be happy to make time for remember? Thanks for the congratulations. By the way, does anyone know why Viktor's dragon sounded so...well agonized near the end?"

Hermione raised her face from where it was smooshed against Harry's shoulder having finally calmed down a little. She still held on to his hand as she sat down on the cot next to him. "It was really sad and Viktor didn't mean it. He's sent some sort of stunning spell that blinded and confounded his dragon but it made her stumble and she stepped on a few of her real eggs, causing them to break."

Luna looked miserable. "They had to sedate her, the dragon tamers I mean. Losing babies is the worst thing that can happen. Her flapperfog is drooping."

Harry's eyes widened, "Oh no. No wonder she sounded like that." His mind went to his mother and her sacrifice to save his life, "That poor Fireball."

Ron nodded, "The keepers will be keeping an eye on her until well after the remaining eggs hatch. Charlie says the loss of a few sometimes throws the mother off so badly she forgets she didn't lose them all."

Harry decided then and there that he'd sneak out of the school that night before they took the dragons back and try to talk to the Fireball. "I hope she'll be okay."

"We all hope so." Hermione nodded. "If all the handlers are as Charlie I think she has a good chance to, if not be okay, at least be as good as possible with the eggs she has left." She sighed. "I've said it before but I'll say it again. This tournament is folly and this task didn't just endanger you as the champions but the dragons too. There are too few dragons in the world for them to be used as some sort of prop for some stupid contest."

"I agree with you Ms. Granger and believe me, the Quibbler will take it up in our next issue. There is a magical creature protection law that is supposed to stop things like this from happening." Xenophilius looked very serious for once.

"Charlie told me about that one and I still can't believe the Ministry managed to circumvent it long enough to even get the dragons here much less set them up as the task. Can I just say I hope whoever came up with that idea finds his or her bum mysteriously roasted?" Ron folded his arms across his chest. "Bloody brainless bureaucrats."

Harry smiled and squeezed Hermione's hand as he heard his name called, "I think I'm being summoned for my score."

"Okay." She released her death grip on his fingers. "Go face them, you have to get top score for this. You were the quickest and you got the egg without causing any damage to yourself, the dragon or the real eggs."

"Don't forget to smile at the winkermottlies." Luna said with a nod and brushed her lips against his cheek before going and standing with her father again.

He grinned, "I don't know what winkermottlies are so I'll smile at everyone and later you can tell us what they are." He pat her shoulder then gave Ron a knowing look at the vague jealousy on his
back as fast as I can fly." He loped out of the tent, passing the twins who handed him something, and into the area where he'd get his scores. He saw Maxime's expression of resignation as she used her wand to create a glowing ribbon that formed the number ten in the air. Crouch was next and gave the same, as did Dumbledore, no surprise there, Ludo Bagman, who Harry had fortunately been avoiding, shot up a ten as well and then came Karkaroff, who looked like he's swallowed a live catfish. Harry could see the internal battle on his face and see him looking around at the cheering crowd before he shot up an eight. Harry could hear Ron even from far behind him as the crowd erupted in booing and insults.

"You lousy biased scum! You gave Viktor a ten! I hope your bollocks rot off an-mmmph!"

Harry was just grinning wider than he thought his face could stand as he turned in a slow circle and saw even the majority of Slytherin supporting him. That was a good feeling. He gave the disguised Remus and Orion a wink then tossed the little thing the twins gave him into the air, activating it with his wand and in an instant the firework ignited into a bright, beautiful display of a howling wolf that transformed into the words 'Harry's Howlers' with the smaller words 'Fireworks Provided by Weasley Wizarding Wheezes' beneath. As everyone was cheering over the fireworks he went back to the medic tent, where Hermione was still holding her hand over Ron's mouth and they'd been joined by Fleur and Krum and an orange paste covered Cedric as well as Fred, George, Neville and Ginny. He shook his head at Fred and George, "Well I hope you two cleaned up."

"You better believe it Harry." George grinned wolfishly. "If you continue like this then Freddie and I'll be all set to open our business before you know it." He wrapped his arm around his twin brother and blew kisses in Harry's direction.

"You put on a great performance Harry." Cedric bowed his head to him. "Shows that the simplest is often the best." His expression was sheepish, he'd never even thought of just summoning the golden egg, filled with a need to impress...Look how well that had turned out.

"Are you going to behave?" Hermione glared at Ron before removing her hand from his mouth.

Ron pouted, "Come on Hermione you can't tell me you didn't want to turn him into a goat for that score."

Viktor sighed, "It was very unfair of Headmaster Karkaroff. I did not efen deserve de four Mr. Bagman gave me."

Harry looked at the older seeker, "You couldn't have guessed about what would happen."

"No Viktor, you can't blame yourself." Hermione walked over to the Bulgarian after pinching Ron in the side, he was right though, she did want to hex Kakakoff's shrivelled buttocks off but maybe not as loudly as Ronald. She put her hand on Viktor's arm. "You didn't do it on purpose and the spell itself wasn't a bad idea. It was an accident and not something you meant to do." Hermione understood how bad Viktor must feel regarding what'd happened. From what she'd seen of him, he loved all kind of animals and this must hit him hard.

"Karkaroff sort of does look like a goat already doesn't he?" Luna tilted her head with a smile as she looked at Ron, "not much transfiguration needed, maybe just the ears."

Ron smiled softly at her, "Luna you are the most unique and best of people you know that?"

Viktor looked down at Hermione, "Da but I hate dat the dragon pays the price for the folly ov the Headmasters and the Ministries." He'd been horrified when he'd seen the dragon crushing her own eggs and the pained roar she'd made when she realized what had happened made his heart hurt.
He'd been sick to his stomach when he'd seen his own Headmaster's smirk of satisfaction over it.

"That I can't argue with." Hermione nodded, her hand still on Viktor's arm to offer comfort. "Dragons and real dragons eggs should never have been carted away from their habitats and used in a contest to begin with. Don't feel guilty Viktor, be angry at the ones who's fault it really is."

He pat her hand and offered her a slight smile, "Dank you, Herm-own-ninny," he privately winced at his mispronunciation of her name.

She just beamed at him, Hermione knew her name was a mouthful, even for people born in Britain, she didn't mind mispronunciation. "You're welcome Viktor, now no more feeling guilty. Think of it this way instead, one task down and some time to rest before the training for the next one has to start. She pulled her hand away and placed both of them in her pockets. "If you're done here we should probably get back to the Tower, there will be a party and I'm sure they're all waiting to congratulate you Harry."

Harry chuckled and leaned back to look at Fred and George, "Can the two of you smuggle Orion into the party?"

"Of course! We'd never have a party without-"

"-our little protegé. He has to learn the ropes now doesn't he? Better to learn from the masters, soak it all in." George grinned before walking over to Ron and slinging an arm over his shoulders. He leaned in and whispered. "Want us to sneak your little moonbeam in as well Ronnie?"

Ron turned a brilliant red and spluttered a bit before ducking his head and murmuring, "Yes, please."

Fred grinned widely having heard that, "Well then, let's go gather our ducklings shall we Georgie?"

"Absolutely Freddie," George bounced over to his brother again, a wide grin on his face. "Right by your side as always. Now Mr. Lovegood, I hope you don't mind but we need to borrow your daughter for a little while."

Luna just smiled dreamily and hugged her father before walking off with the twins.

Fleur smiled at them all, "I must of course join my own school for our celebration. 'Arry, you were wonderful out zere," she kissed his forehead, much to his blinking surprise and confusion, "Bonne nuit."

For the first time since her unwarranted bout of jealousy when she first saw Fleur, Hermione felt a hot stab of something unpleasant go through her but she pushed it back as best she could. "Goodnight Fleur, you did good today." She even managed to press out a smile at the French girl.

She turned to Viktor again. "Goodnight to you too, and remember, no feeling guilty."

"I shall try," he caught her hand and brought it up to kiss her knuckles, "Goodnight," then he left the tent with Fleur.

It was Harry's turn to be jealous and he just could not figure out exactly why he was.

Xenophilius had bowed to them and walked out of the tent to find something more to put in his article.
Hermione held her hand out for Harry and Ron. "Come on you knuckleheads. We should get back so they can celebrate the hero of the hour." She smiled happily.

Ron had to bite his cheek to keep from laughing as Harry took the hand Krum had kissed and rubbed his thumb over Hermione's knuckles absently. "Alright to the party, Nev, Gin, come along. Oi and Diggory, won't your own house be going a bit mad in celebration as well?"

"Oh they will." Cedric shot a charming smile at them, even with the orange paste on his face. "I'm just...Going to meet someone before I go back." He scratched the back of his head.

"Okay Cedric, say hi to Cho for me." Ginny chuckled at the Hufflepuff's blush.

"Will do. Oh and Harry, top notch performance today, really great."

Harry saluted him, "Likewise, now go, let Cho kiss you better." He let Hermione pull him out of the tent and toward Hogwarts, Ron starting a debate with her and making him laugh.

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Harry looked around, sighing in relief when he saw that the dragon handlers were tucked securely in their tents, fast asleep, and crept towards the cage the Horntail was in first. He'd gone by the jewelers in Hogsmeade to get some back up just in case he'd needed to bargain with his dragon and now he felt the Horntail deserved it for the stress he'd put her through. He breathed in nervously when he saw great yellow eyes snap open and tendrils of smoke escape and spoke quickly as he pushed the invisibility cloak's hood off his head and the rest back behind his shoulders to keep her from trying to fry him. He had his shield spell up but he'd rather not test it against dragon fire, "Milady I bring a gift and apology."

The Horntail shifted, fixing sharp eyes on Harry. "A little two-legs in knowledge of the old language. I haven't heard that in a long time. The large head lowered more. "Apologize, for what little two-legs? You didn't bring us here and you didn't cause harm, like my sister had to go through."

"No but I did cause you stress milady, stress I wish I had not had to put you through," he pulled out a large, heavy necklace of bright gold and shining diamonds, "a gift to replace the gold I was tasked to take from you." He only moved close enough to lay the necklace inside the very edge of the cage then back away to the distance he'd been at once more. "The two-leg who caused your sister pain and her loss is deeply saddened and shamed by what happened. His intent was not to cause damage and he unfortunately has not been taught as I and the others who faced your kine have been taught and so he had no way to create a better method to get to the gold placed in your sister's clutch. We four two legs are in a competition created many of our generations ago, my fellows were perhaps over-confident as to the skills they possess and under-estimated the cruel idiocy our leaders would have chosen."

The Hornail picked up the necklace delicately between large teeth and lifted it further into the cage where she dropped it. "Your gift is accepted. Those who placed the gold with us, who brought us here should know better. It sounds to me as if you two-legs need a better council. Sometimes dragons grow old, loose their ability to fly, hunt and protect. As painful as it is they need to be replaced in council. You should replace your broken ones." She huffed and slammed her tail against the bars of the cage, not liking to be caged. "I will tell my sister what you said, I am worried it won't make much difference right now. Three of seven eggs were destroyed...It is not likely to get through to her right now." There was a pause. "Believe me little two-legs, had it been my eggs I would have fried you all." Yellow eyes gleamed.
A tear slipped down his cheek in sorrow for the Chinese Fireball but he nodded, "I do not doubt you milady and understand well your feelings. I've a clan mate, an uncle-father, whose young son lives in danger of losing his life at a corrupted two-leg's whim every day should my uncle-father displease him. My clan and I would kill the evil two-leg in a heartbeat for the threat alone and we will once we free our youngling from the grip the evil one has on him."

"Younglings are the earth's greatest gift, they are to be treasured, protected and taught the ways of the ones who came before them. To threaten a youngling, hurt them. It's the foulest of crimes. In our clan we would rip the evil one's wings off. Leave the evil one alive but unable to ever take to the sky again. Death is just a new beginning, there are much worse things."

Harry smiled, "Milady I like the way you think." He looked around and had a thought, "You and your sisters, you are able to carry your eggs with you in flight?"

Yellow eyes narrowed. "We can yes, sometimes a den is corrupted or destroyed, we need to carry our eggs to safety." She rose inside her cage as much as she could, gesturing toward her slightly softer underbelly. "We have a pouch, here. It leaves our talons free for fighting, protecting."

"I know you will not attack the large stone nest so if you would let me, I would be honored to open the cages so you and your sisters may fly to your homes." He understood the feeling of being caged and the loathing of being controlled and it would have the added benefit of getting Dumbledore in trouble. Bad security measures and all that.

If a dragon could smirk, that was what the Horntail was doing. "You have a mind like a dragon little two-legs." She bowed her large head before him, that was the greatest compliment she could give him. "My sisters and I would be grateful if you released us. Nesting should never be done in captivity, it is a precious and private matter. You will have the dragons favor little one." She blew a smoky breath at him. "Do not worry, I have just marked you. Any dragon will sense you are under protection." The large head rose again and she let out a series of roaring growls that led to a burst of activity in the other cages all all the dragons gathered their eggs into their pouches.

Harry bowed deeply to her, "You honor me milady." He then went about releasing the lock on her cage and the iron collar around her neck, leaving her unfettered and free before doing the same for the other three. At the Fireball's cage, though she'd tucked her remaining eggs into her pouch, he could see the devastation in her eyes and posture and he bowed, tears once again escaping as he thought both of the pain she must be in and his own mother. "Dear lady you have my deepest sorrow for your loss and my greatest hope that the four that remain will hatch and be strong. I give you my word of honor, upon my magic, that my world will be told of your loss and the reprehensible actions that led to it. I will do my utmost best to see to it that no other faces your pain."

The Fireball inclined her head. "It will not make a difference for my younglings gone but I thank you. Thank you for your tears." She looked straight at him. "Tell the young two-legs that I bear no hatred toward him. My anger is directed where it belongs. I will wait for my remaining eggs to hatch and grow up strong but they will see my vengeance...And the vengeance of my mate."

He nodded, "I will tell him and may the Great Lady fly with you on your journey," he finished taking her collar off and felt the rush of wind as she tore from the cage and took to the sky with her sisters. He cast a few more spells on the cages, making them collapse, and lifted a hand in farewell to the dragons as they disappeared into the cloud cover before covering himself with his cloak and rushing for the castle as the handlers finally woke, idiots. He was just glad to see that Charlie wasn't among them, that he'd gone to spend the night at the Burrow and so wouldn't be getting in trouble for this. He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt that Skeeter was going to have a field day
with this. He ran up the stairs to the Gryffindor common room. He had a letter to pen to Xenophilius.

The moment Harry had climbed inside the portrait hole he was grabbed by the collar. "You are a bad, bad boy Harry." There was absolute fire in Hermione's eyes. "What's even worse is that you didn't bring me with you." She motioned toward one of the high windows and the frantic activity going down at the edge of the forest. "I don't suppose you had anything to do with that now did you?"

The hood fell off, exposing his head and he blinked innocently, "Now why would you think that Hermione? I just went for a nice, evening ramble. Saw lots of pretty things that I'll share with you when we visit Myrtle tomorrow."

"Oh take those innocent wide eyes and shove them." Hermione grumbled and released the fabric of the invisibility cloak. "Go to bed, I'm sure there will be a search to make sure all students are where they're supposed to be...Good work though." She straightened the strap of the tank top she used as a pyjama top and glared at him. "You will tell us everything tomorrow or else." She placed her hands on her hips.

"Absolutely Hermione, right down to the necklace." He kissed her cheek, "G'night." Then he practically skipped up to his bed, grinning widely. He wondered what Sirius and Remus would think of him letting the dragons go.

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Remus stood in the kitchen looking at Sirius who was lying on the floor, hooting with laughter and praise for his godson. As much as Remus wanted to scold him he couldn't bring himself to it, his own lips were twitching. Harry had released the dragons, the dragons, nesting mother dragons even. A shite storm had rained down on both Dumbledore and the Ministry for lacking security and for having used dragons in the first place. Harry had out Maraudered them all with this move. "Oh get up from the floor Siri."

"Why? It's comfy." He broke into another peal of laughter, "It's just too brilliant, oh my Merlin. If James isn't looking down and puffing up with pride like a balloon he needs a spiritual kick in the bum." He grinned up at Remus, "Can't you just see the look on Dumbledore's face as soon as he found out? Oh we have got to bake Harry a cake or something."

A brown brow rose. "We? I would love to see you bake a cake...Wait no, scratch that, I don't want Harry to get food poisoning." He chuckled. "I can picture the look on Dumbledore's face though and it warms my soul."

"That's why I said 'or something' send him a fruit basket?" His foot jiggled, "Oh to be a fly on Dumbledore's office wall today." He snickered, "I hear that Skeeter keeps going back and forth from Godric's Hollow, talking to old Bags, and that there may be a book in the works. Makes me wanna dance."

"It is rather glorious." Remus admitted with a grin. "I'm thinking Dumbles is having some pretty bad days right now." The grin widened even more and with a flick of his wand he turned on the wizard wireless and reached out his hand. "Come on then Pads, let's dance."

Pure delight turned already gleaming gray eyes silver and he grasped Remus' hand as he stood up, the song playing on the wireless cheerful and upbeat as he started moving with Remus to the music. He let Remus lead, stepping forward and back and laughing happily as Remus spun him under his arm. Oh yes this was an incredible day.
Remus couldn't help but laugh out loud as they spun and moved. He hadn't danced for about fifteen years and he was sure that if anyone had seen them they would have laughed but Remus didn't care. Right now, at this moment, he was truly, truly happy. He had fun.
Harry and Ron shooed Neville, Fred, and George into the second floor bathroom, despite Neville's blushing protests of it being a girl's lavatory and the eep he made when he spotted Luna, Ginny, and Hermione there, certain they were about to get hexed into oblivion. Harry flicked his wand at the door to lock and block it from anyone coming in, cast a large privacy bubble and shield that even covered the floor, making sure Myrtle was inside it so she wouldn't feel left out, then tucked his wand away again, "Alright then, now before I explain what's going on, who here knows Occlumency?"

Luna raised a hand. "I do, Papa taught me early on so the Wrackspurts wouldn't be able to touch my soul." She took her hand down and finished braiding multicolored paper streamers into her hair.

Identical red brows rose as well. "Of course mate." George grinned. "How else are we to make sure we can get away with our pranks, our minds are too valuable for someone to pick them."

Fred nodded, "Especially by the likes of Snape."

Neville shook his head, "Gran's been planning to teach me but...it always falls by the wayside."

Harry leaned on the sinks, "Ginny do you?"

She shook her head. "Not really, I have blackmailed those two berks over there to give me lessons and I know the basics but I haven't successfully blocked anyone from my mind yet." She looked annoyed. "Apparently I have concentration issues." She shot her brothers a dark look. "I want to learn though, get better at it."

"Well we're going to need you to, all of us. I've been getting the hard 'fast track' lessons from Professor Snape and passing it along to Ron and Hermione as I learn. It's important for a lot of reasons but first and foremost to keep Dumbledore out of our heads." He sat down on the floor, feeling the brush of cold air that meant Myrtle was behind him, and met the shocked eyes of the Twins, Ginny, and Neville, Luna looked as if she'd been expecting this.

"You might have wondered where Ron, Hermione and I go after classes, well we've been going down into the Chamber of Secrets," he held Ginny's eyes steadily, aware the suggestion of this would be hard on her, "to study and work on becoming animagi as well as other things we wouldn't normally be doing at our age. There's a very good reason for this," he began telling them everything, what had happened last year, what he'd concluded, about Orion's life being held in Dumbledore's hands, everything.

Luna was calm, as if she'd been expecting a lot of what she'd been told. She was a bit surprised to be included but happy too, even though it was serious business.

The twins looked both shocked and angry, especially regarding Orion who was practically another adopted Weasley.

Hermione walked over and wrapped her arms around Ginny who was pale as a sheet. "I can't believe it, I mean I believe it but still. Dumbledore is like a housegod at the Burrow. Mum worships him, trusts him. He let me be possessed, I killed chickens and painted in blood and he knew..." Ginny was trembling. "I want to nail his fucking arse to the wall and use it for target practice."

Ron nodded, "That's our plan. Voldemort isn't going to stop coming after Harry, he's just not. So
we're working actively on getting strong enough to take that slimy bastard down and kill him dead first. Dumbledore is another story. He's not just practically a god at home but all over the world. So we're gradually undermining him, eroding his power base little by little until he won't have so much as a wand to stand on. Then we cut his legs out from under him."

Fred nodded, all humor gone from his face, "You-Know-Who is an evil bastard but he's an honest evil bastard. Death for him but Dumbledore," his hands shook, curled into fists, "he doesn't deserve death. He deserves to suffer."

"That's what we think too." Hermione replied, keeping her arms around Ginny. "We're going to strip him of everything he holds dear, the power, the fame the mere mentioning of the name Dumbledore will be used only for scorn."

"Old beardie won't stand a chance, we are going to take him down, I'm sure of it." George looked fierce.

"You should research Grindelwald." Luna spoke up. "Best thing would to be to talk to him of course but I doubt he's allowed visitors."

Neville nodded and spoke quietly, "Next best thing would be to go to Godric's Hollow and talk to Bathilda Bagshot."

Harry looked at Neville curiously, "Why is that Nev?"

"Grindelwald is her nephew and she knew Dumbledore when he lived in Godric's Hollow."

Ron's brows shot up, "Does everything go back to Godric's Hollow?"

"It's starting to look as if it does and I don't like it one little bit." Hermione released Ginny and wrapped her arms around herself, not feeling good about what she was about to say. "James, Lily and Harry didn't live in Godric's Hollow before they were forced into hiding the first time, before the secret keeper. It was Dumbledore who sold them on that village and it leaves a bad taste in my mouth. It's just like he wanted you there Harry. Why?"

Harry shook his head, "I don't know but we'll find out eventually. For now, I'm hoping you'll all join us in our advanced training down in the Chamber," he looked at Ginny, "I know you probably don't want to go anywhere near it Ginny but it's the only place in the school Dumbledore can't get at. Plus we've managed to make it a little less dark and gloomy."

Ginny raised her chin, still pale but brown eyes full of certainty. "I won't lie, I can't say I'm looking forward to go down there but I can handle it. I'd go through hell itself if it meant I was included, that I could help you and Orion and the rest of us too. Dumbledore and Voldemort need to be stopped and I would be honored if I could play even a small part in helping that happening. If you could go down there again then so can I."

Ron gave his sister a wide smile, pride ringing in his voice, "That's our girl."

Harry nodded, "Thank you. All of you. Ron and Hermione have managed to mimic the Parseltongue to open and close the Chamber so we won't all be meeting in the lavatory at the same time. That way no one can spy on us and Myrtle is kind enough to help us keep a look out," he smiled over his shoulder at the ghost girl, "she's been a big help to us."

Myrtle beamed at him and blushed silver. "Anything for my friends." She floated around them, eyeing Neville and the twins with interest.
"Standing here crammed together in a bubble is really great mate but perhaps we could actually get to see this elusive chamber." George's freckled nose actually twitched with curiosity.

Harry laughed and stood up, brushing the seat of his trousers off, "Alright then everyone, Gin you want to go down with Hermione or with me?" He didn't want Ginny facing the Chamber again alone.

"No offense here Hermione but for the first time back down there I think I'll go with the one who got me out." Ginny gave Hermione a wan smile and walked closer to Harry.

"That's perfectly understandable Gin." Hermione nodded and gave what she hoped was a supportive and understandable smile back.

Harry took Ginny's hand and squeezed before facing the sink and hissing at it to open. He chuckled as he heard the twins behind him and Fred's loud, "Wicked."

He looked over at Ginny, "Alright ready to tuck your skirt and slide down then?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." Ginny answered and after a moment's hesitation she did as he'd suggested and tucked her skirt into the tights she wore underneath. "Not a bloody word." Her tone was cold as ice as she turned to glare at her brothers.

Ron snorted, "I'm not crazy Gin-gin."

Fred raised his hands, "Never crossed our minds did it Georgie?"

"Don't even know what you're talking about Freddie, that's how little it crossed our minds." George blinked his lashes in his baby sister's direction.

"Tools, the bunch of you." Ginny snorted but with a smile. "Okay then Harry, lead the way. I'll be right behind you."

He caught sight of Neville looking anywhere but at Ginny with a blush on his face and nodded in amusement, "What is it Americans say? Geronimo?" He jumped and went down the sliding pipe, feet touching down on the ground that they'd cleared of bones and Basilisk detritus. He heard a slight squeal and moved just in the nick of time to catch Ginny as she almost fell out of the pipe.

"Ooomph." She clung to Harry's shoulders as she did her best to get her bearings and balance back. "Thank you for keeping me from landing on my nose." Ginny looked around. "The lack of bones is a great improvement, I must say." She was doing her very best to be strong and keep the tone light, not give in to the prickling feeling in the back of her mind. She had done horrible, horrible things in her first year and being back down here reminded her of it.

He moved her out of the way of the pipe as the others slid down and joined them, "Oh yeah. First thing we did after fixing the blocked passageway," he slung his arm around her shoulders and gave her a comforting squeeze. He had to admit to being impressed by Luna, who'd managed to land on her feet the first time. The twins had landed on their bums and poor Neville had wound up face first.

Fred and George helped Neville up and brushed him off before they started to whisper furiously among themselves, blue eyes darting everywhere.

Luna just looked around before pulling a paper streamer from her hair and placing it on a stone snake to make it a little happier, since it was locked in one place devoid of color. Hermione had to laugh when she saw it, silently wondering what snake really thought of its new decoration.
Ron grinned, "There's a thought, maybe we should bring a bunch of those down here next time, this place could use a little more life. Slytherin must have been a very gloomy person."

"We can't be sure how it really looked when Salazar Slytherin was the master of this chamber and how many changes Riddle made." Hermione shrugged and moved with the others down the pathway toward the giant door. "It does bring a bit of festive aura to the chamber though."

"It looks great Luna." Ginny smiled, feeling a lot better seeing the paper streamer on the stern snake.

"I think so too." The dreamy girl nodded to herself.

Harry wrinkled his nose and half turned to look back at the gloomy passageway, "Hm, you know I remember reading..." he pulled his wand and made a spiral motion, "Festivus!" and suddenly brightly colored streamers and glowing points of light shot out of his wand to cover the walls and stone, lighting the way as well as brightening things up. "How's that do you think Gin?"

Her smile was like the sun. "I think it's absolutely brilliant Harry, perfect."

Luna was smiling too, her arms over her head, twirling down the stone pathway. "It's like a party in my head...Only outside."

Ron smiled at her, "Well it's loads more fun to have the party outside where other people can dance with you don't you think Luna?"

Harry exchanged a knowing look with Ginny and Hermione, even as Hermione shook her wand warningly at the twins to keep them quiet.

George was grinning madly but raised his hands in surrender at the threat of being subjected to Hermione's hexes.

"True." Luna stopped twirling and faced Ron. "Will you dance with me then Ronald?"

Fred's grin matched his twin's as Ron blushed and took one of Luna's hands to give her a twirl and started dancing with her. He murmured into George's ear, "What was it Mum said, she knew she'd found the right man when she was able to dance with him without music playing where everyone can hear it?"

George nodded. "She said that there was always music when she and Dad touched, no matter if anyone else heard it or not." He looked at his brother dancing with Luna. "I think Mum will be very pleased with herself later to know at least one of her offspring did meet his soulmate in school just like her and Da. Though I don't think Ronniekins knows it yet."

"Eh he'll figure it out eventually," Fred leaned his shoulder against George's.

"No doubt and it'll be amusing to watch the journey as he gets there." George ran his fingers through Fred's hair.

Harry was staring at his best mate in surprise and murmured, "I didn't know Ron could dance."

Neville spoke softly, "It's something all pureblood families teach their children because the old rituals required dancing and when those weren't practiced as much there were balls and parties to replace them."

"Mum was adamant we'd all learn to dance before we went to school...Not the greatest time of my
Ginny scrunched up her nose. "Still now I'm glad, dancing is fun."

Hermione shook her head to herself, surprised that there were still things she didn't know about Ron, he hadn't mentioned anything about this when they'd talked about the ball when they visited Sirius and Remus. "Does that mean you all wore the heeled shoes too?" She looked at the twins and Neville.

Fred wrinkled his nose, "Yeah, not while learning thank Merlin, Mum wasn't a sadist, but at parties, yeah. Course Bill found a way to make even the required heels look cool, he wore hessians."

Harry pointed at all his friends, "That does it all you lot are going to help Hermione save me from myself. I don't know anything about dancing."

George kept his fingers in his brother's hair but grinned widely. "No worries Harry-boy, we'll have you twinkling your toes in no time. It really isn't all that hard, look at the way you fly. You have control of your body Harry, you only have to use it in a different way when you dance."

Fred nodded, "Yeah Ronnikins was tripping all over his huge feet when he first learned, Mum despaired of him ever succeeding, we still don't know what turned that tide."

Ron shook his head as he and Luna came to a stop by everyone, "For your information, Dad helped me out. How remains my and his secret." He blinked at Harry's narrowed eyes, "What?"

"You weren't going to just let Hermione do all the work with me were you?"

"No. I just wasn't going to bring it up until you started," he grinned, "you know me mate."

Harry chuckled and shook his head before turning to hiss at the door, "Yeah, lazy. In we get then, Hermione would you like to make the main chamber more festive this time?" He waved her forward.

"Thank you Harry, don't mind if I do." Hermione moved her wand in the same circular movement Harry had and called out 'Festivus'. Brightly colored streamers shot out of her wand and decorated ceiling and walls, even the gigantic statue of Slytherin himself were clad in rainbow colored streamers. The oil in the walls caught fire and lit up the room and spread both light and warmth. Hermione hadn't managed to figure out how the oil never seemed to run out.

Harry helped Ginny in through the door, rubbing her shoulder and noting that Neville stood close to her other side, "How you doing there Ginny?"

She flashed them a smile, albeit a slightly strained one. "I'm fine...Promise. It's actually not as bad as I feared it would be. No huge snake, no dreary darkness. No diary and no Riddle. It'll be okay." Ginny looked around the chamber as she reached out for Neville's hand. The quiet, soft spoken boy always made her feel safer somehow.

Harry moved away as Neville took Ginny's hand with a shy, blushing smile and moved further in, chuckling at the gleam in Fred and George's eyes, "There's a bunch of passages off the main chamber, we haven't really explored much though, too busy working and making plans. We use the main chamber for practice and the library for study, I figure the two of you can find a room off a passageway and use it for making your products."

Ron noticed a bright gleam enter Luna's eyes at the mention of a library and couldn't help but be amused. She was the dreamy sort but she was a Ravenclaw straight through.
George and Fred were practically bouncing on their feet hearing they could get a room where they could make their products without having to sneak so much and hide everything. "In case we've forgotten to tell you lately, we really love you Harry-boy. We'll name a supreme line of products after you."

Hermione rolled her eyes and she nodded toward Luna before the two of them went to check out the library, just a quick peek, to show Luna.

Harry grinned, knowing that quick peek would turn into an all day expedition but he didn't mind. He looked at the twins, "Just keep making people laugh and we'll be even."

Fred shook his head, "You're too good to us Harry. By the way, where is the huge snake Ginny tells us so much about? You did kill it in here right?"

Harry moved to the small trunk they'd put in the main chamber for a few materials and pulled out a large blanket for them all to sit on while he went over the theory of animagus magic with everyone, "Yeah, it's been rendered it down to parts and most of them sold off, though I did keep a few for personal use." He spread the blanket out and saw the gleam in the twins eyes, "No to the venom unless or until you become potion masters, I might be persuaded on the rest of what I kept...possibly."

"Oh Harry, you have no idea about the power of persuasion we can unleash on you." George's grin made him look almost fox like. "We'll play nice for right now though but when you least expect it, we'll be there, pleading...Using the puppy eyes that even make Molly Weasley fold and bend to our will." He and Fred sat down on the blanket along with Ron, Neville and Ginny. The other two girls were lost in the library.

Harry chuckled, "If I can say no to Orion, which I have once or twice, I think I can manage to put you two off for a bit. Now moving on from the subject of the nineteen meter snake-"

"Nineteen meters!" Fred's eyes were wide, "Blimey Harry you must have made a fortune selling off even half of the thing!"

Ron laughed, "He refuses to tell me or Hermione the final total and won't tell us why either. I think it embarrasses him," he punched Harry in the arm.

"Then why do you bring it up? It doesn't matter how much it was sold off for. Right now though what matters is getting you all started on the path to becoming animagi and Nev, Gin, and Ron Occlumens," he went into the theory, dumbing it down to what he'd have found easiest to understand because the way the books put it made his head spin.

He was keeping the final total of the profit from the Basilisk a secret because of the portions of it he'd used to set up accounts for those harmed by the basilisk and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley as they'd nearly lost Ginny. Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Justin Finch-Fletchly, Penelope Clearwater, and Colin Creevy would be getting the notices of an account set up by an 'anonymous benefactor' from Gringotts in a few days according to the Goblins. After Mr. and Mrs. Weasley got theirs. He'd like to be a fly on the Burrow wall when they got that letter.

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Molly hummed softly and checked on the stew, stirring itself on the stove and the potatoes bouncing into the pot before she planned to go back to her knitting. It was coming up on Christmas and she had so many sweaters to get ready for this Holiday. She was just about to sit down when there was a tap on the window and an unfamiliar owl sat on the outside, tapping on the glass.
Molly walked over and let the bird in, offering a plate of owl treats as she untied the letter from its leg. She frowned at the Gringotts stamp on the letter, wondering what kind of business they had with them before she spelled the envelope open and reached for the parchment inside. She'd barely read through it before she had to sit down and just look at the letter in disbelief. This couldn't be real.

Arthur walked into the room and blinked at his wife before rushing over, "Molly, love what's wrong? Is it one of the children?" An icy fist clenched in his stomach at the thought of one of their babies being hurt or worse.

Looking up from her stupor she hurriedly placed her hand against her wonderful husband's cheek, soothing him. "No, no the children are fine, all our dear ones are fine. Don't worry love." She twisted in her seat and handed Arthur the letter. "Look at this."

Relaxing at the reassurance he took the letter from her and his eyes nearly popped out of his head, "W-w-what? T-Two hundred t-thousand galleons?! F-from who? It must be a mistake. Who would give us that kind of money?" His shocked and bemused eyes met his wife's.

"I don't know. I've read the letter ten times now. Almost a quarter of a million galleons, it's money we've never even been able to dream about but how can we accept this Arthur?" Molly looked into the beloved brown eyes. She picked up the letter and read it again out loud. 'For the difficulties your family suffered two years previous.' She fell silent as her mind worked. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking...He wouldn't would he?"

Arthur read the line, remembering how badly Harry had felt about their car and more, how he'd babbled apologies about not figuring out what was wrong with Ginny and helping her sooner. Harry cared so much and his loyalty and love was gained with the smallest things and he would do anything for those he loved, even face down a Basilisk with nothing in hand but a ragged old hat, hope, and bottomless courage. Arthur tucked a wild curl behind his wife's ear, "He would I think Molly and he's clever enough to know that we can't reject money given by an anonymous benefactor."

"No we can't and we can't deny that the money is needed. Our boys are growing like weeds and our little girl is becoming a woman, they need new things." Molly leaned against her husband. "But Arthur, I still feel bad. Harry is our boy too. We should take care of him. I love his selfless and loving nature, I do but I want to protect and provide for him. He's our son as well."

Two hundred thousand galleons would go so far, fixing the Burrow, and providing for the children. Maybe Arthur could even work a little less and they could travel and visit Charlie in Romania, see how he had it with his dragons. They couldn't afford to turn the money down and Molly didn't want to hurt Harry by rejecting it either but it just didn't feel completely right.

"I know love. I wish I knew why Dumbledore was so against Harry living with us during the summer. I know he's said that Harry is safe with his mother's sister but I have to wonder about that. Those people...you know how I feel about bigotry and anti-muggle sentiment but those people are so..."

"An arsehole is an arsehole, no matter if muggle or wizard." Molly was unusually crass but she was so, so angry at those horrible people. At the end of every summer Harry came back starved and skinny and she'd seen the bruises even though he did his very best to hide them. "I can't picture any blood ward being worth that. We have wards too and we would protect Harry with our last breath. He would be taken care of and happy here."

Arthur nodded, "The marks we've seen on him and how thin he is...how is it that Dumbledore
thinks that's better for him? Or does he see it?" He ran his fingers through his wife's graying mop of red, "he's so busy with Hogwarts, the Wizengamot, and the IWC and you know how Harry hides himself, do you suppose that Dumbledore perhaps simply hasn't had the time to see what happens in that house?"

Molly tapped her fingers on the table in consideration. "I think you might be right love. Dumbledore is a great and kind man but he has so much on his plate. He's responsible for all the students at Hogwarts and this year it's the Triwizard Tournament and as you say, Harry hides his pains well. I mean we can't expect Dumbledore to see everything, as great as he is, he's only human."

"You know love, with Sirius Black...erm being what he is, Harry has no magical guardian. I know that Dumbledore has tried to act as Harry's magical guardian but not being a blood relation and unmarried he's not been awarded the status. What would you say to us going to the Child Services in the Ministry and applying to be Harry's magical guardians? Even if the Dursleys were decent people they still couldn't teach Harry all he needs to know about our world."

"I think we should do that Arthur, you're absolutely right. The next birthday Harry has will be his fifteenth, in a little over two years he will reach maturity and there's a lot of things he needs to learn before then." Molly reached for Arthur's hand. "Let's do it love, let's go to the Ministry and petition for guardianship. Bring Harry home where he belongs."

He brought her hand to his lips, "Next time he steps off the Hogwarts express he'll be coming home with us then. I'll arrange an appointment with Millard for tomorrow."

"Thank you love, thank you." She leaned in and pressed her lips against Arthur's, rubbing her thumb against the soft scruff on his cheek. "I can't wait to let Harry know once it's all decided and cleared with the Ministry."

Arthur smiled, "I agree completely love." He kissed her again, "After the appointment we should probably go into Gringotts and arrange for some of Harry's gift to be invested by the goblins. We've never before had enough excess to invest or I'd have done it long ago."

Molly nodded. "If there's anything the goblins excel at it's making money grow. Oh Arthur, no more second hand robes or faulty wands. We can give our babies what they need...Maybe even buy ourselves something new." Tears sparkled in Prewett blue eyes.

His own eyes a little damp he nodded, "Harry's given us a new start and we'll give him the same, even if I have to pull every Ministry string I can get my hands on for him."

"It's the best thing for Harry, Millard and the Ministry will see that. I know it will happen because that's how it should be." She gave her husband a watery smile. "I love you Arthur Weasley, you're the love of my life and you made all my dreams come true. This will only be the icing on the cake."

"My Molly-princess, keeper of my heart," he nuzzled her nose with his, "I was blessed the first time we danced together in a silent room. You had my heart then and you always will."

"I still hear music everytime we touch, that's never changed. You are my music Arthur." She kissed him again. "Now, I better check on the stew, it's beef and carrots, your favorite." She got up from the chair. "Why don't you go to the cellar and bring us a bottle of wine, we're going to get our Harry, we have reason to celebrate don't you think?" She beamed at him.

"Indeed we do," he kissed her cheek and went down to get some of their homemade wine.
Ron looked over at Hermione, who was fidgeting like mad. Harry had chosen to go right to the Chamber today in order to try and work out the shrieking egg when others' ears wouldn't bleed from it instead of coming to the Hall for breakfast and he could see just how much Hermione missed him already. It was a wonder she couldn't see it herself. "Come on Hermione," he nudged a plate of fruit in her direction, "we'll see him later, he promised."

"What?" She looked up from counting, the ridges in the table and blinked at Ron. "Oh I know that, Harry's free to do whatever he wants. I'm just curious if he'll find something out about the egg. February may seem far away but we don't know what kind of training that's required. The sooner he works it out the better the edge he'll have against the rest of the champions." Hermione piled some fresh fruit on to her plate but she wasn't really hungry, her stomach felt squirmy and worried.

Fred, who was sitting next to her in the space Harry normally occupied, poked her cheek, "Come on then, what's the matter? You can tell your uncle Freddy."

"I can say as much that if you poke my cheek again you are going to find that finger in a body cavity you really don't want it in." She gave him a deadly glare. "Nothing's the matter, I'm just feeling a little...Off today. Maybe I'm coming down with something, like a cold."

Fred exchanged a look with George and mouthed 'love sickness' before ruffling Hermione's hair, "Awww well as it's the weekend you can go right to the library and bury yourself rather than suffer through your classes feeling 'off' then."

"What do you mean bury myself? I have a lot of studying to do and the weekend is the best time to do it. And what are you grinning like a loon for?" She turned her glare on George instead who only grinned wider at that. "Nevermind, look Ron, I'm not hungry. I think I'm going to take a walk outside and see if that makes me feel better. I'll catch up with you later." She got up from the table and walked out.

Ron propped his chin on his hand and watched her exit in amusement just as the owls flew in delivering the morning mail, "You think she'll ever figure out it out?"

Fred grinned, "Eh eventually, looks like you've got an owl little brother."

"Hm?" Ron blinked and looked at the stern owl in front of him holding out its leg, "Huh, who're you from," he plucked the letter off the bird's leg and offered it a bit of sausage before staring at the Gringotts seal in confusion.

"So, what did you get Ronnie? Not a howler I hope, you look a little gobsmacked there little knobhead." George tried to lean across the table to peek at the letter.

Ron re-read the letter, his mind working furiously, and then he said, "I'm going to kill him...no first I'm going to hug him blind then I'm going to kill him. Sneaky little prat." Ron let Fred pluck the letter from his hand just as he saw Ginny spit her pumpkin juice clear across the table.

"What's going on here? My nosiness is suffering, I need to know." George squirmed in his seat as he watched both his sister and his brother.

Ginny coughed up the juice that had been sucked down her airways as she clutched the letter so tight her knuckles turned white. Her cheeks were bright red, matching her hair. She got up from her seat and stalked over to Ron. "Where is he? Where is that idiotic, silly, stubborn, wonderful knobhead?"
"Visiting Myrtle, I get to strangle him first." Ron got out of his seat and tore out of the Hall, wondering if Hermione had gotten an owl too.

Fred passed George the letter, even as he spotted two more spit takes in the Hall, Finch-Fletchly at Hufflepuff and dear nosy photog Colin at the end of their own table, both of whom looked much more confused than Ginny and Ron but then they didn't know Harry as well, nor did they know the Basilisk had been rendered and sold off. "You know Georgie boy, I'm starting to think Harry's surpassing us in surprising and sneaky."

"You won't hear any arguments from me," George's blue eyes were wide as he read Ron's letter.

"Ron does not get to strangle him first. Harry is insane." Ginny stomped her feet, not knowing if she should cry, laugh or just scream in confusion. "Look at this sum." She waved her letter in Fred's face. "What am I to do with this kind of money? Arggghhh!"

Neville had already picked up the gist of what was going about and caught sight of the sum on her letter, both his brows lifting in surprise at the amount, but then, "Buy yourself something as pretty as you are?" came out of his mouth before he even knew he'd opened it.

Fred looked at the shy Gryffindor with amusement before snitching Ginny's letter and reading. Ron's sum was reasoned as being 'reparation for selfless assistance in the face of danger' but Ginny's was 'restitution for pain and suffering experienced' both mentioned as two years previous and she'd gotten 600,000 Galleons as opposed to Ron's 200,000.

Ginny's blush deepened at Neville's comment but she was still visibly upset. She had done nothing to earn a money sum like that. The only thing she'd done was be stupid, confiding in a strange and dangerous book, getting others into danger and almost causing Harry's death. She should pay for what she'd done, not be rewarded for it.

"You do good with this money Gin and no matter what you think you deserve it, Harry is right about that. Save it for school, play Quidditch since it's your dream. The money has made it so you can do whatever you want Ginny. Thank Harry and be happy. That's all he wants." George spoke softly.

Fred nodded and pointed at the others in the Hall who were exclaiming over their mystery benefactor, "Seems to me he arranged for the money to be split and shared among those who were hurt according to the danger their lives were in. Creevy and Finch-Fletchly were petrified, and I'll bet Percy's Penny and Hermione are getting a letter similar to yours and Ron's, but you were the only one other than Harry who nearly died. Ron got hurt when the passageway collapsed so he gets, whatever percentage Harry figured out. You were all hurt and I imagine the only reason Mrs. Norris isn't getting any money is because she's a cat so what's she gonna do with it, same with Nick. You all were hurt and Harry thinks you should have something to make up for the hurt. You know how he is."

"I do know and I love him and I'm grateful but it's too much." Her legs were on the verge to give out so she sat down right where she was, which happened to be in Neville's lap. "I want to do something good with this money, not just waste it because I have it. You guys need an investor?"

Fred found the squeak Neville made and well as the automatic move his hands made to steady Ginny insanely amusing, especially as he put his hands on the table as soon as Ginny didn't wobble. "Well you know we could use one and you are a Weasley but you should think about it a little bit first Gin-Gin. It's too much and a lot now but when you graduate? And have to get out on your own? You might want to save it and not toss any of it away on our," he exchanged a look with George and quoted their mother, "silly, useless jokes."
"I know that whatever I'll invest with you, I'll get back tenfold. I have full faith in you brothers mine." She settled more comfortably in Neville's lap and turned her head to smile at him in thanks for catching her. "I'm not talking about the whole sum, I'll be frugal and save for the future, promise. I'll even put it in some sort of fund so it can't tempt me but I would really like to give you what you need. Invest in something I believe in. Your jokes aren't silly or useless. I think they're very much needed."

George exchanged a look with his brother, they could use some backing. Especially now that their mother had found and gotten rid of most of their ready made stock.

Fred nodded and kissed Ginny's forehead, "Alright little sister, your faith is appreciated and will be rewarded, you can be assured." He settled back into his seat, "So if Hermione got an owl too, who do you think will be hexing Harry first?"

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Harry was three seconds from throwing the bloody egg against the wall. There had to be something the screeching meant but he could not, for the life of him, fathom what could make that sort of unholy noise. Maybe he should have gone to breakfast with the others instead of giving himself a headache.

"I should hex you blue, with antlers and...Pimples, large, painful, oozing ones." Hermione waved her wand around in the air, sparks actually flying from it as she stalked toward Harry. "Really, what on earth are you thinking? Doing something like this and not telling me first? You think I need money for being your friend? That I should get paid for spending time with you and help you?"

"Er...Hermione," Harry subtly raised a protective shield around himself and backed up, "what are you-" his gaze fell to the letter clenched in her fist. Should have figured she'd know it was him, "it's not for that, could you please put down your wand?"

"No, I don't think I will. You can't hide in a bubble forever." Hermione walked closer, eyes blazing. "You care, that's good. You want to share, bully for you but don't you ever go behind my back and do something like this to me again Harry James Potter. I don't need money to care. I'm not a...a...a whore."

"Hermione!" Green eyes were wide and shocked and a little hurt and he dropped his shield unconsciously, "You really believe I'd ever think about you like that?!” His temper stirred and he used what he'd been learning from Snape to slam Occlumantic shields down on his emotions, closing himself off. "You weren't even supposed to know it came from me. The law states that in the creation of such a large account for another being the reason for the account's creation must be stated otherwise 'reparation for injuries incurred two years previous' wouldn't even be on there and all you'd know is that an anonymous benefactor gave you 250,000 galleons. You were attacked by the basilisk so you got six and a half percent of the profits from selling the parts of it." He turned, not caring if she hexed him, wounded to his core that she'd thought he was trying to buy her friendship, and slammed the book he'd been reading back onto the shelf.

"You really think I wouldn't have figured it out anyway? That it was from you?" Brown eyes brimmed with tears that spilled over. "I've been scared in our adventures together, I have but I've never been worried. Even back in second year, when I met the basilisk and through the mirror up I wasn't worried. I knew you'd figure it out. I've always had faith in you Harry, in everything you do. You know how I'm afraid to fly...I'm not afraid to fall because I know you'll catch me if it happens. I...I wanted to be like that for you...Catch you if you fell. I know you, I know your heart and I know you meant well, you always do but money does change things. All I have to offer you are my
friendship and my love and now it feels like it’s not enough. I’m not enough Harry.” Hermione’s breath hitched and she lowered her wand before she turned and walked away, wiping her eyes at her sleeve.

It hurt to have her walking away, like someone was pouring acid in the spot where she’d already ripped his heart out for doubting him, for thinking he wanted anything more from her than she already gave, and for thinking that he’d pay for it. It hurt but he didn’t turn around, didn’t call for her to come back because if she really had faith in him, really believed in him, then she’d never have said any of that. So he just stood there, listening to her footsteps and the clang of the metal door as she left, just stood there, feeling his heart bleed.

Ron had been waylaid by Luna, who’d managed to calm him down, and now, though he was still going to tackle Harry in a hug, he had no plans to strangle him. He stepped into the bathroom and gawked at Hermione, emerging from the hole to the Chamber and crying, "What the bloody hell?"

"Take care of him Ron, look out for him and keep him from stupidity, even yours." She continued to cry. "I messed up, I said the most horrible thing and I hurt him Ron, I hurt him so bad. He hurt me too and now I don’t know how to fix it, if I even can. So you need to take care of him for me." Hermione was sobbing now, deep heart wrenching sobs as if her heart was broken. "I have to go."

Ron’s eyes went wide and he snagged her arm, "Whoa hold on, wait a...not like this you’re not." He reached over and grabbed some paper towel to press into her other hand, "I am not letting you walk out of here without a play by play because I am not turning into the middle man while you and Harry turn into Sirius and Remus without knowing what happened so I can help you two fix it." He then wrapped his arms around her and held fast, "Hex me all you want but tell me what’s happened okay?"

Hermione struggled for a moment before giving up and crying into his shoulder, paper towel pressed against her eyes as she went over what had happened in a broken voice. "I was so horrible and now I’ve lost him...I deserve it too."

"Yeah you were horrible," Ron didn’t let her pull away even as he spoke the hard, cold truth, "but you've not lost him. It's Harry we’re talking about here remember? If you apologize he'll forgive you but you'll have to mean it and more, when you do, you'll have to know, to the depths of your soul, that Harry would never, ever try to buy you. That's your biggest fault you know, you doubt yourself and it kinda falls out onto the others around you. It's like with the Patronus, you have to know you're going to succeed when you cast it. So you'll have to know, to believe in Harry the way you just claimed you did one hundred percent."

He moved back a bit and grabbed some more paper towel for her. "And Hermione, thinking that money changes things between real friends, that's a stupid, stupid thought and you're not usually stupid. Money didn't change who Harry was when he got his trust vault at Gringotts and him giving you money isn't going to change who you are or why you’re his friend. Same here, and the same with Ginny. He gave her 600,000 because she nearly died and I saw Colin and Finch-Fletchly doing spit takes before I left so they got some too. Isn't this something that happens in the muggle world when someone's hurt like by a big business or something? They get reimbursed for their pain and suffering?"

She nodded shakily. "You’re right Ron, about everything and I do believe in Harry, I really, really do. I let my mouth run away with me before my brain could catch up." She wiped her eyes again. "Money can change things though and I’m stupid and horrible but I’m so scared it would happen. It almost broke my parents up, a few years ago when my Mum started making more money than Dad. They are wonderful, kind and giving people who love each other and it still caused them to almost
get a divorce. What if I'm like them? Don't you see it wasn't Harry I doubted when I said that, it was me." Hermione fidgeted madly. "I have to tell him, I have to apologize before I lose my nerve...Thank you Ronald for setting me straight." She leaned in and kissed him. "I love you, Luna's a very lucky girl." She turned on her heel and dove back down the slide and ran to the chamber hissed the door open and ran to Harry, not caring if he'd curse her or hit her as she threw her arms around him.

"I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry. I didn't mean it I swear. I know you didn't try to buy my friendship and you'll always have it, no matter what." She took a deep breath before continuing. "I was awful and horrible and I understand if you hate me but I'm so, so sorry. So sorry. I believe in you Harry, I do! You're the most special, kind and thoughtful person I've ever met and I ruined it...I ruined everything."

His arms came tentatively around her, as if afraid she was going to strike him for it, and he spoke softly, "I don't think I could hate you if I tried Hermione."

She only hugged him tighter. "But I would understand if you did. I was a witch in the non magical sense of the word. As horrible as they come. You did a good thing Harry, a really good thing and I...I practically pissed all over it. Thank you, for being you and for caring so much. Thank you for being Harry through and through, I wouldn't want you any other way. If I could take back the last hour I would. I am so sorry and I hope that you can forgive me one day, even if I don't deserve it. You are my very best friend...I can't live without you."

Now his arms clenched around her and his face buried in her shoulder, his own shaking as he tried to control his emotions, "I'm sorry too. I didn't do it to upset you. I just, I heard Uncle Vernon talking one time about how Grunnings had to pay a fortune because of faulty drills hurting people and I thought that was the right thing, that the ones who got hurt because of the basilisk get a portion of the profits from its sale. I'm sorry."

"No Harry, no." Hermione still held on tight, one of her hands coming up to stroke Harry's hair. "You have absolutely nothing to be sorry for. You did a wonderful thing, I was the one who spoiled it and I'm sorry, sorry I did. You have nothing to apologize for." Hermione's heart was pounding, feeling like it would burst with everything that had happened and the fact that despite how terrible she'd behaved, Harry was still hugging her, willing to still be her friend. It was humbling and Hermione promised herself she would never ever do anything to hurt Harry or make him doubt her belief in him again. "You are wonderful Harry, absolutely wonderful and I'm so happy and proud to know you, I really am and I truly am so, so sorry."

He shook his head and held a little tighter, a few tears escaping his control and slipping out to soak into the knit of her sweater. "Just please...I'm still the same, you're still the same, nothing's really changed so just please, don't act like it has?" That was the only thing that mattered to him, that he didn't lose her from this.

"You are still my very best friend and even if I would like to walk on eggshells or prove to you how I treasure you, you know me...I'll be back to lecturing, nagging and threatening to hex you into line in a second. I can't help myself. You're family, nothing will change. I won't let it." She continued to pet his hair, simply holding on to him.

He closed his eyes, finally relaxing, "Thank you. I love you Hermione and it'd kill me to lose you over something as stupid as money."

"I love you too and you'll never lose me, even when I'm an idiotic bitch. I had an insecurity moment and was reminded of my parents almost splitting up but we're not them. I'll always be there for you. Always." Hermione couldn't even begin to explain the relief that flooded her, knowing that they
would be alright.

He gave her a squeeze, "Do Ron or Ginny know too? And if they do, how pissed are they?"

"I think so. Ron does know so it's probable Gin does too. Don't worry, no one will be as big an arse as I was. They will behave like I should have done." She leaned down and pressed her lips to his temple.

His lips twitched and he lifted his head, "You sure about that? With the Weasley temper?"

"My temper's not that bloody bad!" Ron's voice came from outside the library where he'd been unashamedly eavesdropping.

Hermione couldn't help but chuckle and looked up toward where Ron was. "It is that bad but we love you anyway. Come here and join our huggle-puddle." She held out one arm toward him, still insanely grateful she'd met him when she did.

He edged into the room and over to them, carefully nudging Hermione away from Harry just a bit before pulling his best mate into a headlock and giving him a noogie, "Bloody prat pulling this on us," his voice was ripe with exasperation and brotherly affection, "Tell me you at least kept some for yourself."

"Oi ger off!" Harry flailed, just happy Ron wasn't angry, "Yes Dad I kept half, happy?"

"Of course he's happy." Hermione smiled and shifted away a little more, giving the boys room. "It's a good thing you kept half Harry."

He finally managed to throw Ron off of himself, running his hand through his hair, "Yeah well I figured I'll probably need some sort of well to draw from in case of emergency since I wouldn't put it past Dumbledore to have a watch on my trust vault. I asked the goblins about that and since it's that vault that pays my tuition he can have a watch on it to make sure I'm not spending everything I'll need to finish schooling." His expression made it clear what he thought about that.

"Oh that little evil gnome of a man." Hermione stomped her foot on the stone floor. "He's even keeping tabs on your vaults? How much you spend? I would like to grab his beard and tie it to Buckbeak's tail. I'm very glad you have your own money he can't control now. Smart move Harry."

Ron grinned, "Hermione don't insult the gnomes like that."

Harry nodded, "And why would you want to torture poor Buckbeak in such a way?" He started paging through the index, "It's just the trust vault he can watch and freeze. He can't touch my parents' vaults or any others of mine, he can't even find out if I've got other vaults, especially now that I've written to the goblins and asked them not to share my information with anyone not in possession of a blood and magically signed letter from me as well as a vault key."

"Very smart move, I am utterly impressed." Hermione gave a pleased nod. "By the way, before I came down here and gave a performance as a crazy person...Any luck with the egg?" She looked at the golden egg propped up against a wall.

He snorted, "The only thing I've gotten out of that bloody thing is a headache. It's not like there's anything about shrieking golden eggs in a table of contents or index," he smiled wryly. "It's weird though. The shrieking rises and falls like it's...eh that's stupid."

"No don't say that, like it's what?" Hermione looked curious. She hadn't been able to listen to the screeching, shrieking for more than a short, short time before it felt as if her brain would explode.
"Well it goes up and down like...singing," at Ron's choked noise he added, "really, really bad singing but..." he shrugged.

"So what mate, you'll have to fight a hoarse siren next? Pluck her feathers?" Ron couldn't help but laugh at that mental image.

"Just because it's a language we don't recognize doesn't mean that Harry's not right Ronald." Hermione started to gnaw on her bottom lip as she always did when she was thinking. "It's obviously not a dragon language because if it was then Harry should know it." She paced the floor in front of the egg, glaring at it from time to time as she walked. "Actually Ron...You may not be as far off as I first thought...What kind of people are known for their songs? Sirens, just like Ron said. Sirens of the sea."

Harry frowned, "Huh?"

Ron stuck his tongue out at Hermione, "I didn't mean he was wrong, I just found the thought of Harry having to pluck a siren's feathers funny. So you're thinking mermaids then?" At the looks he got from his friends he shrugged, "What? They're in a lot of the bedtime stories Mum used to read to us."

"I'm thinking mermaids yes. Why shouldn't they exist? We're living in a world of wizards, giants, trolls and dragons so why not mermaids?" She resumed her pacing. "You're not as stupid as you pretend to be Ron, if you put some effort into it your grades would surpass Percy's. Mermaid song, meant to be heard only at sea...Or in water at least."

"I know they're real Hermione, they're just a whole lot uglier and meaner in real life. And I don't want to put in the effort to surpass Percy's grades, first I don't want the headache and second, that's Percy's thing and I don't want to take it away from him."

Harry smiled at Ron for that before sighing, "So anyone want to share the revelation?"

"Sorry mate. Mermaid song can't be understood above the water. If that thing," he nodded at the egg, "is screeching mermaid language you'll have to stick it and your head underwater to hear the clue."

Hermione was both excited and a bit annoyed. "I wasn't accusing you of not knowing that mermaids were real...Just give the muggleborn some slack, I didn't know." She turned to Harry. "So, a bath large enough for you and the egg...I wouldn't recommend the lake this time of year, or ever really unless you want to tangle with the squid."

"I'm not that crazy, though the squid doesn't seem to care too much about people in the lake but I don't do freezing." Harry shrugged, "So, I have to find a bath big enough for me to go under with the egg."

Ron snorted, "Where could you find that in Hogwarts? All the dorms have showers."

"Hmm." Hermione sat down on the floor and crossed her legs. "All the dorms have showers yes but the dorms aren't the only places who have baths in the castle. There's the staff quarters and the prefects bathroom. Hasn't Myrtle mentioned a large bath there, with fit blokes to ogle?"

Both Ron and Harry looked a little ill at that and Harry shook his head slowly, "Er no...nor do I really think we wanted to know about that."

"Really didn't want to know about that. It's bad enough I know my sister looks at Diggory's bum I didn't need to know that Myrtle peeps on the blokes." Ron looked vaguely horrified.
"Oh get over yourselves, what is she supposed to do with all her time then? She doesn't sleep and she can't leave the castle. What's the harm if she looks at boys at times? It's not as if she'd do anything to them, she's just bored and lonely." She narrowed her eyes at them. "And if you tell me that neither of you has never looked at a girl then I'd call you liars and if the idea of a boy's bum is that horrible to you, I would say you protest too much and should look into your own sexuality. What's wrong with two blokes fancying each other? Look at Sirius and Remus."

Harry raised his hands when Ron looked at him for help, "I'm not the one whining over Ginny staring at Diggory's arse mate. My whole protest is the idea of someone who I don't know is there staring at me when I'm naked. Which erm," he blinked at Hermione, "If anyone, living or not, did that to you Hermione, how would you react hm?"

"Well as you know I lived through it at the Burrow. Of course I'd be pissed, hexes would fly and maybe fists too. Okay so her peeping ways are a little skeevy, I'll admit to that." Hermione sighed. "My point in this whole thing was that there's a large bath in the prefects bathroom but I don't know how you'd get in there without getting caught."

Ron shrugged, "We know any prefects who might want to let us in for a tick?"

Hermione shrugged. "The only one I can think of straight up is Cedric. He does owe you for the dragons but asking him would be helping him as well, if he hasn't figured it out yet." She continued to nibble on her lip. "Too bad there isn't a Quidditch team this year since the Quidditch captain has the same rank as a prefect."

"Remind us of our sorrow there why don't you?" Ron teased, "I don't know mayb-" he paused as Myrtle floated through the wall, "Er morning Myrtle."

"Good Morning." She floated around them. "I just thought you should know that there's a redhead up in the bathroom hissing and spitting and doing her best to get down here." She floated up in front of Harry's face. "She's looking for you."

"Ginny," Ron stood up, "I'll go let her in. Thanks Myrtle." He ignored Harry's squeaked protest as he left the library.

Harry moved immediately to stand behind Hermione, "I'm counting on you to keep her from killing me."

"I'll protect you to my dying breath." Hermione promised with a smile. "Don't worry Harry, she can't possibly be worse than I was."

It wasn't long until Ginny came running into the chamber. "You are a knobhead of the highest degree. I should hex you until you have raisin skin but I've had time to calm down." She didn't have her wand out as she walked toward Harry. "No need to hide behind Hermione, I'm not going to hurt you. It's too, too much and I can't believe you did this but thank you." Ginny slowly moved around Hermione and hugged Harry.

He pat her back, "You almost died Gin and had that slimy bastard rooting around in your head and taking advantage of you. It's not too much. If it'll make you feel less odd, I had the goblins split it by percentage and not exact amount."

For the second time that day and it was still only morning Harry had a girl crying all over him. "It really doesn't make me feel less odd at all since all of a sudden I have a bloody fortune but that's not your fault. I have a large family to spend it on though." She sniffed against his shoulder.
He shifted and rubbed her back, deciding not to mention that her parents had gotten a share as well. She probably really would hex him then and he really needed all his faculties intact. He stuck his tongue out at Ron as he came back in, Luna and Neville in tow.

Ron settled into an arm chair, "Fred and George went to their little corner to work on the Wheeze products for a little while."

Luna levitated a handkerchief over to Ginny before settling on the armrest of the chair Ron sat it. "Careful Ginny or you'll let the twiddleloopers in, wipe your face and smile instead. That scares them away."

"Well I don't want any twiddleloopers inside." Ginny smiled at the strange girl and wiped her eyes as she finally released Harry after kissing his cheek.

Hermione sat back on the floor, relaxing and deep inside once again regretting how she'd handled things. It was over now but it was still a thorn in her how she'd acted.

Behind Ginny's back Harry clasped his hands together and mouthed a thank you at Luna then perched his bum on the corner of the desk, "How was breakfast for you Luna?"

"It was very nice thank you, good food and even better entertainment." She smiled a slightly wicked smile at that, she was dreamy but that didn't mean she didn't know what was going on around her. "And you? How's your morning been holed up in here with only Wrackspurts as company?"

"It's been interesting. We think we've got a lead on the egg, so now it's just a case of confirming it." He eyed the innocently gleaming egg in the corner. "Just need to find a large bath."

"That's easy then." Luna replied calmly and reached out to twirl a lock of Ron's hair around her finger. "All you have to do is ask."

Ron looked over at her, "Yeah but ask who? The only prefect we know is Diggory and he's got his own egg and Harry needs to keep his edge."

She tilted her head in confusion. "Why would you ask Cedric or any other prefect? They don't have anything at all to do with it. You ask the room itself, or think of what you need and it shows."

Harry straightened, "Room? What room are you talking about Luna?"

"The Come and Go Room, or the Room of Requirement if that's what you want to call it." She looked at them as if they were just a tiny little bit stupid. "You must know of it...It's on your floor." Luna blinked. "You think hard of the thing you need, a door will appear and when you enter the room will be fully equipped with what you need."

"Er no," Harry shook his head, "We've never heard of it before or seen it."

Ron looked at the blond girl, "How'd you come across it?"

"I was looking for my shoes and my notebooks. The Nargles must have stolen them again. When I got to the seventh floor my feet were cold and I was thinking I really needed woollen socks. All of a sudden a door appeared and I walked in to a room filled with all kinds of socks." She shrugged. "I didn't understand it then but the next time I went there it was filled with...Um, well something else. I spoke to Helena about it and she explained what it was."

Harry tilted his head, "This is probably going to be a stupid question but, who's Helena?" He couldn't remember any student named Helena but then he didn't know everyone here.
"The Ravenclaw ghost, the Gray Lady. She really doesn't like to be called that, her name is Helena." Luna answered in a soft voice.

Neville tilted his head, "Helena? Helena Ravenclaw? Rowena's daughter? Gran's always going on about how sad her story is." Among using the story as a warning against avarice, jealousy, and disrespecting your elders that was. His Gran could turn any tale into a moral story.

Hermione leaned forward in interest. The Ravenclaw ghost was the daughter of one of the founders? Imagine the things you could learn from her about the founders and what the purpose of the school really was when it was built.

"That's her." Luna agreed with a nod. "She doesn't like to talk about her life while she was alive though, really, really doesn't want to talk about that or her mother. She's very sweet though and so very shy."

Ron hummed, "Can't say I blame her, I wouldn't want people to come talking to me only because they want to know more about one of my brothers all the time and she's got to get loads of people pestering her for stories about her Mum."

"She did before but not many students know who she is now, or even speak to her at all." Luna said. "She just wants to be herself, just like anyone else. Since she's so shy though she mostly keep to herself."

Both Harry and Neville nodded in understanding about that and Harry flipped a page in the index absently, "I'll have to say hello if I see her in the halls, anyone you like is worth knowing. So this come and go room, we just go up to where it's supposed to be thinking about what we need and a door will open up?"

She nodded again. "Just make sure that if you're more than one there that you think of the same thing. Otherwise the room will be confused and you can end up with beds made of whipped cream or something like that."

Ginny chuckled at that. "This castle is too strange for words. Strange and wonderful."

Harry looked around at all of them and grinned, "So...if the room will turn into anything it doesn't have to be a bath, just water," his eyes gleamed, "who wants to go for a swim then?"

"Don't even dare to try and count me out." Hermione scrambled to her feet. Of course she wanted to be there and find out if they were right and if they were what the egg said.

"I'd like to join too." Ginny said and Luna nodded.

Neville agreed softly and Ron also grinned, "I'm in. Let me go snag the twin terrors and hey, someone should go get Orion."

Harry beamed, "I'll get Orion and meet you all in the corridor." He dashed from the library in excitement.
Chapter 20

They were all back in the Chamber after hours of swimming followed by a large dinner, and settled on the blanket for that evening's work on learning animagus magic and then trying to cast their patronus. Harry was positively thrumming. After the work out of his body, his magic was nearly jumping to do something. His mind however was turning the egg's clue over in it. What would the mermaids take that he'd miss so most of all? It wasn't like he had a lot of things in the first place.

Hermione still couldn't manage a Patronus, it just didn't work for her. It was almost to the point where she wanted to toss her wand across the room. Her mind was on the song in the egg, wondering both what they would take for Harry and how he would manage an hour under water.

Ron shook his head just the teeny, tiniest bit at Hermione. She might have got the clue about Harry but his clue about the patronus charm had gone right over her head. Ah well she'd get it eventually. He concentrated and cast the charm then leaped up, shouting in triumph as a corporeal patronus flew around the Chamber, "Yes!"

Fred and George, clapped and whistled as the silvery barn owl soared around them. "Woohoo, way to go Ronniekins!" George shouted.

Luna just smiled at the bird before meeting Ron's eyes.

Hermione was happy for Ron, she really was. It was wonderful he'd managed to produce a corporeal Patronus, she only wish she could do the same.

Harry looked over at her and reached out to squeeze her hand and murmured, "It'll happen. Remember it took me an entire bloody year to manage it."

She smiled at him and squeezed his hand back but Hermione wasn't sure she believed him completely. It wasn't just the Patronus, this whole year felt so much harder than the previous ones. She couldn't reach her Animagus form either, she behaved like a troll and hurt her friends. Her brain seemed to have suddenly shut down and there were all these emotions, all the time and she didn't know how to deal with them. Not to mention that strange fluttery feeling in her stomach.

Harry shook off his worries and hollered at Ron, "Okay can the celebration prat. Good job though," he grinned at the fading owl, then gave Ron a knowing look, "master one thing move on to the next."

Ron razzed him and sat back down next to Luna, "Right. Animagus transformation. How close are you by the way Harry?"

He hummed and stretched his spine a bit, "Close, very close. I haven't really tried since the first task, too concerned with the second but before it felt like I just needed to reach a little farther."

"Maybe now that you have the clue you can concentrate a little more on reaching it again." Ginny said, shifting her wand from one hand to the other. "I know that there still things to figure out regarding the second task but you have several months to do it and we'll all help in every way you can." She looked over to the twins. "I don't suppose you have anything that lets you breathe underwater?"

George shook his head. "Sorry Gin, not yet anyway."

Neville frowned, "I think I remember reading something a while ago but..." he shook his head, "I'll
look through my books tomorrow and let you know Harry. So you can concentrate on your animagus transformation."

"Thanks Nev," he looked at them all, "So I'm guessing from the eager expressions you all want me to give it a go now yes?"

Fred grinned, "Yup. I bet Georgie and Ron on your form so I want to see which one of us wins."

Harry gave him a two fingered salute before closing his eyes, the incantation echoing through his head as he reached into the most instinctive part of himself. His mental fingers brushed fur and then he felt an all over tingle and tickle and the next thing he knew he was smelling more and his hearing was sharper than before. He opened his eyes to see the people around him in slightly sharper detail but with the colors a bit washed out. He opened his mouth and out came a soft questioning growl.

Everyone was silent and wide eyed in shock. Hermione couldn't take her eyes off of Harry. He was big, soft velvety looking tan fur, a black mane that was just as wild as his usual hair and his eyes were just as brilliantly green as in human form. He was magnificent, regal and absolutely beautiful.

"I win!!! You owe me Freddie, I told you he'd be a lion...The perfect Gryffindor." George hooted with glee as he watched the large lion.

Fred dug a Galleon out of his pocket and flicked it over to his brother, "Yeah, yeah. I still say he would have made a cute little puppy."

Ron snickered as Harry growled playfully at Fred then went about stretching and padding around a bit, trying his new bits out curiously. Green eyes turning back to eye the tail flicking lazily.

Harry sniffed, noticing a slight nutmeg and parchment scent that caught his attention and padded closer to Hermione nuzzling her hair and purring.

Hermione couldn't help but giggle as a shiver went through her at the feeling of Harry's whiskers and breath tickling her. She reached up and rubbed a soft ear before running her hand through his mane. It was strange, he was so powerful in this form but he was still Harry, she still only felt warm and safe with him around.

The twins exchanged a pointed look before George rolled his eyes with a grin, pocketing the Galleon.

Harry purred louder, enjoying Hermione's touch, and lay down, massive head in her lap like a tame kitten.

Ron shook his head, "Only you Harry....oooh I just had a thought. Animagus magic is undetectable even by the Ministry so you could transform in front of the Dursleys and scare the piss out of them!"

"Ronald!" Hermione scolded but really she thought it wasn't a half bad idea. She continued to pet, scratch and caress the large head in her lap and across his side.

"Imagine the look on their faces, when suddenly a huge lion was in Harry's place." George chuckled evilly.

"Boys." Ginny shook her head. "It would probably kill them and although they deserve death Harry could get in trouble or placed in...What's it called again? Monster care?"
"Foster care." Hermione corrected.

Ron hummed, "And how much worse would that be than the Dursleys? Hey! Without them Mum and Dad could adopt Harry and nothing Dumbledore could say would convince them otherwise!"

The lion that was Harry obviously approved of that thought a lot because the purring suddenly doubled in volume, much to everyone's amusement.

Even Hermione laughed as she continued to pet the purring lion. She wanted Harry away from the Dursleys as much as anyone but scaring them to death seemed a little excessive.

"You're already our brother but it would be great to make it official," Ginny added, liking the idea very much.

Fred nodded, "Yeah. But Harry can't transform in front of the muggles. Foster care's not much of a threat but his relatives would probably call animal control." He chuckled at the grumble Harry made and the way his ears pinned back, "But wait til you show Padfoot and Moony, they'll get a kick out of your form and Snuffles can't call you Bambi ever again."

The purring started up again. Harry did look forward to the look on Sirius and Remus' faces when he showed them his animagus form. It was too bad he'd have to wait awhile to do that but in the meantime he'd concentrate on learning to dance and finding a way to breathe underwater.

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Sirius' bum hit the floor, much to the cackling amusement of Ron, as he stared and stared, and stared at the lion in the living room.

Remus managed to stay on his feet but that had a lot to do with the shelf he was gripping tightly and leaning against. Their little Harry, a lion...It was difficult to wrap his mind around it and still it was oddly fitting. Harry was brave and protective of the ones he cared about. "Wow..." Remus really wished he had something more profound to say but he didn't, it was a marvel he could get that single word out to begin with.

Hermione didn't even try to hide her smile at the two men's expression.

Ron grinned, "Ah he's just a big tame tabby under all that- ack!" He found himself pinned under a purring lion, "Prat, you just like being able to throw your weight around for once."

Sirius chuckled, "Well calling him Bambi is definitely out for good now, just look at him Moony! He's huge!"

"He certainly is." Remus agreed with a smile. "It's great Harry, that you've found your Animagus form. It suits you perfectly. Thank you for showing us."

Hermione sunk to her knees and lured Harry away from Ron so the redhead could sit up.

Harry butt his furry head gently against her shoulder and then sat to shift back to human form, "It's been amazing. I haven't roamed the grounds or anything, just the Chamber because I don't want the Bee to catch me," he wrinkled his nose, "but it's fun and yeah Ron it's nice to get the upper hand against you for once." He laughed at the two fingered salute his friend tossed him. "But I've got a question, since I managed to do it I've been...well it's easier to move and I'm even faster on my feet than before. Is that normal?"

Sirius nodded, "Yeah it is. Remember the animagus form is one that is you with all the trappings of
society stripped away. It's how you are at the very core of your instincts, your most primal self." He smiled at Hermione, "I'm betting you're have a devil of a time even getting close right?"

"I have." Hermione admitted with a groan. "And thank you so much for smiling about that. I'm trying and trying but I can't connect with it and my brain just keeps working and planning and buzzing when I'm supposed to meditate and get close." She got up from the floor and moved to the couch in the living room instead, sitting down.

Harry got up and followed her, Ron doing the same so she was flanked on both sides by her two friends.

Sirius scooted his butt over to the floor in front of them, "I'm smiling because Lily tried after graduation to attain an animagus form before it got so frustrating that she gave up. She didn't want to take my advice even though I was the first Marauder to manage it." He poked her jean clad knee, "You need a boost, something that helps you set aside your logic and reach for your animal side."

"What kind of boost?" Hermione looked at Sirius, if he had an advice that she actually could use then she wouldn't discard it. She wanted to reach her animagus form and both Harry and Ron had taught her that accepting help wasn't a weakness.

Remus smiled at them fondly, knowing that Sirius did know what he was talking about before padding out to the kitchen to get some tea ready.

"Okay part of the reason Lily didn't want to listen to me is because she thought I was being a pervert...which I am not and was not being. I told her to use her erm...hunger," he coughed and blushed a bit, "for James to connect with her animagus self. It was an honest and legitimate suggestion cause then they were still in the honeymooning stage and all erm..."

Ron snickered, "Horny? Ow!" He rubbed his head where Hermione had smacked it.

Sirius nodded, "Yeah but that definitely wouldn't work for Hermione since she's not got a lover and hopefully won't for a solid while. Instead for you Hermione, it would be best to tap into your protective drive. To ride the wave of emotions and savagery that you feel when you think about someone hurting the ones you love the most."

Hermione was well aware of the fact that her face was tomato red, she could feel the heat radiating from it but she nodded all the same. What Sirius said did make sense but it was once thing to realize that and another to put it into practice. "If I can only get my mind to agree to focus on that then I think it could help."

"Well let's give it a go now. I'll help. Close your eyes and start with the meditation and incantation but listen to what I say at the same time." Once her eyes were closed he leashed his own instincts and spoke in a steady tone designed to be heard by someone in a meditative state. "It's the end of the year, you're all getting off the train, you going home to your parents, Ron's being smothered by his Mum, and Harry's pushing the cart with his things towards the Dursleys. Harry's Uncle looks angry, red in the face, hands in tight fists and as soon as Harry is close enough one of those hands whips up and backhands Harry."

Harry bit the inside of his cheek to keep from squirming. That was actually close to something that had happened before only Vernon would never strike him in public. He always waited until they were inside 4 Privet Drive.

Hermione's blood ran hotter as anger and absolute loathing spread through her bodily making even her spine prickle. Harry didn't deserve to be hurt like that, she wanted to protect him, to pull that
horrible whale of a man off of Harry and punish him. In her mind she was walking over there placed her hands on Vernon to yell at him, opened her mouth and...hissed?

Hermione's eyes flew open.

Sirius was smiling at her, "Got pretty close there didn't you?"

"I did!" She beamed at him as she practically vibrated with excitement. "Again please, let's go again."

Despite knowing that it was something that he hated anyone knowing that happened Harry chuckled at her excitement. Sirius glanced at his godson and got a nod then settled more comfortably, 'Okay, eyes closed and incantation again. This time you're inside the Dursley home and it's mostly quiet, Harry's aunt, uncle, and cousin have gone out to eat at a fancy, expensive restaurant, but you hear ragged breathing coming from under the stairs and go over to the cupboard there. You reach out and open the cupboard door and there's Harry when he was five, curled up on his side on a cold hard floor with only a pair of pajama trousers three sizes too big for protection and his back covered in bright red welts from Vernon Dursley's belt."

This time Harry winced though not enough to disturb Hermione's concentration. That had happened and was one of the maybe two times anyone had found him after a beating only they hadn't been welts to start with, his magic working to stop any bleeding and heal torn skin.

The anger was back, much stronger than before and Hermione could feel herself shaking from it. Along with the rage there was an incredible sadness too, no child should experience something like that and especially not Harry. Harry deserved only the best. In her mind she entered that tiny cupboard and curled around the five year old Harry, pulling him close and protecting him. She wouldn't let anything happen to him ever again. She would bite and claw and scratch anyone who even tried to come close. Her claws flexed as she pulled the small child closer and cleaned his welts with a rough, gentle tongue. A smooth growl resonating through her body.

When she opened her eyes the world looked different, larger with different coloring. Hermione turned and looked at Harry, wanting to make sure there were no welts and no cupboard. Not here and now.

He was smiling at her and reaching out to scratch behind her ear, "Look at you there Hermione, you're gorgeous." He ran his fingers through a silky, striped pelt and scratched under her chin, meeting Ron's amused gaze, "What?"

"You and Mione, both kitties. It amuses me."

Sirius chuckled, "Well done Hermione. You should probably stay in your animagus form for a little while to fully connect with it so you can transform the next time without help."

She did listen to what Sirius said but it was so hard to focus when those fingers scratched under her chin, it felt heavenly. A rumbling purr rose from her throat and with a tiny bit of awkwardness at learning to balance her body with four legs and a tail she made it into Harry's lap, kneading his denim clad thighs and butting her head against his hand, wanting more petting.

Remus came in carrying a tray. "Oh my, you've been busy. I wasn't gone that long." He looked at Hermione as he put the tray down on the coffee table. "Another cat huh? Albeit a smaller version. Bengal from the looks of it."

Ron nabbed a biscuit from the tray, "She makes a nice tiger." He wasn't put out that she'd managed
the transformation before him, especially since he'd nailed the patronus first. "McGonagall would be proud."

Sirius picked up his cup, "You kidding? When you deign to tell McGonagall, the old tabby'll just about bust with pride."

Harry continued petting Hermione's head, "I do want to tell McGonagall one day, after the old Bee is outted for what he is. She'll need the cheer up then."

"She will yes. She's an upright, honorable woman, finding out that someone she's put her trust in for so long is the bad guy will hit her hard," Sirius eyed Ron, "As for you, I'm betting the reason you've not transformed yet is the same reason I didn't. What do you think Moony? Not putting enough effort in?"

"If he's like you then yeah." Remus smile was fond as he looked at Sirius before turning to Ron. "You're so sure you're going to make it, know that your animal is just there, right underneath the surface. And because you know, that's why you don't push yourself that last extra bit until you fuse together. It's not laziness...More cocky assurance...But in a good way, don't take me wrong, I'm not trying to put you down Ron."

Hermione listened lazily, eyes half closed and still purring up a storm in Harry's lap.

Ron scratched the back of his head, "Yeah I guess. It's right there and comfortable, and I always know it's there so yeah..."

Harry chuckled at the way Ron's ears turned red, "It is a good thing, it means you know yourself and are confident in yourself without being a twat about it." He was happy for that quality in Ron because of where it was born. Ron might not feel like he measured up to his brothers in their achievements but he always knew he was loved and that his parents were proud of him.

"It is a good thing, Harry is right." Remus nodded as he placed out teacups for all of them before placing the kettle, sandwiches and biscuits on the table as well. "You just need to push that extra little stretch and you'll be there. It's such a tiny push before you and your animal form will be truly one." He pursed his lips. "Well...I think so anyway. I can't speak from experience since my animal is another thing completely."

Sirius absently reached out and squeezed Remus' ankle over his trouser leg in support as he added his agreement, "Remus hit it on the head. You want to give it a try now or later?"

"Eh go for later, I don't want to intrude on Ms. Stripes' moment and besides, we're supposed to finish polishing Harry's dancing skills here remember? Though I don't see how you can top what Luna taught him, Merlin that girl's got the moves and she had Harry doing a paso doble even...it was impressive."

"Paso doble, impressive indeed." Remus smiled, he had never been much of a dancer. "It sounds as if you can go to the ball without worries Harry, at least no worries about the dancing." He leaned forward and poured the tea. "Let's have tea first and you can dance through the floor later."

Sirius grinned, "What else have you learned?"

Harry nibbled on a biscuit and took a sip of his tea, "Hermione taught me the basics and the waltz, Neville the foxtrot and let me tell you that was no where near as amusing as Fred teaching me the Samba or George the Rumba," he paused to let Sirius clean up the spit take he'd done and get his cackles out of the way, "Ginny taught me the steps to the opening dance for the ball, something I
still need to pick up a thank you gift for because that little folk dance would have had me losing my mind otherwise, Ron," he exchanged a laughing look with his best friend, "got me doing the quick step, and Luna also taught me the tango."

Sirius laughed, "I think you've got a good set then so I'll add...hmm what do you think Moony? The Cha-Cha-Cha or the Mambo?"

"Mambo, definitely the Mambo." Remus grinned in amusement before dragging a footstool over by his foot so he could sit down on it. "With those dances under your belt, you'll sail right through any social gathering, both wizarding and muggle."

"I half feel like I've been on that American tv show, Dancing with the Stars," Harry shook his head, "but so long as I don't embarrass myself."

Sirius hummed, "Or the girl you're going with right? Who's your da-" he blinked as Harry groaned feelingly and dropped his head onto the tiger's in his lap, "You've not got a date yet?"

Ron snickered, "Oh he's tried. He asked Ginny but she'd already agreed to go with Neville, he asked Hermione but she's being secretive and supposedly already has a date, the Patil twins already have dates, Cho is going with Cedric and he'd not ask Parkinson if someone held a wand to his head."

"What about Luna?"

"She's my date thank you very much Snuffles," Ron stuck his tongue out at him.

"Oh Pads, you don't move in on someone else's date, very bad form." Remus poked Sirius in the side with his toes, a teasing smile on his lips.

Hermione got off Harry's lap and changed back to human form. She wouldn't admit it even at wand point but she'd only accepted her date to the ball after Harry asked Ginny before her. She was well aware that neither Ron or Harry saw her as a girl, not really but she wanted to go to the ball with someone who did. She straightened her hair and reached for her tea. It was a bit disorienting getting back into the human aspect of her mind after being in kitty mode.

Sirius shook his head, "This is a sad, sad day. Prong's sprog can't even get a date."

Harry glared at him, "Bite me Snuffles. There's other girls to ask but..." he shrugged.

Ron snickered again, "Fangirls the lot of them. I just don't get why you didn't ask Hermione first."

Harry tossed a pillow at him, "She spends almost all day, every day with you or me or sleeping in her dorm. She's pretty inside and out and utterly brilliant and deserves to have a real date, not a date with someone who's warts she already knows way, way too much about."

"She is sitting right here and is more than capable of speaking for herself." Hermione said though she knew her face was just as red as it had been before her transformation to animagus form. It was sweet of Harry to think that way about her but it was also completely wrong. She'd have loved to go with Harry. Oh well, she hoped the night would be pleasant and fun with the date she had. She also couldn't believe she was going to say this, she must be a glutton for pain. "Why don't you ask Fleur? She almost has the same problem as you do with the fangirls. Boys only ask her because of her looks and the fact that she's a champion."

Remus traded a knowing look with Sirius.
Sirius leaned his head on Remus' knee with an exasperated sigh. It'd be nice if those two would pull their heads out but there wasn't much to be done to make them.

Harry hummed and nodded, "Yeah I guess that would work. At least she could be sure that her dance partner won't be drooling over her."

Hermione nodded slowly, already feeling a sinking feeling in her stomach for even suggesting it. She liked Fleur, she really, really did but right now she wished the French girl straight home to France. It was petty and not nice but for some reason that was how she felt. "It's just a suggestion but I thought it could work." ...And she just kept on doing it, Hermione took a large sip of tea to keep herself quiet.

Ron looked over at her, "Well even though I'll have Luna and Harry'll be twirling the gorgeous French veela round the floor and you'll have...whoever it is, you'll save us a dance won't you Mione?" He smiled winningly.

Smiling she swallowed her tea, almost scorching her throat and leaned her head on Ron's shoulder. "Of course Ronald, I always have time to dance with my boys." She reached out and patted his freckled hand.

Harry felt one of those mysterious surges of jealousy and mentally kicked himself in the bum over it.

Sirius saw the flash over Harry's face and grinned as he hauled himself to his feet, "Alright then young padawan, time to learn the Mambo. Moony," he grinned at Remus over his shoulder, "mind putting on the music?"

"Not at all Mr. Padfoot." Remus waved his wand over his ancient looking record player until an appropriate record turned on, playing fitting music. "Let's see the master at work then, teaching his pupil. I on the other hand, will treat myself to another biscuit." He reached out and dipped a biscuit in his tea.

Harry got up, already used to dancing lessons with other guys, an amused smile on his face, "Alright Snuffles, do your worst."

"I hope not, I plan on doing my best and so should you. Now-" Sirius began explaining the Mambo and guiding Harry through learning the lead for the dance.

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Harry cast a prayerful glance to the sky and then made his way over to Fleur, who was sitting just outside the Beauxbatons carriage reading a book. "Fleur?"

Fleur looked up, a frownline between her eyebrows until she saw that it was Harry. "Oui 'Arry, what brings you 'ere?" She closed the book and looked up at him with a smile.

He smiled sheepishly, "I'm hoping you can help save me from er," he cast a glance over his shoulder at the small giggling group of girls trying to hide and spy on him at the same time, "a very giggly Yule Ball. See the number of people I know and trust are...limited and the amount of those that are girls...well there's Hermione, Ginny, Luna, the Patils to a very small degree, and you. So I'm hoping you might be willing to go to the Yule Ball with me so we can both have a good time without having to deal with a simpering, giggly, or drooling dance partner?"

"Ow...Romantic." Fleur's eyes glittered as she looked at Harry who looked like he wanted to be anywhere but where he was. He really was rather adorable. "Oui 'Arry, I would love to go to the
dance with you. I think we could 'ave a good time together without pressure. I save you from giggling and you save me from wandering 'ands."

"Thank you," he bowed with a slightly self-deprecating grin, "I can even promise that I won't step on your toes. I've had people drilling me on dances since the First Task. I can even dance a passable paso."

She let out a pearl like laughter. "Good to know, I look forward then, to dance with you 'Arry. Maybe you can show me how it is done." Fleur got up from her seat and walked over to brush her lips against his cheek. "Don't be nervous, we'll take it as it comes and 'ave fun."

He grinned at the cries of dismay he heard from the girls who'd followed him, "Fun I can do." He heard a familiar shout and looked behind himself at Ron, red faced and scowling, "I swear he's psychic sometimes. Well I have to go and let my best friend beat me up now." He gave her a smile, "Good luck with your clue for the second task."

"Merci, same to you 'Arry." Fleur sat back down in her seat. "Non on the bruises and black yes though, so he can't beat you up to bad. Eet will not look nice in the pictures."

He laughed, "No worries there. He'll just muss my hair, not that you'd notice," he waved at her and trotted over to Ron who was shaking his finger at him.

"You...you..."

"Before you explode, I bought and sent them before we even got on the train after seeing the lacy monster otherwise I'd have reminded you to get your own in Hogsmeade. It's an early Christmas present, promise."

Ron simmered, spluttered, and grabbed Harry for a noogie, "Prat. Okay thanks, just so long as they're the only present I get this year."

"They are," that was a lie but he figured Ron would let it slide. "So, feel up to visiting Myrtle?"

"Yeah why not. I want to see if Snuffles was right about me anyway and Hermione and the others are already down there, Neville's practically bouncing."
Harry turned the corner of the hall, the hessian boots he'd gotten while in Hogsmeade to replace the heeled shoes clacking on the stone floor, and smiled at the other champions gathered in the Hall. He waved at Cedric and Cho, shook Viktor's hand, and then bowed politely at Fleur, "You look lovely."

"Merci, you clean up very nice as well 'Arry." Fleur spun around, showing off her ice blue, empire waisted silk dress. "Are you ready for this then?"

"As I'll ever be," he smiled just as McGonagall came into the hallway, "Ah good all the champions are here. Do you all have your partners?" She eyed Harry and Fleur in question.

Harry gave his head of house a grin, "Fleur took pity on me so we're each other's partners."

"Ah good then. Mr. Krum?" Her sharp eyes turned to the Bulgarian.

"She should be here soon," Viktor might not look it but he was nervous, his stomach twisting more than it had his first Quidditch game, as he hoped she hadn't changed her mind and decided to stand him up. Not that he thought she was the type to do so but still.

Hermione felt an almost overwhelming need to wipe her sweaty palms on the silk of her dress but she didn't. What was she doing? She wasn't the kind of girl who got dressed up and went to balls, people would laugh at her and pity Viktor for being stuck with her, still she wouldn't back out now. She couldn't do that to Viktor. Raising her chin stubbornly she called on all her strength and walked down the last steps to join the rest of the people standing in front of the large double doors leading into the Great Hall.

Cho saw her first and her mouth dropped open in pure shock and amazement. Who could have known Hermione Granger was hiding that sort of beauty under her frizzy, bushy hair?

Harry saw Cho's expression and turned, sucking in a surprised breath, "Whoa."

Fleur chuckled at her date's expression. It was a good thing they were going as friends because otherwise she would not have taken such a reaction from her partner lightly. "Whoa indeed."

Hermione ducked her head and walked over to Viktor. "Sorry I'm late. The hair, it took a long time taming it."

"It is more dan vorth de vait. You are beautiful." He took her hand and kissed the back of it, "I shall be de envy ov many men tonight."

"You are lying through your teeth but thank you." Hermione blushed and looked Viktor over in his uniform like jacket. "You look very handsome and dashing. I think I'm going to be the envied one."

Harry had to kick himself mentally to stop staring at Hermione and to shake himself out of the seething jealousy that had risen up. He'd always known that Hermione was pretty but he'd never realized just how stunning she could be. In the periwinkle dress that accented her figure perfectly, her hair sleek and straight as rain and subtle application of makeup she looked like some sort of goddess. He cleared his throat then looked over at Fleur sheepishly before murmuring, "Sorry."

"Eet is quite alright." Fleur continued to smile and looped her arm through Harry's. "No 'arm in admiring beauty where you find eet."
Hermione kept glancing over at Harry, he looked so very handsome. Something had been done with his hair and those shiny knee high boots...They looked good on him. He and Fleur looked amazing together, something she could never compete with. She turned her attention back to Viktor and smiled up at him, feeling a bit guilty for looking at Harry when she was there with him.

Viktor smiled down at her, placing his hand over the one she'd laid in the crook of his arm a bit possessively. He saw the way she'd looked at Harry and the way Harry had looked at her and he was man enough to admit he didn't like it but he'd not say anything or act badly. Hermione was here with him and not Harry after all.

Harry followed the others into the Great Hall turned ballroom for the night, after a brief confusion on the part of McGonagall over whether he and Fleur should go before Cedric or not, and over to the Head table where they were all sitting tonight. Once again giving a mental thanks to Ginny for coaching, he pulled Fleur's seat out for her then sat beside her, somewhat amused that Percy was on his other side.

Percy nodded at Harry and got red on the neck when he looked at Fleur before looking straight forward again, listening intently if Mr. Crouch would need anything.

Luna looked up at the Head Table from the table where she and Ron sat along with Neville and Ginny and the twins and their dates. "They all look so pretty don't you think? Like Sparkle pricklies."

Ron hummed, amused by the glances Harry and Hermione slid towards each other when the other wasn't looking, "Yeah, who knew Harry and Hermione could clean up that well?" He looked back to Luna as Dumbledore started in on some sort of speech, "But I'd have to say that you're the prettiest girl here tonight in my humble opinion."

She beamed at him and reached out to pat his hand gently. "Well that's lucky then since your opinion is the only one I care about. You look rather lovely too. Bluebell blue. I like it."

Ginny smiled and straightened the wide shoulder strap on her deep purple dress. "Everyone looks very nice."

Neville nodded, noticing that Fred and George's dates of Angelina and Katie were already looking bored to tears and the twins were busy talking in their...own little world. "They do. I wonder if Harry's jaw hit the floor when he saw Hermione?"

Ron chuckled, "Poor bloke probably choked on air. Think those two'll ever figure it out?"

"I'm starting to have my doubts, both of them so smart and neither of them can tell their arse from their elbow. Dose them with Amortentia and lock them in a room together I say...Or just lock them up, I don't think any love potion is needed." Ginny sighed.

Fred grinned, "Yeah who'd ever have thought that ickle Ronnekins was sharper in that respect than Harry and Hermione?"

Ron rolled his eyes and looked over at the girl next to him, "What do you think Luna? Do you think they'll catch a clue?"

"I know they will, eventually." Luna answered with a nod. "All they'll need is a little help from their friends and to kick out the Wrackspurts from their minds and all will go well."

Ginny really liked both Katie and Angelina but right then she wanted to use her pointy toed shoes and kick them both when she saw them hide their smiles when they looked at Luna.
Ron narrowed his eyes on both of the Chasers irritably and covered Luna's hand with his before proceeding to ignore them, as he would for the rest of the evening, "As we're all very good friends we'll provide that help happily."

Fred exchanged a look with George and indicated their dates with a glance.

George nodded shortly.

Ginny noticed and suddenly felt extremely proud of her brothers, all of them. Even the git up at the Head Table, hopefully he'd retract his head out of his bum before it was too late. Most proud of course of the three that sat at her table.

Harry controlled his eye roll at Dumbledore's speech then quirked a brow at the way to order food. He looked down at his plate and ordered a simple meal of steak and potatoes. He looked over at Fleur, smiling at the French dish on her plate, "How do the Hogwarts kitchens manage French cooking? Are we passable?"

"Ah oui, eet ez very tasty." Fleur smiled. "Of course eet ez nozzing like ze food at 'ome but I 'ave nozzing to complain about." She lifted a slender crystal glass to her lips and took a sip. "One day you 'ave to come visit. My Grandmozzer makes ze best food you can taste."

He beamed, "I'd like that. I've always wanted to see other places. What area of France do you live in?"

"I live in a village outside of Toulon, in ze south of France, eet is right by ze Mediterranean sea. Eet was a wonderful place to grow up in and eet will always be home. Even eef I won't live there all my life." Her voice turned a little wistful. "I would love to show it to you 'Arry."

"It sounds beautiful. Maybe if I'm lucky I can wrangle a little time and permission one summer to visit. I'd really love to be able to." He speared a bit of potato, "I've never seen the sea before but it's on my bucket list."

"Well know zat you are always welcome, and you 'ave to see ze sea, eet ez glorious." Fleur lifted her fork to her mouth, enjoying the subtle seasoning of her dish.

He smiled and continued talking to Fleur as they ate but at the same time he was aware of Percy's almost painfully desperate attempts to get Crouch's attention on some issues he'd obviously been working on for some time and from what Harry heard Percy's solutions were absolutely brilliant but not only did Crouch not even bother listening to his assistant, but he'd not even called Percy by the correct name. It made Harry's blood boil and as he looked out over the tables and saw his best friend laughing and joking, he was reminded of what Ron had said about why he didn't put in the effort to get top grades. 'I don't want to put in the effort to surpass Percy's grades... that's Percy's thing and I don't want to take it away from him.'

It struck him suddenly that Percy wasn't a tight-arsed prat just for the sake of it. He was trying to make a mark, do something brilliant that would get him noticed. He was third in line with two older brothers who had glamorous jobs that they were swiftly becoming the best at, older brother to two jovial, popular pranksters who were building their own business from scratch, one brother who'd been front and center for grand adventures and heroism, and a baby sister who was adored and cosseted and talented in her own right.

Percy was over-shadowed and badly needed to be seen so he put everything he was into his job, trying to be the best but he wasn't getting anywhere because his boss apparently had his head up his arse. Harry murmured an apology in advance to Fleur for the scene he was about to cause and then
turned sharply in his seat to glare viciously at Barty Crouch, "Mr. Crouch I can't help overhearing the way you keep dismissing your assistant and honestly it makes me sick."

People close enough to hear froze, even Dumbledore was given pause by the cold tone of Harry's voice and the strength behind it.

"Have you even heard a single thing he's said or any of the positively brilliant solutions he's offered to problems you keep complaining about? That was a rhetorical question." He interrupted Crouch before he could continue, "Not only do you keep dismissing him out of hand but not one, not once in the entire time I have seen you with him have you gotten his name correct.

His name is Percy Ignatius Weasley and he is the most dedicated and brilliant person you could possibly deal with on a day to day basis. He works overtime without pay, brings his work home to refine and polish and perfect it until it shines, he works himself to the bone to make certain you're presented well to dignitaries, ambassadors, and other countries' Magical Cooperation departments, the very least you could do is remember his proper name. It makes me wonder how many people you've insulted and cost us good foreign relations with by forgetting their names if you can't even remember your own assistant's. Unless, of course, it's Percy who pulls your irons out of those fires andsmooths over the insulted tempers?"

From the Head Table and outwards, silence spread like a wave as people turned to look at Harry and of course Crouch. Percy's face was matching his hair and freckles in color and he straightened his glasses nervously, not knowing how to act. Part of him was grateful that Harry...that someone spoke up for him, that someone had heard what he had to say but another part wanted to make it completely on his own. With no one's aide, he didn't need rescuing.

Crouch sputtered and stared at Harry, face almost purple in color. As much as he wanted to yell or march out of there in outrage he couldn't. He couldn't afford to make an enemy out of the Boy Who Lived, plus the boy was a champion as well. No he couldn't do what he most wanted and lash out.

"I assure you Mr. Potter that I value every input Patric here delivers to me. It's just that maybe a grand ball isn't the ideal place for a work conversation. I'll be happy to take it up with him in the office come Monday."

Percy didn't say anything, already knowing that once the Holidays were over there would be something else to keep Mr. Crouch from listening. Still he would never stop trying. He sent Harry a half thankful half irriated glance and ate his meal in silence.

"I just told you his name, it's Percy, not Patric, not Perkins, Percy. And if a ball isn't the place for such conversation, why are you moaning, groaning, griping, and complaining about your work issues here then not listening to viable solutions?" He borrowed a tactic he'd seen Malfoy use and lifted a single, disdainful brow before proceeding to ignore him. He was aware that there were several eyes on them and more than a few of those were of Ministry officials that outranked Crouch. Good. Maybe someone would notice Crouch's idiocy and asshattery.

He looked at Percy and murmured quietly, "I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable but I just couldn't stand it any longer. Your ideas are brilliant you know, and I know brilliant, I'm around Hermione every day. I may not know much about the details of your work but it seems to me your ideas would work very well," he glanced over at his other side, "what do you think Fleur?"

"Ah Oui, from what I've 'eard 'ere and in ze Tournament at large, your ideas sound very good Mr. Weasley. Eef ze English don't appreciate you, zen maybe anozer country will." She smiled blindingly at Percy ignoring the way he blushed even deeper red.

Fred nearly choked on his asparagus and looked at Harry defending Percy the Prat so staunchly,
then he looked at Percy and saw what Harry had. His big brother had been trying so hard and was getting nowhere. "Georgie I think maybe we should ease up on Percy when he starts in on cauldron bottoms and whatnot."

George nodded as he looked up at the Head Table too. "I think you're right Freddie, he's a prat but he's our prat and a brilliant one. He should be appreciated for what he does and maybe we can begin to show that at home." He leaned closer to his brother, completely ignoring Katie.

Ron was amused by the looks of growing fury on Katie and Angelina's faces as his brothers ignored them. Served them right. He looked up at Harry who was employing Fleur's help and drawing Percy into conversation, honestly listening to Percy and then asking questions or answering back and he noticed a few Ministry officials and international delegates surreptitiously listening in with impressed looks on their faces as Harry helped Percy to shine by giving him an interested someone to speak about his ideas and projects with.

"Have I mentioned lately that I've the best, best mate/brother in all but blood on the face of the planet? Gin you and I have to write Mum and Dad about this one, I mean just look," he nodded at a stern blond man who was nodding in agreement with something Percy was saying, "That's the Deputy Minister for France."

Ginny agreed with a nod. "You are absolutely right about everything you just said, as shocking as that is." She was filled with admiration for Harry and the pride on Percy's face when what he said actually was heard and taken into consideration was worth more than any surprise Galleons.

Hermione felt all warm inside when she witnessed what Harry was doing. So like him to see things for what they were and act on it, righting the wrongs he could right. She was so proud of him, so proud.

Viktor listened as well and nodded about a comment on broomstick import/export regulation even as he noticed that Crouch looked like he'd swallowed a live fish. He leaned close and murmured to Hermione, "I hope dat Mr. Veasley can speak French because if de look on de French Deputy Minister's face is any indication, dey may poach Mr. Veasley from de English."

"I hope he does." Hermione said a little bit viciously. "Percy speaks French like a native and if they lose him then maybe the British Ministry will realize what they let slip through their fingers. Percy can be a stiff know it all sometimes but I know just how he feels. I'm just like that too, so afraid to fail, to make a mistake."

"It vill be a kick in de face dat Mr. Crouch deserves I dink." He hesitantly tucked a trailing bit of hair behind her ear, "I do not believe dat you could ever possibly fail if you put your all into it."

"You are much, much too kind to me Viktor. I can fail, spectacularly so but one thing I've learned is to pick myself up and try again." She looked at both Harry and Ron when she said that. "School and studying has always come easy to me, it's everything else I struggle with." She smiled gently at him.

He smiled back, "You only truly fail when you give up and mistakes, I dink a muggle poet said it best, 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.' Dat is someding dat got me through the first few games I lost."

"It's an excellent saying and words to live by," Hermione nodded, still smiling. It was a bit of a surprise to learn that Viktor read muggle poetry but a pleasant one. She narrowed her eyes teasingly, "And you mean you've actually lost a game? According to Ron, you can practically fly without a broom."
He chuckled, "Da I haf lost bevore and it hit my pride hard at first but now, it is part of de game. You can not know de best vay to vin if you haf not lost bevore." His attention was caught by Dumbledore standing and announcing that it was time for the champions to open the dancing. Viktor stood and pulled Hermione's chair out, "Shall ve my lady?"

"Absolutely kind Sir. I'll do my best to keep my heels off your toes, no promises though." Hermione stood and took Viktor's arm, letting him lead her out on the floor to take their place among the other two couples. The unpleasant sting inside her that Harry was there with someone else was still there but she was having a good time with Viktor. He was nice to talk to and he certainly paid attention to her.

Harry gave Fleur a sheepish smile as they got into position, "Thank you for not frying me for that scene back there. I consider Percy a brother and well...I just couldn't stand seeing him so disregarded."

"Eet ez perfectly okay 'Arry. Family matters and Mr Weasley was treated badly, you did ze right zing." Fleur placed one hand in his and the other on his shoulder. "Eet would 'ave been more disappointing eef you 'ad done nozzing."

"Well that's a disappointment that'll never happen. Just ask Hermione or Ron and they will tell you that I am incapable of doing nothing when I see an injustice or unfairness. I tend to rush right in if someone doesn't sit on me," he grinned as the music started and once more gave thanks to his friends for teaching him how to dance as he lead Fleur into the fluid steps of the opening folk dance.

"They look good out there." George leaned back in his seat and watched the champions dance. "I'm probably a bad evil person though because right now I find it would have been more fun if we hadn't taught our little lion to dance. At least then we would have been amused. This is all dreadfully correct and boring."

Fred nodded, "It is a bit of a yawn but after the opening dance things should liven up a bit. We didn't teach Harry the Latin dances for nothing after all."

Katie tried to get George's attention, "It'll be less boring if we join the dance George."

"Yeah you're right Freddie, things should liven up once this snooze fest is over. If nothing else we'll liven it up." He would pay for it later but George didn't care. Right now he couldn't remember why he had even asked Katie to go to the ball with him to begin with. She was a fine Quidditch player and a pretty girl but they had nothing else in common and George didn't like anyone who laughed at others thinking they were so much better themselves.

Fred ignored similar cajoling from Angelina as Ron led Luna out onto the dance floor after the traditional dance was over and a rhumba rhythm started to play and nodded to his brother, "Looks like Ronnekins and Luna are ending that snooze fest. I swear if Ron lets her get away I'm going to turn him into a hamster and give him to Luna as a pet. That lass will make a brilliant sister-in-law." His comment served two purposes, one it was a reply to his brother, who he never left hanging, and two it would let Angelina and Katie know exactly why he and George were ignoring them.

"Not even Ronald is that idiotic. Have you seen how the boy looks at her, Mum will weep with joy when the girl next door becomes a Weasley some day in the future." George's eyes were half closed and his body language relaxed but the redhead was completely aware of the things going on around him, including the look their dates exchanged. "Luna's already family though, a top notch girl."
Ginny smiled at her brothers antics though she agreed with them and turned to Neville. "Come on Nev, let's get out there and show them how it's done."

He bowed and took her hand, "Happily."

Fred grinned as their little sister was led out onto the dance floor and looked around the ballroom, spotting Draco Malfoy looking utterly miserable in the corner. "You know Georgie I heard that Malfoy’s date got the flu and left him all by his wee ferrety self." His eyes gleamed in mischief.

"Aw, how sad for him and his date. I hope the candy basket we sent the fiery Miss. Parkinson didn’t have anything to do with that." George blew on his nails and polished them on the lapel of his dress robes.

Katie gaped at them, "You two are horrible!"

Fred ignored her and propped his chin on his fist, "Possibly but you know I feel just a tiny smidge bad now. I mean he looks so lonesome and sad." He gave his twin a look, "And we need to liven things up a bit don't you agree?"

"Absolutely, besides, this strawberry shortcake could use a little vanilla filling." George smile was as wicked as it could get as he smoothly got out of his seat and waited for his brother to do the same.

Ignoring the scandalized gasps of their dates, Fred got to his feet and sauntered over to Draco Malfoy, both of them grinning ear to ear. He boxed Malfoy in on one side while George did the same on the other, "Well hello there, are you lonesome tonight?"

"Pardon me? What in the name of Merlin do you think you're doing?" Silver gray eyes widened in shock as he was sandwiched between two tall, smiling gingers. He was too shocked to actually do anything.

"Well little dragon, our first plan was to dance, so come along then." George didn't drop his smile. Fred enjoyed the utterly stymied look on the blond's face. The subtle starting strains of a tango caught his attention and he snagged Draco's wrist in a firm grip, "Come on then little dragon and let us show you that three can tango."

"No, now wait a second, I haven't agreed to any dance. Especially with you." Draco tried to protest but it fell on deaf ears as he was manhandled out on the floor, one body pressed close to his front and one to his back. His Father would be livid if he saw a Malfoy in that position and funnily enough that was the thought that finally relaxed him, that allowed him to follow the gingers’ lead.

"There we go." George's voice was smooth in a pale ear.

Fred moved in concert with his brother, draping Draco against one then the other of them and he purred, "See we don't bite, unless you want us to."

"It's bad enough with your hands on me, I certainly don't want your mouths anywhere near my person." Draco was beginning to find his sneer again though he still moved fluently through the steps of the Tango. "You might not bite but I do, venomously so."

George chuckled happily. "Oh we like you little dragon, we really do."

Fred nodded, sweeping Draco into a turn then letting George plaster him against his front, "A great deal. You can bite all you want, a few teeth marks never bothered us and really, venom can be
sweet sometimes." His nose brushed the spot on Draco's neck just below the ear.

"Sweet but lethal." Draco hissed out and repressed a shudder. What were they up to? Making a spectacle of him and of themselves. He couldn't fathom why they were doing this and why he hadn't hexed them to hell and back yet for daring to touch him.

George just chuckled again, finding the littlest Malfoy amusing and delightful.

"My brothers are mental, absolutely mental...But he is fit, Malfoy I mean." Ginny watched the three way Tango as she danced in Neville's arms. "I'm surprised Katie and Angie haven't combusted yet."

Neville didn't mind her comment about Malfoy being fit and chuckled a bit, "They will sooner or later. Poor Ron though, I think they've broken him," he nodded at the redhead standing and staring with his jaw dropped open and eyes nearly bugging out. "He's not pulled any of his gitty moves since Hermione's teeth were hexed so I'm actually not surprised the twins have made a move, not after the speculation I've heard them make on Malfoy's physical assets."

"Oh Morgana, they discuss such things in the open?" Ginny didn't know whether to laugh or glare. She had to chuckle at Ron's gobsmacked expression. "Poor Ronnie, he'll catch Nargles if he keeps his mouth open like that." She turned in his arms. "So~o, these physical assets...What do by idiot brothers believe then? Gherkin or eggplant?"

Neville laughed, "Talk centers more on his backside than the front but leaning towards the latter. I don't think they'll make that far a move until he's sixteen though."

"I bloody well hope so, if they tried I would hex their bollocks off." Ginny sounded stern. "I don't care what Fred and George do together but they'd better wait for whoever they invite to join them to be of a more proper age. Besides this way they have a year and a half to prime him I guess."

Neville choked a bit before bursting out laughing, "You're wonderful Ginny Weasley."

Harry, who'd taken a short break with Fleur from dancing and was getting punch, eyed the twins with Draco then Neville laughing and then Ron, who's jaw had finally snapped shut at something Luna said, "Well...the twins at least know how to liven things up, even at an already fun party."

Fleur's laugh chimed across the Hall. "Oui, zey are a bit unconventional perhaps but 'ighly amusing. I zink people like zat are needed to keep the blood pumping so to speak."

He chuckled, "I almost feel sorry for Malfoy, he looks like he doesn't have a clue what to do about his current position or the twins."

"e does look rather confused and bewildered but from what I 'ave 'eard and seen eet may be good for 'im." Fleur regarded the blond calmly. "Everyone deserves a second chance oui?"

Harry nodded, "Yes they do."

Fleur flashed him a smile and drank her punch, she knew that if there was anyone who believed in second chances it was Harry. "At least ze twins will know 'ow to 'andle 'im."

Hermione and Viktor joined them by the punch, Hermione already warm and pink cheeked from dancing. She was having fun though and she hadn't stepped on Viktor's toes so far.

Harry grinned at her, the flush making her look lovely, "You look like you're having fun there."
"I am, I am having fun...Just a little warm." Hermione grinned back, taking the cup Viktor handed her. "You? Are you having a good time?"

"Yeah. Fleur's a great dancer and I haven't stepped on her toes so I'll call this evening a success." He nodded at the twins and Draco, winding down from their tango, "What do you think of that? Other than the fact that Charlie isn't the only Weasley with a thing for dragons."

Hermione tilted her head to the side and nibbled on her bottom lip as she watched the very odd trio. "I think it's a good thing. If Malfoy is to have a snowball's chance in hell to be able to change and break free of old habits then he needs to be shaken up and woken up. I can't think of anyone better to do just that than Fred and George."

"No one else can shake things up as well as the twins this is true," he lifted his punch in small salute, "Oh you know that gift my insane godfather sent me?" He looked over at her, "It's been cleared of dark magic traps and whatnots by Aurors, I got a letter detailing what they cleared out and there were some very, very nasty things lurking."

"That's great Harry, not the nasty lurky things but that it has been cleared." Hermione's smile widened and she took a step closer to him. "Do you think you'll have a chance to go see it before school starts up again? If you do then I definitely want to come with. Pleeeaaase."

He reached out and tugged on a sleeked lock of hair with a grin, "No need to beg. I wouldn't want to check it out without you. The decor is gruesome, the Aurors are leaving it to me to take care of that they just took care of the sticking charms anchoring everything down and erm....apparently it comes with a house elf. The letter had some really unflattering things to say about him too."

"Decor is easily changed, especially with magic. All you have to do is decide what you want and then...Wave your wand. The house elf can be trickier." Hermione wrinkled her nose. She was still charging ahead with SPEW but she had done a little more research into it, realized not every house elf was mistreated and it was true that most of them was happy to be in service. "Perhaps Snuffles can tell you more about what to expect from your new house elf...Oh and don't tell Dobby, he'll be green with envy."

"No plans to let the Kreacher cat out of the bag," he shook his head, "Who names house elves anyway?"

Viktor grunted, "Most elves ask deir masters to name deir children. It ties dem to de house magic from birth."

"Is there any reason to name them the most ugly and strange names you can think of?" Hermione looked up at Viktor and walked back so she was standing next to him again. "I mean I understand about tying the magic to a family, it will work better both ways then but the names...the names are so horrible. Mopsy, Tipsy, Snottric and Kreacher...Why?"

"It depends on de vizards. My uncle has an elf named Dimitri but anoder family member named her elf's infant Phlem."

Harry shook his head, "Lousy, lousy names and lousy wizards for using those. Eugh."

"I couldn't agree more." Hermione made a face. "There are definitely aspects of wizarding society I don't understand at all."

"Oh 'ermione, I've spent my 'ole life in ze wizarding world and zere ez plenty of zings I do not understand either. We like to make zings confusing." Fleur placed a hand on Hermione's arm.
Harry chuckled in agreement then tilted his head when he heard the band start a waltz, "Hey Hermione, may I have this dance?" He smiled at her.

"Of course." She looked up at Viktor. "I'll be back shortly." Hermione took Harry's hand and walked out on the dance floor with him, feeling strangely tingly.

Harry put his hand on her waist and his other held her's warmly as they began their dance. Something about it, about this, felt perfectly right. It was almost as if there was a different band playing as he danced with Hermione. "You know I think you knocked me flat when you came down the stairs."

"What?" Hermione blinked in surprise before looking down at her dress for a moment. "Oh, it's just spackle and polish, not really me at all." She smiled at him, moving easily to the music and as absolutely corny as it sounded almost feeling as if she was floating. "You clean up very well Mr. Potter. I must admit I love the boots."

He chuckled, "They're much more comfortable and look better than the green brocade shoes," he wrinkled his nose, "but most of this is spackle and polish like you say. How long did it take you to get your hair like that?"

"Hours." Hermione groaned. "Miserable hours at that. Frizzy is me I fear...It's kind of nice though, to polish up at times...Few times and far in between." She grinned at him.

"Maybe but tell you a secret," he leaned his head close to whisper, "I like your hair better without the polish."

Over by the punch bowl Viktor's hand clenched on his glass and he wanted to go over and cut in but he knew Hermione would likely be very angry if he did.

Fleur saw Hermione smile and blush and she saw Viktor's grip on his glass. "Eet ez just a dance Viktor. Why don't you join me on ze floor why we wait non?"

He nodded, "Ov course," he set his glass down and offered her his arm, leading her out on the floor.

Ron stood with Luna, shaking his head, "There's a problem. I hope no one gets badly hurt." He wanted Harry and Hermione to realize their feelings for each other but he didn't want Viktor hurt when they did.

Luna nodded, looking a bit sad. "Harry and Hermione's souls are already interlocking, even if the Wrackspurts are clouding their minds to it. But you're right, Viktor is a good man...Very intense though, hopefully feelings can cool off as quickly as they ignited."

"I certainly hope so, well for Viktor that is," he smiled, "Would you like to go for a walk? See if we can spot any friendly snow creatures?"

"Like frost-wiggles?" She looked at him with a hopeful smile. "Absolutely, this is the perfect season to spot them since they go back into hibernation just after the new year." Luna tangled their fingers together. "Let's take that walk and thank you for asking me to come here with you, unless I've forgotten to thank you earlier."

He linked his fingers with hers as they left the ballroom, "I wouldn't have wanted to be here with anyone else." He had his girl and with a little luck Harry and Hermione would see the truth of who they were meant to be with soon.
Harry arched his back, coming out of the pool as his gillyweed ran out. He really had to thank Neville for finding that. The Task was tomorrow and he had all but one thing worked out for the clue now. What in the name of Merlin would he miss the most? He smiled over at his friends and family having a splash fight, chuckling as Orion managed to dunk George under. It probably didn't matter too terribly much since he had what he needed to get there and back as well as a selection of underwater spells in case he ran into trouble but he still didn't like the mystery.

"I rule!" Orion laughed and swam like a champ to get away from any twin retribution. He made his way over to Harry. "All set for tomorrow Harry? Feeling confident?" Orion floated on the surface, flapping arms and legs lazily to stay afloat. "You know that the windows in our common room and dorms overlooks the lake beneath the surface right? Merpeople are not to be taken lightly, they are made for underwater battle and they don't like to lose. Don't expect it to be easy just because you've mastered the breathing issue. I know you can do anything but I want to warn you anyway."

He grinned and dunked Orion briefly, laughing at the evil glare he got when the boy surfaced, "Appreciated kiddo. I'll be careful."

"Good, Dad and Pa-..Sirius would be a mess if something happened to you and it would be such a drag to be forced to cheer them up." Orion grinned and splashed his pseudo brother with water. "Oh and this is a completely different subject but I've been having really weird dreams lately, about professor moody as two beings. What could that mean?" He went back to floating. The only reason Orion even mentioned the dreams were because the last time he'd dreamt like this Sirius had showed up, or the Grim at least.

Harry frowned. Remus had told him about the occasional dreams Orion has and how they often held portents. "I don't know. What kind of two beings?"

Orion shook his head with a frown. "I don't know, they're just dreams. Just two I guess...As if he's two people in one, I can't explain it. It's more a feeling than anything else but it could just as well be nothing. Once I dreamt of Uncle Sev in polkadot robes and that never happened...Thank Merlin."

"No kidding Thank Merlin. That would scar everyone for life!" Ron's voice echoed in the room to a round of laughter.

Harry nudged his floating psudo-brother, "Well tell me if anything changes okay little sprog?"

"Will do Simba...Though with you Scar would be better wouldn't it? The eye color, mane color and...Well scar." Since Harry and Hermione had introduced Orion to the wonder of Disney movies, he was obsessed, to put it mildly. He liked the animal movies best and couldn't help but wonder how people without magic made such magic. "I look forward to seeing Dad and Sirius tomorrow, I can't wait until next year when I get to go to Hogsmeade too."

Harry dove under then came up, carrying Orion out of the pool playfully over his shoulder, much to the amusement of the others, "If I'm Scar does that make you Kovu?" He tickled Orion's side, grinning at the giggles.

"No, ease up on the torture and let me down you brute." Orion squirmed and giggled. "And I might be Kovu, but I prefer to be the totally awesome and kickass Grim/wolf hybrid that Disney somehow for some insane, incomprehensible reason left out of their Savanna adventures." Orion
went lax for a moment before launching his counter attack and running his fingers along Harry's ribs.

Ron snickered at Harry's yelp then howled with laughter as Harry set Orion down on the ground and gently gripped the back of his neck and the boy actually went a little limp, "Cut that out pup. We're wrinkled beyond help and dinner is fast approaching."

"You started it you know...Just saying." Orion grinned up at Harry cheekily before scuttering away to dry himself off and finding his clothes. He'd heard a rumor that it was pork chops as a choice for dinner and he wasn't going to miss that.

Hermione just chuckled, the boy really was like a pup, filled with endless energy and joy.

Harry dried himself with a spell and ducked behind the changing screen the room had provided to get dressed.

Ron had already dressed and been lazing about poking through his mind. He actually liked the way the Occlumency lessons had helped him order his thoughts. It didn't change who he was but it made the instances of being tongue tied fewer and further between. They'd all been doing well in Occlumency, having felt and blocked Snape's half-hearted Legilimency attempts. They still avoided Dumbledore's gaze, knowing that they probably weren't up to shoving him out just yet and not wanting to give any of the game away.

Ron brushed up against his 'primal self' and shrugged, deciding what the hell before sinking into the animagus incantation in his mind and following Sirius and Remus' advice and just reaching that bit further until he felt energy suffuse him and a few startled calls around and opened his eyes to see the world had changed in color and size a bit.

"Whoa...Check it out." Orion emerged from behind the screen, freshly dressed and amber eyes wide as he looked at what he believed to be Ron. His sensitive nose took in the scent of canine but he couldn't really figure out just what Ron was. Mostly he looked like a larger more muscular fox.

Hermione stuck her head out from behind the other screen as she shimmied into her clothes, her hair even frizzier than usual from the moisture of the pool. "Look at you Ron! Looking good."

Ron made a playful barking sound, more high pitched than a normal dog's bark and bounced on his white paws, bushy black tail flipping happily before he went on a run around them all.

Harry looked out from behind the changing screen, fixing his tie and laughed, "Why am I not surprised to see Ron's a canine?" He laughed as the border collie sized canine went down on his front paws in front of Luna, tail end up and wiggling playfully, before bouncing and licking at the blond girl's hand. "Does anyone have any idea what kind of animal he is?"

Hermione finished putting her clothes on and walked back out into the large room and sat down next to Luna who was petting Ron and scratching him behind the ears and down his back. "He's a dhole, they're Asian wild dogs, living in packs. Very sociable among themselves but can be quite fierce when hunting in their pack. They have been known to take down black bears as prey."

"Why am I not surprised Hermione would know." Orion rolled his eyes, echoing Harry's earlier statement, and looked at Ron's blissed out expression as Luna petted him.

Harry ruffled Orion's hair, "Because you know she's the most brilliant lady to ever walk the earth?" He grinned at Ron's happy canine groans, "A dhole huh? Yeah that works. You'll have to show Sirius next time we all get together."
Ron yipped and shifted back, head still under Luna's hand, "Can I just give thanks that I'm not a red furred weasel? I love my family but that would be going too far."

Luna continued to run her fingers through his hair. "Oh you're not a weasel in spirit, I've known that all along."

"Not that there's anything wrong with weasels." Orion hurriedly said. "Only you would have had difficulty keeping up with the ferret jokes regarding Malfoy."

Ron shrugged, "He's not as evil as he's been. Maybe he's been replaced by one of those pea people?"

"Pod people Ronald." Hermione corrected, wincing a little as she dragged a brush through her rebellious hair. "You're right though, he hasn't been his vile self in a while now. Maybe you got through to him Harry."

Harry coughed, "I don't know about that. I'm pulling more for our two favorite trouble making redheads having something to do with that. Speaking of, where are they?"

Ron shrugged, "Said something about having to stir the pot....I'm really not sure I want to know what pot they're stirring and hoping it's for one of their products."

"I doubt it." Hermione mumbled, knowing rather well how the minds of the brilliant but insane twins worked. "I think the best we can hope for is a real pot instead of a metaphorical one. With the second Task taking place tomorrow, they can be up to anything."

Ron shuddered, "Oh believe me I know. Well so long as they don't blow anything up...unless it's the big bee that is."

Harry laughed, "Alright you lot, everyone dressed and ready to go?"

"All ready." Orion bounced over to his highly admired selected older brother.

"Yeah." Luna said and shrunk her bathing clothes and placed them in her bag. "I hope we can come back here even when the Task is done sometimes. It's been nice."

Harry smiled, "There's no reason we can't."

Ron nodded, "Yeah, it's nice being able to swim in winter with your friends." He snagged Luna's hand as they all headed out the door. "So, what pudding do you think they'll have at the table tonight?"

Laughter echoed down the corridor as the door disappeared behind them. Typical Ron, everything went back to food.

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Harry grinned, tugging on a lock of Hermione's hair as they exited the Great Hall after dinner, Orion skipping just ahead of them all, "You worry too much. I've got spells aplenty and plenty of gillyweed in case I'm down longer than an hour."

"It doesn't matter how prepared you are, unexpected things can happen." She gnawed on her lip. "I have faith in you and know you can do it but I will never stop worrying."

"I think it will be awesome," Orion looked back over his shoulder. "Harry will outclass the rest of
them again. I can't wait to see Karkaroff looking as if he has to swallow Dumbledore's beard again."

Harry slung his arm around Hermione's shoulders and gave her a squeeze, "I know and I appreciate it," he kissed her cheek, "You're the best." He grinned at Orion, "I'm looking forward to that sight my-" he broke off as McGonagall appeared in front of them.

"Miss Granger, Mr. Moonstar, I need to speak with the two of you."

Hermione furrowed her brow but nodded, she couldn't help but wonder what Professor McGonagall wanted to talk to them about though. Had they done something wrong helping Harry train? "Okay, we'll be right there." She turned and smiled at Harry. "I'll be back later but if you have gone to bed then sleep tight, good luck and I'll see you tomorrow."

Orion nodded and turned to hug Harry. "Yup, good luck!"

They both turned and followed McGonagall.

Harry turned to Ron, raising a brow in question and got a shrug in return.

"I don't know mate. Maybe it has to do with their grades or essays or something? We'll ask them tomorrow after the Task yeah?"

"Yeah..." green eyes followed the wake of his little brother and Hermione, a tickle of worry poking him in the back of the neck.

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Harry of course, being Harry, couldn't sleep all night, and so, thinking about what Orion had said about Moody, he pulled out the Marauder's Map and looked for the dot labeled Alastor Moody. It was there where it always was, in Moody's office. He drummed his fingers on his bedsheets as the sky slowly lightened and pondered what Orion's dream about Moody as two people could mean until his wand alarm went off, letting him know it was time to head down to the lake and get dressed for the task before the crowd of spectators appeared. He looked out at the bleak cold morning and shivered. He was not going to enjoy being in the icy cold lake.

He arrived and was ushered into the champion's tent and shoved into a cubicle to get his outfit on. He'd gone a very non traditional route and ordered a custom wetsuit to wear in the Howlers colors. It wouldn't block the gills or slow him down like fabric would have and it would help keep him warm even in the icy water. He wiggled into it, zipped it up and walked out into the main area of the tent, smiling at the other champions. "Do any of us know what we're getting?"

Fleur shook her head, eying him in the wet suit. He might be just fourteen but the lean rangy body that suit clung to spoke of great promise for adulthood, "Non, and I 'ave been zinking about eet but zere is not much I value zat can not be replaced."

"I could understand it more for Harry and I, who live here but for you Fleur and you Viktor, what can you have here that cannot be replaced. I don't get it." Cedric twirled his wand between his fingers nervously. The uncertainty of what they were supposed to reclaim made him fidgety.

Percy and Crouch came into the tents, Crouch looking at Harry in mild irritation, still remembering the Yule ball before letting all the champions know that they were to gather at the shore of the lake and that all champions had the same starting time in this task.

Harry tapped his foot as the explanations were gone through and gave Percy a small smile before
he and Crouch exited the tent and then he started pacing, "I don't like this mystery about what they've taken. I mean there's really nothing that I put any real importance on that can't be replaced. Yeah my broom or the pictures of my parents are important to me but both can be replaced."

Viktor nodded, "It would not be something with monetary value but sentimental value."

Fleur made a frustrated sound, "Zis is impossibly irritating."

Harry nodded and then looked up as they were signaled to step outside where everyone was gathered and go down to the platform out over the lake.

Dumbledore smiled, seeing that everything was in place before he cast a Sonorus and began speaking, "Ladies and Gentlemen welcome to the Second Task of the Tri-wizard tournament. Our four champions have been tasked this time to retrieve what they would sorely miss within the time frame of an hour. The hostages,"

Fleur's eyes went wide and she shrieked, "OSTAGES?!"

Harry's blood ran cold. Dumbledore had taken people they cared about and put them under the lake?!

The old wizard continued as if an outraged veela had not just screeched, "the champions are to retrieve are Cho Chang for Mr. Diggory."

Cedric looked as if he wanted to dive into the lake right away, not caring about any starting signal. His cheeks were flushed with both anger and worry as he glared up at the judges before looking back into the dark water as if he could draw Cho to him with will only.

Remus in another glamour started to shift in his seat on the stands, suddenly feeling very, very uncomfortable and very worried. Amber eyes darting around.

Next to him Sirius' ears flattened and he could feel his hackles rise. The sound of this was very, very bad.

Ron exchanged a look with his brothers and Neville and they all immediately headed for Remus and Sirius. Hermione was missing so she might be Harry's hostage but Ron knew Krum cared about her too and they'd not seen Orion at all this morning. He hoped the boy was watching from the Slytherin common room but if he'd been taken, they'd have to hold Remus and Sirius back because both of them would go right for Dumbledore's throat.

"Gabrielle Delacour for Beauxbatons Champion Delacour."

Twin shrieks came from two veela, one Fleur and one a woman up in the stands being restrained by the deputy Minister of France. Fleur looked ready to toss a fireball at Dumbledore, "Le Monstre! She eez but ten!"

"Hermione Granger for Mr. Krum."

Viktor's hands fist, the knuckles turning white and he was completely unaware of Harry's hands doing much the same beside him as the temper he rarely showed ignited.

Harry's stomach felt icy, tight with fear and nausea. Hermione was down there, under the cold water, Merlin knew what happening to her. His fingers actually twitched to toss a hex at Dumbledore and he knew the worse of it was yet to come.
"And Orion Moonstar for Mr. Potter."

Ron, Fred, and Neville lunged to hold Remus in place while George did the same for the Grim that was Sirius. The growl Ron heard the usually gentle man make was fortunately overshadowed by the savage snarl Sirius gave. Ron murmured lowly so that only Remus could hear him, "Don't! This is what he wants, he wants you to lose control. I know he's your cub and I understand, I do but you've also got Harry down there," he nodded at his pale best friend whose eyes flashed briefly with such an intense loathing at Dumbledore Ron was surprised the old bastard didn't drop dead where he stood or even notice, "and he'll hex the entire bloody lake away if that's what he has to do to save Orion."

Remus' eyes flashed fiery amber even through the glamour. "I know that," His voice was a rough growl, he had no way to control the wolf in him now. "the point is that he shouldn't have to. That fucking bastard has put my son's life in danger for entertainment value. Put Hermione in danger and those the other champions care about. He should pay." He stopped his struggling to get away but he was still growling and baring his teeth at the bearded wizard on the platform. He was so sick and tired of playing after that man's tune. To be shackled down and rendered useless and harmless unable to even keep his cub out of harms way.

George had a bit of trouble holding Sirius back, the Grim intent on lunging at Dumbledore. "Snuffles stop! The Ministry is here, if you get caught you won't be able to protect either Orion or Remus any longer. Take care of Remus and trust Harry to do the same for Orion."

That got the dog to stop straining to rip Dumbledore's throat out and he whined, high and worried and went back to put his head in Remus' lap as the other boys slowly released Remus.

Down on the platform Harry met Remus' amber eyes and mouthed, "I'll get him, don't worry." He started stretching, readiness himself to dive into the lake as Dumbledore finished explaining the Task to the onlookers. As soon as the signal was given he dove in with the gillyweed in his mouth, chewing furiously after having taken a deep breath and swimming as a human until he felt the herb take effect and then he was off like a shot heading for the center of the lake.

Cedric had hurriedly cast a bubblehead charm as he hit the water, even through his outfit it was freezing cold and murky dark. The seaweed swayed at the bottom and it almost looked as if something was moving in it. He startled when Fleur was suddenly grabbed by Grindylows and pulled toward the bottom. Part of him really wanted to help her but a bigger part of him wanted to find Cho and make sure she was safe. He sent a few stunners the Grindylows way before he swam deeper and further into the lake.

Remus' fingers were clenched in black fur, heart beating furiously, still angry but now much more worried.

Luna held Ron's hand, knowing the redhead was more worried than he let on about his two best friends. She wanted to offer him what little comfort she could. Luna waved to her Papa who was there as a reporter and glared at Rita who looked positively gleeful at what the task was about, her quick quote quill moving rapidly. It made her sick. That was one woman she wished a Nargle infestation on.

George stayed with his brothers close to Remus and Sirius just in case. This task left a bad taste in his mouth, the will to take more bets gone. He noticed that even Percy looked ill at ease as he sat in his place next to Crouch.

Ron squeezed Luna's hand in silent gratitude and looked around. They couldn't see what was going on at the bottom of the lake so he studied the people watching. He noticed Madame Maxime
tearing verbally into Dumbledore and the beautiful blond woman who'd screamed out in anger
crying into the chest of the Deputy Minister of France with her and he realized that they were
Fleur's parents and also the parents of the girl who was Fleur's hostage and more, they hadn't
known this would happen. He squeezed Luna's hand and murmured in her ear, "Can you stay here
with Remus and Sirius? I have something I want to take care of real quick."

"I'll stay." Luna nodded and squeezed his hand back before releasing it. "Mind the snatter wasps
and come back later if you can." She sat down next to Fred, the twins bracketing Remus and Sirius
on either side along with Neville and Ginny. It was strange how long an hour could feel as she
regarded the smooth dark surface on the lake, it gave nothing away about what was going on
beneath that surface.

Ron crept through the crowd coming up behind the blond reporter witch and murmuring,
"Skeeter."

"I am quite bus-" Rita turned around, her annoyed expression vanishing instantly as she caught
sight of the redhead. She knew this boy was very close to Harry Potter himself and she wouldn't
alienate him, he could prove a useful source of information. "What can I do for you Mr. Weasley?"
Her tone turned sugary sweet.

He lifted a red brow, "If you want a real story and not some made up tripe," he glanced over at the
Delacours then at Dumbledore and Maxime, "You might want to look in to the fact that
Dumbledore and Crouch seem to have arranged to kidnap the Deputy Minister of France's daughter
for use in a dangerous deadly tournament very much without her parents' permission and, as she's
just ten years old, she’s not even in school at Beauxbatons yet. And here's another juicy tidbit for
you, Ludo Bagman? You know he was taking bets at the World Cup? Well he paid the winners in
leprechaun gold which, as I'm sure a brilliant witch like you knows, disappears after a few hours."

Rita's pointy features actually twitched in interest and beady eyes darted around the stands,
wondering which juicy tidbit to go after first. She decided on the Delacours, better to strike while
the iron is hot...Or in this case the parents are worried and afraid. "Thank you for that very
interesting information Mr. Weasley. Now if you excuse me, a reporter's work is never done." She
clattered away on sky high heels.

Ron returned Luna's side to sit and wait for his friends to get out of that damned lake unscathed.

Beneath the surface Harry was using a guide spell that had a little blue light leading him safely
towards the center of the lake when the sounds of a struggle caught his attention and he half turned
to see Fleur trying to break free of a pack of Grindylows. He was tempted to leave her to it but the
desperation on her face made that impossible. He brandished his wand and cast a relashio followed
by an immobilus on the grindylows then he swam over, grabbed Fleur by the wrist and took off
after the blue light. He did it because if he didn't at least help her to the village he'd feel impossibly
horrible if something happened to her sister because Fleur couldn't get to her.

Fleur's eyes were wide at the speed the gillyweed gave Harry under the water and the fact that he
was helping her at all and her eyes pricked with tears. She knew how much he loved Orion, just as
much as she loved her sister, and that he'd taken the time to help her when he'd move faster on his
own meant more than she could express. She felt humbled and grateful to have this young man as a
friend.

The mermaid village came into view with the anchors tying the hostages down surrounded by
merpeople. Harry was ready to hex his way through the entire village but the merpeople moved
aside and let them through. He released Fleur's wrist and came to a stop in front of Hermione and
Orion and felt his heart rip in two. He couldn't stay down here, couldn't make sure Hermione
would be okay, not with Remus and Sirius counting on him to save Orion but it hurt like hell and it slapped him in the face with a secret he'd even been keeping from himself. He swam a bit closer to Hermione, cupped her cheek with a webbed hand and then kissed it. His voice burbling in a watery fashion as he apologized before going to cut Orion free, tears mingling with the water of the lake. He knew she wouldn't blame him, that she'd be the first person to tell him to get Orion out first and do it now but it didn't make him feel any better.

He caught his little brother and shot to the surface like a torpedo, leaving his heart behind with Hermione and hoping Viktor would get to her and keep her safe.

"Bubbles." George leaned forward, blue eyes narrowed in concentration. "There's bubbles, it looks like something is happening." He cast a tempus with his wand and swallowed when he noticed that it had already been forty-five minutes.

Cedric found and released Cho just as Fleur released the tiny blonde girl. He was glad she'd managed to get away from the Grindylows but now that he had Cho he remembered that it was also a competition and he used his wand to give himself more power as he shot forward and up toward the surface.

Fleur started kicking for the surface just as she saw the sharkheaded Viktor arrive and start tearing at the ropes holding Hermione.

Harry and Orion's heads broke the surface and he was already towing the boy, who'd spluttered awake as soon as he hit air, toward the platform quickly when he heard Cedric and Cho surface, the girl gasping for air.

Ron's hand squeezed Luna's tight and he kept his eyes on the spot where the champions were surfacing. "Krum you'd better get Hermione or we're going to have serious words."

Remus whined low in his throat when he saw Orion and Harry and he had to force himself to stay in his seat and not rush down there and gather them both into his arms and spiriting them away to safety. His hand was still in Sirius' fur.

Orion now that he was awake started to swim on his own so Harry wouldn't have to tow him as they moved toward the platform. Now that he was awake and aware the cold of the water hit him like a brick since he was wearing only his usual school uniform, the heating charms disappearing along with the ones keeping him asleep and not breathing. "Aw man, I can't believe I missed everything by being unconscious down there. It sucks." Orion's teeth clattered as they were helped out of the water.

As soon as he was out of the water Harry ate the counter to the gillyweed and practically carried Orion over to Madam Pomfrey where they were both covered in blankets and fed potions. He noticed Fleur and her sister breaking the surface and swimming toward the platform and Cedric and Cho being warmed and wrapped up as well. He put his hand on the towel over Orion's hair, "Not much to be missed, go, get to your Dad and Snuffles," he nodded at Remus, who was being nuzzled by Snuffles. His eyes were glued to the water and he brought his legs up to wrap his arms around them, his entire frame tense.

"You sure Harry?" Orion finally noticed that his brother was tense and worried. He followed Harry's gaze out over the water. "Viktor will have her up soon, if not then it wouldn't surprise me if she comes up by herself, you know how stubborn she is." Orion placed his hand on Harry's arm and squeezed gently before getting up, still wrapped in a heated blanket as he made his way up the stands to his parents.
Sirius was whining and wiggling and as soon as Orion was within grabbing distance, canine teeth were clamping on the heated blanket and pulling him close to himself and Remus. Once their son was safe in Remus' arms, Sirius was licking both Remus and Orion's faces in relief.

Harry looked up as Fleur moved to sit beside him and put her hand on his arm, her sister held close to her other side, "Merci 'Arry. Eef you 'ad not 'elped me," she blinked furiously to clear the dampness from her eyes, "I would not 'ave gotten to my sister."

"You're welcome," Harry saw the surface ripple and then two dark heads breaking it and surged to his feet, rushing over to help Hermione and Viktor out of the water.

Viktor saw the look in Harry's eyes and had to push down his immediate desire to pull Hermione away from the other champion as he pulled her over to Madam Pomfrey. He recognized soul deep love when he saw it and knew even more that, as much as he himself cared for Hermione, it was her decision. He didn't plan to just lay down and leave the field clear however.

Harry's eyes went up and down Hermione, looking for any sort of nick, scratch, or injury before he took the blanket Poppy handed him and draped it around her shoulders, "Are you okay Hermione?"

"I'm fine, perfectly fine. Just cold." She pulled the blanket closer. "I don't know anything from falling asleep until breaking the surface so I think I'm the one who should ask that question. Are you okay Harry?" Brown eyes mirrored Harry's action from before and looked him over worriedly.

He nodded, his hands rubbing her shoulders and arms through the blanket, "Not a scratch on me," he nodded towards Fleur, who was standing with her parents and sister, both girls sandwiched between their mother and father in a hug of relief, "I think she's the only one who was injured. Grindylows." He wanted to pull Hermione close and hold her safe but he could hear Rita Skeeter in the background and knew he couldn't afford to. Not if he wanted the damned woman to keep from spewing her venom all over Hermione.

Hermione's eyes moved to Fleur and then back to Harry again. "Oh, I hope she wasn't badly hurt. I'm glad she made it up alright." Hermione wanted to sink into Harry's arms, she felt uneasy, knowing she'd been down in the lake and not remembering any of it or knowing what happened, it didn't sit well with her. She turned and looked over her shoulder. "Are you okay Viktor?" That was another thing that made her uneasy. She'd only known Viktor for a few months, spent some time talking to him, went to the ball with him and a few cheek kisses. After that she was the thing he would miss the most? It made her feel strange, especially since she couldn't claim to feel the same.

He nodded and reached out to pluck a leaf from her hair, subtly breaking her away from Harry, "Da, I am vell. No marks," he held his arms out in an offer for inspection that sent the majority of the girls nearby swooning. He liked that Hermione didn't do that but it also made him feel oddly unimportant.

She looked him over closely but made no move to run her hands over him to make sure. Instead she smiled. "Good, I'm glad. I've heard the merpeople can be vicious if agitated and the Grindylows can be sneaky and cruel so I'm glad you managed to complete the task without incident....Another ridiculous, half brained task." The last sentence was muttered crabbily under her breath.

Harry's eyes nearly glowed with temper as he looked over to where Dumbledore was speaking with the other judges after having conversed with a mermaid, "That twat is going to find he's bitten off more than he should I think."

Viktor nodded in agreement, "Kidnapping de daughter of de Deputy Minister of France is a bad mistake. Mr. Dumbledore vill realize dat soon I dink."
Dumbledore cast a Sonorous again, "Ladies and Gentlemen now for our champion's scores after the Merchieftainess shared what happened under the water. Mr. Krum used an incomplete transfiguration and was last to return with his hostage. We award him thirty five points. Miss Delacour showed a good grasp of the bubblehead charm and returned third, however she also received assistance from another champion and so we award her thirty points."

There were applauds for both the champions mentioned along with muttered protests about the nature of the task. It seemed no one not even the audience were entirely pleased with it.

"This is crap." George leaned back in his seat, having switched seat with Neville once he was sure Sirius and Remus was calm so he could sit next to Fred. "With the nature of this task I don't think Fleur should be punished for getting help when she needed it. I'm sure Harry helped her without her even asking for it, that's the kind of person he is." George was disappointed about this whole Tournament, not the champions efforts but the whole Tournament in itself. Where was the fun of making bets and playing pranks when the tasks were as insane and dangerous as they were. George didn't have many scruples but betting on the lives and safety of his friends and in Harry's case family, that was too much even for him.

Fred nodded, "Harry couldn't swim by someone in danger if there was a shark about to bite his bum. Bloody buzzing twat." He was angry, something that rarely happened in truth but Dumbledore was managing to prick his temper more and more as time ran on. This was just beyond wrong and he didn't know what the old bastard hoped to gain by it, what he hoped to gain from the whole Tournament truth be told.

Dumbledore continued as if he couldn't hear the disgruntlement, "Mr. Diggory also showed marvelous command of the bubblehead charm and returned with his hostage second, we award him forty points. Our final champion, Mr. Potter was the first to return with his hostage, well within the time limit, and fought off not only his challenges but gave aid to Miss Delacour in fighting off a pack of grindylows, it is the decision, after some discussion, of the judges that he be awarded the full fifty points."

Harry actually growled, "I can't believe that old bearded bastard. Knocking off points from Fleur because I helped? Isn't this entire bloody tournament about international cooperation? Ugh I hope doxies nest in his beard some night."

"I'm hoping for crabs myself." Hermione muttered. "If anyone deserves the little beasts it's him. And you're right, completely and utterly right, this whole thing is supposed to be about cooperation and friendship. Docking points for needing help is the dumbest thing I've heard. This tournament is turning more and more into a joke and not of the funny kind either."

Hermione was finally starting to get some warmth back in her body but she continued to have the permanently heated blanket wrapped tightly around herself. She looked up into the stands and Rita Skeeter who was talking intently with Fleur's parents. "I think the bee will have some difficult headlines to explain tomorrow though. Did you know Fleur was the daughter of the Deputy Minister of France?"

Harry blinked and followed her gaze, "Er...no, no I didn't." He tilted his head in a ponder, "More than headlines I think. He's not just Hogwarts' headmaster but Supreme Mugwump. How's it going to look for the head of the IWC to have kidnapped the ten year old daughter of the Deputy Minister of France, a girl who's under Beauxbatons' Headmistress's protection, without permission from her parents or Madam Maxime?"

Viktor grunted, "Very bad. He may lose his post vor dis. It breaks several international laws."
"Good." Hermione sent the old wizard a lethal glare. "It's not good that he kidnapped Fleur's baby sister and endangered her but it is good that he will be called out on it, maybe it will make more people wake up and see that he isn't all that he claims to be."

"It's a start." Harry's voice was quiet and he tugged on Hermione's arm, "Come on. The scores have been announced, I've had enough of this stupidity for today, and we're both cold and wet. Let's get inside."

Viktor cleared his throat, "Actually, could I haf a moment Hermy-own-ninny?"

She thought of Harry and the warm cozy common room wistfully but nodded, it was the least she could do to give Viktor a little of her time. "Of course Viktor." Hermione looked at Harry then. "You go inside Harry, get changed and warm, I'll be there shortly, in the middle of another celebration party I assume." She gave him a smile, not letting on how much she wanted to go with him.

He smiled a bit wanly, "I'm actually going to the library after talking to Myrtle," the Slytherin Library was just as warm as the common room and not anywhere near crowded, "I'm not up for a party. I'll see you after you get changed and warm." He went up into the stands, noticing that Snape was there, talking to Remus and looking like death warmed over.

Viktor gently moved Hermione out of anyone's earshot and shifted a bit shyly, "I vill not keep you long, I do not vish you to catch ill. I vas vanting to ofver an invitation to you and your parents to visit Bulgaria dis summer."

Hermione blinked in surprise and looked down at her wet, soggy shoes before looking up again. She didn't want to hurt his feelings. "I...I don't know Viktor, can I think about it? I need to speak with my parents too, we usually go to France and with everything going on with the Bee and Harry I don't know if I can make any plans at all. I might need to be there for him. Thank you so much for inviting me though, it's a wonderful gesture."

She might as well have screamed her feelings for Harry into Viktor's face right then. He saw clearly that Harry held her heart though he didn't know if she was aware of that herself just yet. He nodded, "Ov course. Please go varm yourself up now." He looked up, scowling as Karkaroff called him over, "And I must return to de ship," he bowed to her the headed for his headmaster. Really the man was a burr in the saddle.

She bit her lip, feeling something tighten inside her at the same time as something else relaxed. Hermione really did like Viktor but only as a friend, she didn't want to hurt him but she didn't want to lead him on either, couldn't force herself to feel something she didn't. She watched him walk away before turning around, dropping the blanket and hurrying after Harry so she could get changed and meet him in the library.

Harry was in the library and had managed to smuggle Orion, Remus, and Sirius into the Chamber Library as well. Ron and the others were also sprawled out on various chairs and couches, or in the twins’ case on a large floor cushion. He'd also brought Snape down into the library. The man already knew about them using the Chamber though not about the library and Harry figured he deserved some sort of restitution for the night he'd had. He'd apparently spent all night and morning looking for Orion, even into the Forbidden Forest, until the task had started. Harry could see the near debilitating guilt still on the potion master's shoulders even with the wonder of the library around him.

Orion squirmed his way out of his parents hold and walked over to his uncle, wrapping his arms around him. "I'm sorry." He felt wretched for the dark circles underneath Severus' eyes. "I'm so
Remus held back another growl, his anger and in all honesty hatred for Dumbledore growing. How could he just take people? He loathed the fact that Orion had been used in that way and he hated the worry etched on his best friend’s features. It was so wrong, you couldn't play with human beings like puppets that way.

Severus returned Orion's hug, "You have nothing to be sorry about Orion. I know you'd not just slip away without letting myself or someone else know you were going somewhere." That was why he'd been so frantic. He knew Orion wouldn't just leave, had known someone had to have taken him. He and Minerva would be having words as soon as he could corner the damned old tabby cat.

Sirius, out of Grim form, watched his old nemesis and his son and something settled in him. He'd been doubting if Snape truly cared about Orion, something he simply couldn't help, but this put paid to it. Snape loved his son, he'd not have gone half mad and stayed up all night even going into the forest to look if he didn't. Sirius reached over and ran his hand down Remus' forearm in comfort, feeling more than hearing the suppressed growl.

Remus turned his hand over and caught Sirius' hand in his own, holding it tightly, needing Sirius to anchor him at the moment. Needing the comfort of having him there even though he knew Orion was safe and there with them.

Hermione walked into the room, in sweatpants and a large thick Weasley sweater and sat down on the floor on another squishy pillow. She was in a very weird mood but being here with almost all the people she cared most about helped a lot. She was happy they were there instead of at a loud party.

Ron chuckled at her, "Looks like we're all of a similar mind," he wiggled his fingers around at everyone except the 'adults', who all wore Weasley sweaters. Harry in his yearly green, Orion in the red, Neville in the sunny butter yellow, Luna in a silvery blue. The twins in their traditional letters jumpers, Ginny in her light pink, and himself in the maroon.

Smiling Hermione pulled on the sleeves on her purple sweater. "Great minds think alike and there's nothing like one of Molly's sweaters when you need warm and comfy. The next best thing to one of her hugs." She sat cross legged on her pillow, pulling Orion down so she could hug her fellow hostage before releasing him and watching him bounce over to his parents and snuggle down in between them. It was so seldom he got the chance to see them these days, especially with Sirius in human form so he wanted to make the best out of it.

Harry smiled at her, still wanting to wrap her tight in a hug and simply not let go, "Yeah, nothing better to warm up with than a Weasley jumper."

Ron grinned and played with the end of a single braid Luna had put in her hair, "I wonder if Mum's ears are burning with all this talk about her jumpers? I know she's going to blow a gasket when the paper is delivered tomorrow."

Fred hummed, "Oh yes, she might even send a howler to the buzzing bastard herself."

"Oh I wish she would." George was leaning against Fred in a lazy sprawl. "No one can howl in a howler like our Mum, she can make even me cringe and that's not easily done."

Sirius hummed, "You know, we've got our sneaky little Slytherin boy here," he ruffled his son's hair, "what do you say son, want to write to Molly and tell her how you feel about this mess?"
Harry slid off the chair he was in and onto the floor next to Hermione's cushion and grinned at his pseudo-brother, "Embellish all you'd like."

Orion grinned and leaned into Sirius' touch, he was weirdly fond of having his hair touched, even if it was only a ruffling. "You know what Scar, I don't even think I need to embellish, this mess is horrible enough as it is. I will lay on with the woe and how scary it was though, even though I don't remember anything from when Hermione and I went to Professor McGonagall's office." He cracked his knuckles. "Oh and Harry, can I borrow Hedwig? Walnut is pretty useless really when it comes to delivering letters, he's so tiny that he doesn't have stamina carrying a letter over long distances."

Without thinking about it Hermione shifted until she was leaning against Harry, soaking in the warmth and strength of his body.

Harry stilled, feeling her settle against him as he answered Orion, "No problem. I don't give her enough to do anyway and she hates being idle." He looked down at the familiar frizzy curls of Hermione hair and leaned his head down a bit, breathing in the smell of nutmeg and books before instinct and impulse took over and his arms came around her, holding her tight and he leaned his forehead against the top of her head, eyes tightly shut.

At first she tensed in surprise before relaxing completely, almost melting into Harry, her hands coming up to rest on top of his. Harry smelled like fresh air and green grass. Almost like she thought freedom smelled like. This was right, like it was supposed be. Having Harry so close felt like home but it felt thrilling at the same time.

George inched closer to Fred and whispered in his brother's ear. "Looks like at least our lion has seen the light."

Fred murmured back, "Ah yes but will the tigress see beyond her nose?"

Sirius smiled and squeezed Remus' hand, "Bout time there don't you think?"

"I absolutely do." Remus squeezed back and smiled. He hadn't been any older when both the man and the wolf had decided that the man next to him was it. He didn't know if that was the case for Harry and Hermione but he wished them happiness. That they would know love and strengthen each other without evildoers and insane Headmasters ruining things for them. "So Hermione, I didn't know you and Mr. Krum had gotten so close that you were the thing he'd miss the most."

Remus' voice was soft.

"We're not." Hermione tensed a little again. "I'm not...I mean he's a friend. Nothing more. I don't know why I was it and in all honesty it freaks me out a little."

Fred pursed his lips, "Yeah but you're friends with Harry too and you're looking awfully co-" whump!

Ron shocked them all by throwing pillows at first Fred then Remus, "Leave off. What Krum feels is his business, not Hermione's responsibility. It's not like she's done much more than be polite and nice."

"Thank you Ron." Hermione felt a wave of intense gratitude for her redheaded best friend. She felt bad and weird enough about the Viktor situation without having to explain it or 'defend' herself.

Luna turned her head and brushed her lips over Ron's cheek. "Good man."

He blushed, "Eh I try."
Harry gave Hermione a squeeze and murmured softly, "I'm glad he got you out though. I hated having to leave you down there but..."

She twisted her head so she could look up at him. "No, Harry, you needed to get Orion out. I wasn't your responsibility and you know I wasn't in any real danger. The merchieftess would have brought me up if Viktor hadn't made it in time." Hermione patted Harry's hands. "I'm glad you brought Orion up, it was the right thing to do."

He didn't want to burden her further by telling her that it had hurt to leave her behind so he just squeezed her again. "How'd I know you were going to say that?"

"Because I'm always right and you've finally learnt that I am?" She smiled teasingly up at him as she looked into his eyes, taking note just of how brilliantly green they were and how long and black the lashes that framed them were. The straightness of his nose and the firm, full bow of his lips. Suddenly her heart stuttered in her chest when realization hit her like a house falling on her head. She was in love with Harry, had always been. She loved each and every part of him and oh wasn't that the scariest thing she'd ever experienced. Hermione knew she was only a friend to him, another of the guys. Harry could have anyone he wanted, why would he want a frizzy haired know it all who never knew how to keep her mouth shut?

Harry smiled and kissed her forehead, "Hermione I've always known that you're almost always right."

"I'll settle for almost, at least this once." Hermione did her very best to sound normal and calm even though her heart was beating like crazy after its stutter. She was hyper aware of Harry's closeness now and didn't really know how to handle it.

Severus rolled his eyes and went to the shelves to pluck a book down and flip through it. Granger and Potter's cow eyes at each other was vaguely sickening and also painfully reminded him of how he'd felt about Lily.

Ron shook his head and whispered to Luna, "Well they've realized their own feelings now. Next is for them to see what the other feels. How long do you think that'll take?"

"Another year or two?" Luna's smile was very close to a smirk and showed that there was in fact Malfoy blood in her veins as well as Lovegood blood. "Unless we nudge them a little, keep the Wrackspurts from nesting and forming colonies. Sometimes we all need a little help from our friends and if we meddle just a smidgen it's at least for a good cause."

He chuckled, "I think I'll let you plan that meddling. I'd probably fudge it up."

"I don't think you would but I am a Ravenclaw, we do love our planning. Maybe I can even make a schedule and draw some diagrams?" She chuckled at herself. "We can call it secret operation lovebug...Or lust-kittens perhaps?"

He laughed and hugged her close, "Luna I adore you!"

Brows lifted all across the chamber and Ron became aware of the knowing grins on everyone's faced and turned a bright red before clearing his throat, "Well I do. No reason not to tell her now is there?"

"I think you are rather wonderful too." Luna raised herself up and placed a small kiss on the edge of his long nose, a pink flush across her cheeks.

Remus smiled and squeezed Sirius' hand. Young love, so innocent and adorable.
George couldn't stop grinning. There was so much fodder for teasing but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He actually sort of admired his little brother for being brave enough to be so honest with his emotions. As a teenaged boy himself he knew it wasn't easy.

Harry grinned, "I see you've shed the caveman facade from earlier in the year."

Ron tossed him a rude gesture, "Okay so I get the point now ya prat. Leave off or I won't keep them," he pointed at Remus and Fred, "off your back."

"Very nice Ron, threatening Harry with us." Remus chuckled, his hand still holding Sirius' and Orion there with them, it was nice, more than nice even after the emotional upheaval from earlier. "You know both Fred and I are very nice people."

George snickered. "Well I don't know about Fred...He can be very, very naughty."

Fred grinned, "Harry himself called us devious brilliance personified so I could easily edge into wicked and evil."

Harry smiled back, "Try it and you'll find yourself in bed with a snake and not the one you want to be in bed with."

Blue eyes widened and Fred pretended to gasp, "Harry you wouldn't?!"

"Want to bet?"

"He would do it, you know he would. And if he wouldn't then I would...Definitely." Orion grinned fiercely, more than ready to take on the terrible twins of doom for his brother's sake. "And please don't talk about Malfoy in those terms. I'm twelve and sensitive you know." Amber eyes was filled with clearly very, very fake innocence.

Remus' lips twitched to hold in his laughter even though he knew he shouldn't encourage his son. He was bad enough as he was.

Hermione didn't even bother to hide her chuckle as she snuggled deeper into Harry's embrace without conscious thought, it just felt good.

Severus snorted and exchanged one book for another, "This from the brat who asked me if Remus and I were lovers?"

Harry choked on air even as his arms held Hermione more securely without thought, "Orion you didn't?"

"Well it made sense to me." Orion defended himself. "I'd never seen either of them with anyone else and Uncle actually smiles around Dad...sometimes. It was before I knew about Sirius. Now I know Dad could never even notice anyone else." He tilted his head and looked at Severus. "I still think you should get a lover though Severus. Do you like boys or girls? There's a lot of people around for the Tournament, maybe I can find someone for you."

Severus gave the twelve year old an arch look, "That, young man, is something that is none of your-"

"Girls," Sirius gave his son a grin, "he was definitely into girls in school so I doubt that's changed."

"Thank you Sirius." Orion beamed at his father before returning his attention to Severus. "Girls then...I can definitely work with that." He fell silent for a while before speaking again. "How do
you know if you like boys or girls? Laura Stratton makes my stomach flip when she smiles but so does Taron Hawkes."

"Maybe you like both, there is nothing wrong with that." Luna smiled at him. "Just gives you more to choose from."

Harry saw Remus twitching, "Er can we stop talking about what Orion may or may not like in front of Moony? And please not talk at all about Professor Snape's preference?"

"A rare excellent idea from you Potter." Snape's voice drawled out.

"Oh Professor Snape, when you're that friendly I get such warm fuzzy feelings." George snickered and smiled at the potion master.

Remus had a silent panic attack. Orion was starting to look at girls...and boys. He would be thirteen in four months, the same age as Luna was now. His baby boy was going to be a teenager, not a child any longer. What would Remus do then? When Orion wouldn't need him anymore? What sort of purpose would he have?

Sirius grimaced as Remus' hand tightened painfully on his and he murmured softly, "Er Moony could you relax? Just a bit?"

"Eh?" Remus looked down at their joined hands and that Sirius' fingers were almost turning blue. "Oh, so sorry." He released Sirius' hand with a sheepish expression.

"Hey now," he grabbed Remus' hand and brought it back, "I said ease up, not let go." He leaned in and whispered into Remus' ear, "And don't get so worried there. You see where our boy is right now yes?" Plastered against his Dad's side. "You're never gonna lose him Remus."

"I can't help it, I know I have to let him grow up and spread his wings but it scares me so much." Remus brought Orion even closer with his free arm and buried his nose in black hair, breathing the scent of his cub, smiling at Orion's confused but pleased look when he glanced over at his Daddy.

Sirius smiled at them then jumped at Harry's loud exclamation.

"George cut it out with the innuendo! I swear that thought's going to be giving me nightmares and don't I already have enough of those? Ugh, can we change the subject to...oh I don't know, Ron's success?"

George snickered happily at having got a reaction out of Harry but perked up in curiosity at Harry's words. "Success? What kind of success has Ronniekins achieved, except for landing himself a girl of highest quality?" He stuck his tongue out at Ron in a teasing manner, still leaning heavily against his twin.

Harry narrowed his eyes and cast a subtle charm at George that had his hair turning electric blue and his skin going putrid yellow with bright purple freckles. "For your information he managed his animagus transformation."

Snape shut the book he was reading and gave a knowing and vaguely irritated look to Remus. He'd known they were using the chamber for study but not exactly what they were studying.

Remus met Severus' look innocently, the tiniest of smiles playing over his lips.

Sirius sat up straighter, "Ohhh he did huh?"
"Show them Ron." Luna smiled and moved so that he would have room to transform.

"Yeah, show us, I really want to see." George said and looked down at his putrid yellow, purple dotted hand. "You know what...I just realized that I'm awesome enough to even pull this look off."

Hermione snorted in exasperated amusement.

Harry murmured into her ear as Ron transformed, "Only in his dreams."

Sirius tilted his head in curiosity at the red furred canine, "Huh, you look like a giant fox."

"He's a dhole." Remus and Hermione said it at the exact same time and both burst out laughing. "It's a wild dog, resides in Asia." Remus continued, looking at Ron closely. "You're a very good looking dhole too." He grinned. "It's nice to have another member in the canine corner. Feared we were going to be overrun by felines there."

"Cool, congratulations little brother, well done." For once there was no teasing or sarcasm in George's tone. He honestly meant what he said.

The dhole seemed to puff up and he yipped and made a flipping jump before settling down, head in Luna's lap.

Severus lifted a brow, "What did that mean, overrun by felines?"

Harry grinned and whispered in Hermione's ear, "Want to show him?"

"Absolutely." Hermione agreed with an answering smile and shifted enough so that they wouldn't be caught up in each other's transformation. Now she could transform without help or the fierce will to protect Harry, even though that feeling was always there in the back of her mind. It wasn't long at all before she looked out at the others from her Bengal form's eyes and she sensed Harry's lion just behind her. The scent of fresh air and grass was more potent in this form and she wanted to turn around and bury her feline muzzle in Harry's fur and just inhale.

Harry arched his back and made a playful growl before pouncing on Hermione's swishing tail.

Snape snorted, "Of course. Why am I completely unsurprised?"

Orion's grin almost split his face in two. "I think it's wicked, and those two are practically made for each other." He pointed at Harry and Hermione who was play growling, Hermione on her back, paws swiping up toward Harry playfully, no claws in sight. "Even you must admit that it is a bit impressive Sev."

Luna just smiled and scratched Ron behind his large ears.

"I think they've all done very well." Remus nodded, feeling an odd sense of pride. Harry was their cub just as surely as if he'd come from his own body and Ron and Hermione were family too. He gave Sirius' hand a squeeze.

Sirius watched Harry pounce again, getting into a wrestling match with Hermione and letting himself be pinned before licking the tigeress' furry cheek, and squeezed back, "They have. Beaten my record too."

Severus hummed and eyed the others in the room, "Am I correct in assuming that the rest of you are also attempting to find animagus forms?"
Neville shifted uncomfortably and nodded, still intimidated by Snape, "Y-yes sir."

"Yup, sure are." George nodded nudged his brother with a pointy elbow. Still horribly disgustingly colorful and clashing madly with himself.

Luna nodded too. "Trying but it's difficult to find the time and calm of mind to truly work on it. The slitherwhips have a tendency to get in the way if I'm not mindful."

"I can't become an animagus." Orion shrugged. "I have to much of Daddy in me, the wolf would fight any form I tried to take. It's okay though because I'm spectacularly awesome either way."

Hermione had taken up a loud purring as she had slung a large paw over Harry and was washing him intently with a wide, rough tongue.

Harry's tail just flicked lazily and happily and his purr echoed hers.

Sirius chuckled at them, then ruffled Orion's hair, "You are awesome cub and we're proud of you either way. Besides you get into enough Marauder trouble without an animagus form."

Snape snorted, "Truth from Black, a miracle."

Orion smiled and nuzzled his father's hand before looking at his uncle. "Play nice, I love you both so be pleasant, you don't have to mean it, just act like it."

"This is them playing nice cub, believe me." Remus said with a smile, feeling like he would burst with pride for his son at the same time as he hated himself for saddling Orion with the curse that lived inside him, even if it was only partially it was still too, too much.

Sirius tickled his son's side, "Yeah that was almost sweet for your uncle when it comes to me."

Severus flipped a page in the book he was reading, "There is an advantage to your wolf you know Orion," he looked up at his nephew, "once out of their animagus forms these three lose the heightened senses, you never do."

"That's true, spectacularly awesome, just as previously mentioned." He smiled warmly at Severus, thrilled to have all of his family in the same place.

Remus couldn't help but chuckle at that, happy that his son took it so well, that he continued to see the positive side to things instead of being like him, doubtful and letting the sad things drag him down. He was very happy Orion took after Sirius in that aspect.

A very loud feline yelp came from Harry and drew everyone's attention belatedly to the two very large cats, one of which was backing off very quickly from Harry, looking horribly guilty. The reason being the lion's bleeding tail with delicate teeth marks in the golden fur just before the tuft at the end of the tail. The lion padded forward towards the tigress making gentle chuffing noises before nuzzling her gently and making a feline whine.

Sirius laughed, "Oops. Reminds me of when I was still learning how to use my teeth and bit down too hard on Prongs' back leg," he rubbed his stomach, "I can still feel that kick."

"Oh he was so angry about that bite." Remus chuckled as he remembered a bristling James. "Claimed you were the reason he didn't catch the Snitch in the Quidditch game after the bite, said you maimed him."

Hermione's fuzzy ears were pinned down miserable, even though Harry nuzzled her. She couldn't
believe she'd made him bleed. It was horrible. The tail had just been there right before her eyes, swaying back and forward so temptingly. Before she even knew what she was doing she'd pounced, biting down on that new toy that was Harry's tail.

Harry licked at her muzzle and her forehead in comfort, nipping very gently at her ears.

"Maimed him my arse. He didn't catch the Snitch because he was showing off trying to impress," he glanced briefly at Snape and corrected what he was going to say, "a girl. His leg didn't even bleed all that long, thirty seconds at the most. We lost the game because I was benched from Chaser position because his kick cracked one of my ribs the little prat."

"I'm not disagreeing with you...You were both idiots though." Remus continued to chuckle, amused that Sirius could still gripe about something that had happened so long ago. "He forgave you later, the comfort party you threw him that night." Remus eyes glittered as he remembered the secret runs to Hogsmeade to get all the 'supplies' needed for that particular party.

"He got royally pissed and had the hangover from hell the next morning."

Neville shook his head, "Harry I think your father figures are hooligans."

The lion made an amused chuff and transformed back into human in order to wrap his arms around Hermione and murmur to her, "Hey now, stop that. It was an accident, no reason to feel badly."

The tigeress made growling sort of whine low in her throat in apology before licking a broad stripe up Harry's face and nuzzling him. After a little while she changed back too, content to stay in Harry's arms though. "I'm sorry, didn't mean to bite you." She tilted her head and bit her lip. "So...the bite...does it come with when you transform?" Hermione had listened to the original Marauders even in her horror over hurting Harry and she knew James' wound stayed in human form and Sirius' rib was still cracked but what happened to a wound on an appendage that didn't exist in human form? As apologetic as she really, truly was it didn't override her thirst of knowledge and her curiosity.

Sirius looked at Harry, lips twitching at the embarrassed look on his face, "Well I can tell you that when I was injured on my own tail it came with me. On animals the tail is an extension of the spine from the coccyx bone so when someone turns back," he couldn't help but laugh as Harry turned red and flipped him off.

"Oh...oh...I'm really, really sorry Harry." Hermione blushed a deep red and ignored the twins hooting laughter. Even Remus was trying to hide a grin.

"So you took a bite out of Harry's arse, plenty of people wanting to do that really." Ginny shrugged but smirked at Hermione's embarrassed groan.

The dhole made an amused yip before transforming back, head still in Luna's lap, "So it's on a cheek? Or like right at the top?"

Harry gave him a slight glare, "I'll let your imagination fill in the blank Ron." He pet Hermione's hair, "It's just a nip, nothing to be concerned about."

Sirius grinned, "Right on the top of the crack Ronny, I've still got a scar from a bite from," his expression clouded, "a rat."

Remus squeezed Sirius' fingers in comfort, pressing down a hateful growl that always wanted to rise when he was reminded of Wormtail. He couldn't bring himself to scold Sirius about the crack comment, not when he knew how much Sirius had suffered because of that fucking rat.
"It will scar?" Hermione went from blushing to pale as a sheet and she dove into a new bout of heartfelt apologies.

Harry clamped his hand over her mouth, "Hermione! It's not going to scar."

Sirius nodded, his fingers playing with Remus', "He's right. It was, as Harry said, just a nip, barely enough to draw blood. The bloody rat sank his filthy teeth in deep and hard, right to the bone. He didn't get away with it though." His smirked as he remembered Moony grabbing Wormtail off his tail, tearing the injury more but it hadn't mattered to him. He'd enjoyed seeing Moony growling the rat into submission then licking and tending to the tail injury. Back then it had made him feel precious.

"They are both right, it really won't scar and Harry's not upset with you Hermione. Take it easy and let it go. You might not want to hear it but I'm almost certain you'll have more mishaps between all your animal forms before you've learned to control your new bodies and strength." Remus smiled gently.

"Okay, I'll stop apologizing, even though I really am sorry." Hermione was overreacting, even she could recognize that but she thought it had to do with the new realization about her feelings for Harry. She didn't know how to deal with them, to not give too much away. Hermione couldn't stand it if she was to see that look of gentle pity Harry had when he talked to the girls brave enough to approach him. She'd rather live out her life as a friend and nothing more than to lose him completely.

Harry wondered at the shadows chasing themselves in Hermione's eyes but chose not to comment. She'd likely go into a tangent of apologies again if he did.

Ron rolled his eyes, "Well now that that's settled, anyone feel like a game of chess?"
Chapter 23

Harry eyed the rolled up copy of the Daily Prophet warily before sighing and opening it, pleasantly relieved to find that he was not front page news. Instead Skeeter had taken Dumbledore's gaffe and run with it like she was a jewel thief and it was the Hope Diamond. The look on the old bastard's face up at the head table was good for his heart, half pale, half green and you could nearly see the scrambling behind his eyes to rework whatever plans he'd had. It took all he had to keep from grinning when he saw an owl carrying a tell tale red envelope straight toward the Headmaster. Oh this was going to be good.

It wasn't just one red envelope heading toward Dumbledore, Hermione spotted several of the dreaded Howlers. If it had been anyone else she would have cringed in sympathy but with the Bee, he only got a smidgen of what was coming to him. She had to grin when the old wizard hurried out of the Great Hall, owls following him. Apparently he didn't want the student body and the visiting schools to hear him be cursed out. She was a little disappointed though, not to hear the angry howls directed at the Headmaster.

Orion was out and out laughing and Hermione couldn't help but wonder how much the boy knew about Dumbledore's part in his and his parents' lives.

Albus had made it to an empty classroom and brought up a silence shield in the nick of time, the Howlers exploded with force so great it made him stumble back a few steps. He was screamed at in at least twenty different languages but above all the Howlers one was heard louder than the others and that was Molly Weasley's. He grimaced at the long list of invectives, insults, and expressed disappointment that went on long after the others had torn themselves up.

As it went on and on he began to pace. This made things a bit problematic. He was going to lose his seat on the IWC, there was no way he'd manage to keep it after Rita Skeeter's article. That had been quite a miscalculation. He'd thought she'd be spending her time focused on spinning lies about Harry but instead she seemed far more interested in his own sweet self.

The entire tournament was turning out to be more of a disaster than going carefully according to plan. Instead of Hogwarts having two Champions and Harry being alienated because of it, the boy had chosen a cause to represent and, at first he'd thought the cause he'd chosen would make it even worse. Apparently not. Not only was Harry winning but his cause was being lauded. There were werewolves by the dozens coming forward, seeking assistance from the foundations that many fools had created to help lycanthropy sufferers, thinning the ranks of the likes of Greyback and whittling down the pool from which Tom could fish. There had not been such a massive surge of sympathy for werewolves since the advent of Wolfsbane and this was easily thrice the support.

Harry had people all over the world and in every house cheering for him, even in Hufflepuff and Slytherin, instead of being despised and persecuted. It gave him a stronger base and he was growing stronger because of it. The false Alastor had reported that Harry could shake off the Imperius curse and his performance in the Tasks so far showed a clear mind and strong will. That wasn't what he needed. He needed Harry broken, vulnerable to suggestion. As the Howler came to a stop he sighed. He'd not planned to allow the fake Moody to completely execute Tom's plan but now it seemed as if he had no choice. He needed the boy to turn to him, so he could arrange his death properly at the right time and being used in a ritual to bring Voldemort back to life would have Harry doing just that.

He'd have to subtly arrange for magical accidents for Sirius and Remus as well. He could not make Harry stay away from them without showing his hand and they gave the boy too much support, too
much love, too much strength when Harry had to be weak and needy for his purposes. You had to
beat and burn steel before you could forge it into a weapon after all.

Molly was practically beaming with happiness as she and her husband made their way toward
Remus' house. Remus knew they were coming but the teenagers coming for their monthly visit
didn't and Molly was over the moon to be able to be the bringer of good news for once. She was
happy that she and Arthur had gone behind Dumbledore's back and filed for guardianship of Harry.
Especially after what she'd learnt after the second Task. It was strange, the feeling of losing faith
little by little in someone she'd thought could do no wrong.

She looped her arm through Arthur's as they turned the corner and walked up the short and neat
walkway to the small house Remus was renting. "Are you excited love?" She smiled up at Arthur.

He kissed her cheek, "Yes. I can't wait to see the look on Harry's face when he learns that he won't
have to go back to his relative's house. Though Ginny might groan at getting one more brother."
The happy gleam in his eyes belied the joke. He knew their little princess would be thrilled to have
Harry with them.

Molly chuckled happily and leaned forward to pull on the string making a bell ring inside. "I hope
Harry will be happy and I hope he won't mind sharing a room with Ron. We can enhance it a bit,
make it bigger for them." Her smile widened when Remus opened the door and asked them to
come inside. Molly gave the werewolf a hug before Remus took their coats and showed them
further into the house.

"Remus, how are you?" Arthur pat the man on the shoulder, "Things are going well I hope?"

"They are, yes. At the moment things are well. I hope it's the same for you." Remus gripped
Arthur's forearm in greeting.

"Yes, wonderful as a matter of fact." He looked over to see Molly scratching the ears of the big
black dog who'd padded out to greet them and the dogs happy noises and blissful expression and he
chuckled at the sight. "I see you've still got that big beast."

"Ah yes, seems he's here to stay." Remus' voice was strangely soft as he looked down at the blissed
out dog. "I am glad you're both doing well. The kids should be here shortly, you know how it
is...They need to take care of their business at Honeydukes before coming to visit old relatives or
friends." Remus chuckled. "Can I get you something while we wait?"

Molly was too busy scratching and petting the dog to really answer but she poked her husband
about the pies they'd brought.

He rubbed his side and pulled the pies out of the expandable bag they'd brought, "Now Remus you
know my Molly. You don't really think we'd visit without bringing something do you?" He held
the boxed pies aloft, "Where do you want me to put these down."

Remus smiled. "I can take them into the kitchen. Please sit down and make yourselves comfortable
while we wait for the youngsters." He plucked the boxes from Arthur's hold. "You didn't have to
do this Molly but I can't say I'm sad when I smell these, I already know from the scent of them
alone how delicious they are."

The dog barked and wagged his tail and Arthur laughed, "You feed him scraps from the table don't
you Remus?"
"Scraps? The beast get his own plate of freshly cooked food whether he deserves it or not." Remus chuckled at Padfoot's growl at that. "Please do sit down, you make feel like a bad host. I'll be right back." He walked into the kitchen and placed the pie boxes in the pantry after having shifted things around a little. Then he walked back to the living room. He figured they would wait with the tea until the kids came but he brought out a tray of small chocolate truffles from Honeydukes, wanting to offer something while they waited.

Padfoot licked Molly's hand and nudged her over to the couch until she was seated and then grabbed the sleeve of Arthur's coat to drag him over to sit next to Molly, much to the balding man's laughing amusement. "Alright you great beast we'll sit down," he scratched the dog's ears and called out to Remus, "I'd say this dog is a perfect match for you Remus, he's just made me and Molly sit down."

"Yeah, perfect." Remus didn't really know what to say. Arthur was right Sirius was his perfect match but it wasn't that easy. As sad as it was Remus was still scared, scared of letting Sirius all the way inside. "He's well trained when he chooses to be." He placed the chocolate tray on the table and sat down along with Molly and Arthur, talking comfortably about big things and small.

Sirius scooted over to Remus, whined a bit, then snuggled his head onto the man's knee. A part of him absolutely despised himself for everything he'd done to Remus, for all the pain he'd caused his Moony, and for the knowledge that Remus may never let him back in ever again. An ear pricked and he let out a soft woof at the familiar sound of Harry, Hermione, and Ron talking as they walked up to the house and he moved to let Remus up.

Remus let his fingers run through smooth fur as he got up to get the door, letting the teenagers inside with wide smiles and hugs. "Come in, come in." He waved them inside. "We have some visitors here to see you today, someone you haven't met in a while." Remus grinned impishly.

Harry tilted his head, "Huh? Who's he-"

"Mum! Dad!" Ron had spotted them first and was barreling forward to give his parents a hug while Harry's ear drums were still recovering. "What are you doing here? Not that it's not good to see you but...er...what's doing?"

"What? We can't come visit our children?" Molly smiled and hugged Ron tightly before doing the same to Hermione and then Harry. She released him and ran fingers through his unruly hair as she looked him over. "Still far too thin." Molly clucked her tongue, blue eyes sparkling. "I suppose we have to work on that over the summer."

Harry's brows knit in vague confusion, "Huh? I don't think Errol would survive you sending big meals to me at the Dursleys Mrs. Weasley."

Molly almost bounced in place as she exchanged a look with her husband. "You're not going to the Dursleys Harry, you're coming home...Where you belong." She beamed brightly. "Arthur has been wonderful, we went to the Ministry and we've been cleared as your magical guardians. No more Dursleys Harry, no more."

Remus sucked in a breath of happiness. If he and Siri couldn't look after Harry this was the best thing that could happen. No more abuse for Harry.

Sirius' legs gave out, all four of them, and he was plonked right down on his furry butt in shocked joy.

Ron's mouth was hanging open but his eyes were fixed on Harry's face, the wide eyed shock and
terrified hope. Never in a million years would he have thought his parents would go against Dumbledore's 'orders' to keep Harry with his relatives.

Harry's mouth worked soundlessly, opening and closing before he whispered hesitantly, "R-really? I'll be going home...with you?"

Arthur actually hurt at the sound of hope seeking assurance, as if Harry expected this to be nothing more than a misty dream soon chased away, and he reached out to bring Harry into a firm hug, "Really son. You're coming to the Burrow to stay at the end of this school year."

Molly wiped away tears and noticed that Hermione was doing the same. She took a step forward and hugged both Harry and her husband at once. "The paperwork is signed, magically witnessed and filed. There's no going back and nothing anyone can do to stop it. You're coming home." She turned to Ron. "I hope you're okay with sharing a room even in the summer months." She smiled at her son knowing he wouldn't mind.

Hermione's heart was clenching. She was so happy, so relieved that Harry wouldn't be forced to go back to that horrible house she'd visited the previous summer. She couldn't stop the tears from falling but they were tears of joy for Harry's sake.

"Okay with it? Okay with it?! I'm not okay with it," Ron noticed his parents start to frown at him as if ready to scold him for expressing what they saw as displeasure then he lunged forward and joined the group hug, "I'm bloody brilliant with it!" He grinned widely as he heard Harry laugh, free and easy.

Sirius joined the mess by bouncing up on his paws and trotting around the Weasleys plus one barking manically.

Remus laughed at the display, knowing how much this meant to Sirius as well. It had been hard for Sirius being on the run and unable to provide for Harry the way he wished he could. Molly and Arthur were wonderful parents though and they would look after Harry and really love him as if he was their own.

Standing in the middle of all this happiness, with something he'd always wanted held out to him essentially on a silver platter, guaranteed not to be taken away, it was too much for Harry and his legs gave out at the same time he started sobbing into the rough tweed of Arthur's jacket.

Arthur was shocked to start with but then his instincts took over and he started soothing Harry the same as he'd done for all his sons over the years, meeting Molly's watery blue eyes with his own brown shining with unshed tears. The boy in his arms had been through so much, so young, and had more weight on his slim, thin shoulders than any man Arthur knew could bear and yet he shouldered it and carried it. It made him ache for Harry.

Molly knew that her husband was the best there was when it came to unconditional comfort and support and she didn't want to overwhelm Harry so she let Arthur rock him. She wanted to go pay a visit to his muggle relatives so badly though, go there and hex them beyond their scariest nightmares for what they'd done to Harry who was so loving, smart, kind and just wonderful. She wanted to get her hands on that Aunt of his and ask her mother to mother how on earth she could have behaved that way to a little boy who'd lost everything and only asked for love.

Ron moved to stand beside his mother. He knew Harry didn't like feeling weak or breaking down and a mass of people patting and petting him would just make it worse. He looked over and saw Hermione crying silently and went to pat her on the shoulder. He knew the look on his mother's face. It was the exact same one she'd worn when they'd learned who'd slipped Riddle's diary into
Ginny's things and he knew his mother would love to get her hands on Harry's 'relatives' just as much as he would. He could actually feel his hands tingle with the need to cast a permanent hex on the Dursleys. It was strong and wild and violent, just like his temper.

Hermione wrapped her arms around Ron, she knew just as he did that Harry wouldn't want all of them to fawn over him right now but she also needed some comfort of her own, as happy as she was. She hugged Ron tightly whispering a soft thank you in his ear, a thank you for for coming from such a wonderful family as he did.

Remus pulled Sirius with him into the kitchen to put the kettle on, giving the others but Harry most of all some time to collect himself without everyone being there looking at him. He had always hated being looked at when he was hurting and he could only imagine that Harry was the same. No one liked to show themselves from their most vulnerable side. "Isn't it fantastic Pads?" He spoke softly to the Grim. "They went up against the king bee and saved Harry."

Sirius nuzzled Remus' leg with a soft whine and a gentle yip of agreement. He owed Molly and Arthur more than he could ever repay for this even though he knew they'd both be angry if anyone so much as mentioned that. There was still a ways to go to save Harry all the way and more, to save Orion but it was a start. Dumbledore could bite his furry arse.

Remus smiled at Pads and brought out the pies from the pantry again, taking them out of the boxes and getting plates to put them on. He moved unhurriedly, listening to the soft murmuring voices from the living room letting him know that Harry was on his way to collecting himself. Was there any wonder that he broke down? Remus didn't think so, he knew he would do the same only much worse if...No when Orion was finally free, unbound to anyone but himself. "Go on Pads, go out there and give your godson a big wet canine kiss, I think he could use one."

The Grim reared up on his back paws and gave Remus one of those first before galumphing into the living room to do as suggested, nearly tackling Harry as he bathed his godson's face with his tongue, lapping up tears and bringing forth laughter.

"Augh! Gah! Okay! Off! While I still have a face!" Harry was laughing as he shoved Snuffles off of him and rubbed his face dry with his sleeve, "Furry menace," he rubbed the silky black ears. He'd apologized for breaking down on everyone, and gotten a loud scolding for the apology too, and now was feeling more evenly on keel, "Thanks." He looked over at Ron's parents, "You won't get in trouble, with Dumbledore I mean, will you?"

Molly shook her head sternly. "No Harry, we won't get in trouble. This is something he should have seen to long ago, we've asked to be allowed to be your guardians since your first year. We only bypassed him and got it sorted by ourselves. As a wizard you need a magical guardian, someone to teach you about our traditions and way of life. There's a lot you can't learn in school." She smiled at him. "And just so you know, we would have done it trouble or not, you're ours Harry, family."

That right there was the sweetest word Harry could ever hear in his opinion, family. And he knew he'd be grinning for a solid week over it and oh what he'd give to be a fly on the wall as soon as Dumbledore was told about this. It almost made him want to rub his hands together and cackle like a madman. A thought occurred to him and he looked over at Ron, "Think Ginny's going to try to kill me again?"

Hermione intercepted before Ron could open his mouth. "No she won't, she'll be over the moon to finally have you as a brother officially. You know how she always says you're her favorite brother anyway, now it will be true legally as well." Hermione smiled warmly at him as she walked over and sat down on the couch, her eyes red rimmed from her crying but she was feeling happier than
Harry grinned, exchanged a look with Hermione before settling back to watch Ron blush.

"Well you already know her actually Mum," Ron scratched his cheek sheepishly, "It's Luna, Luna Lovegood. She'd be here except she wanted to give us a little time with Remus and Snuffles and she went looking for plimpie bait."

"Xenophilus' little girl?" Molly brought her hands up to rest by her heart. "Oh that's so lovely, she's always looked like a little angel and she has a mind of her own, very important for any girl." She winked at her youngest son. "Oh this is wonderful indeed but I stand by what I said, you need to bring her home so we can meet her as your sweetheart, that's a completely different thing you know...Tell me, does she like Shepherd's pie?"

Hermione turned her head and hid her smile in Harry's shirt.

"Er...actually the name puts her off, something about not wanting to take all the pie away from the blonkyreen shepherds. She loves pudding though, all kinds so far."

Harry tugged on a lock of Hermione's hair in amusement, wondering what Molly's reaction to that would be.

"Hmm, pudding huh...Well I do make a mean pudding, both the supper and dessert kind." Molly tapped a finger against the chin. "Bring the lass home and we'll figure something out. It was a long time since we had a good bread pudding, it could be time for one soon."

This time Hermione couldn't hide her chuckle completely, it was just so...Molly.

Harry just grinned. There was Molly Weasley for you. Welcome anyone and everyone with good cooking and warm arms.

"Oh that reminds me Harry. That lovely young woman you were at the Yule Ball with." Arthur smiled at the young man.

"Mmm? You mean Fleur?"

"Yes, anything going on with her, may I ask?" Brown eyes were lit with kind, knowing, happiness.

"Huh?" Harry was genuinely confused, "Why would there be?"

Hermione felt the now familiar stab of jealousy even with Harry's apparent confusion and now that she recognized it for what it was it made her feel ashamed of herself. She had no right to be jealous but that didn't stop those feelings.
"What Arthur means dearie, is to ask if Fleur is your sweetheart Harry and if we should have her over for an introduction as well." Molly smiled at Harry.

"Fleur?! My sweetheart?" He actually laughed, "No, she and I just went to the ball together so I wouldn't have to deal with silly giggly girls without two brain cells to rub together and so she wouldn't have a guy drooling on her all evening."

"And the Task?" Arthur eyed Harry curiously.

He shrugged, "She was being swarmed by grindylows. Ron calls it my 'saving people thing' but really, I couldn’t let her drown. Especially not since I knew how she felt with her sister being kidnapped and all."

"It's your saving people thing mate, you just can't leave them behind when they need help. Accept it, own it." Ron grinned as Remus came out carrying a tea tray, "Is that pie safe? Orion's told us about your previous attempts at baking."

Remus stuck out his tongue at Ron. "Just for that I might eat it all. At least I try to bake and for your information this pie is made by your mother. You can take it up with her whether it's safe or not." Remus wasn't lying, he had half a mind to eat all the pies himself, something about Molly's skill in the kitchen could rival even chocolate...almost.

"More than safe then if Mum made it. It'll be ambrosia."

Harry murmured into Hermione's ear, "Suck up innit he?"

"Of the worst kind." Hermione agreed with a chuckle as she looked at Ron. "Doesn't matter though, look at Molly, lapping it up. And honestly she deserves to be praised." She regarded Molly's smile and flushed cheeks as Ron talked her up.

"Agreed." He watched Mrs. Weasley and wondered if she'd be willing to teach him wizarding cooking. He already knew how to cook like a muggle and he did enjoy it, when he wasn't being smacked around to do it faster.

Arthur just chuckled as his son buttered up his wife. He was happy and relieved that they'd finally have Harry where he belonged, safe and sound at the Burrow. "So Harry, any ideas about the Third Task?"

Harry blinked and shook his head, "No. They didn't give us any clues or anything this time so I'm mostly just learning as many spells as I can until they give us a hint."

"The only thing they did say was that the points you've earned will be useful right?" Hermione asked, recalling the very slight information that had been released. "Maybe they don't know themselves what to do for a Third Task, especially after all the debacle around the second one."

Remus set out cups and plates and snuck a slice of pie down on the floor for Snuffles, much to Molly's amusement.

Harry hummed, "I don't know about that, plus Crouch has gone missing so it's up to Bagman and Dumbledore they'll probably go on with the original plan for the Third Task," he made a face that spoke eloquently of his opinion of that, "So what could be more dangerous than a dragon and more nerve wracking than having loved ones kidnapped? Whatever it is I plan to be as ready as I can be."

"Oh." The word came out as a smothered squeak before Molly shifted so that she could lean over
Hermione and give Harry a hug. "I know you'll be ready Harry, you've done wonderfully this whole Tournament but these Tasks...I don't understand what Headmaster Dumbledore is thinking and I let him know as much in the Howler I sent him. He needs to keep in mind that you are all children, even the other champions and what these tasks have been about, it's unacceptable." She reluctantly pulled back and sat down in her own seat, in between Ron and Arthur as Remus sat down on the footstool he'd used before when the kids came to visit, leaving the couch for the visitors.

Ron nibbled on a berry from his slice of pie, "I think the old man's going senile at the least," the look he exchanged with Harry and Hermione showed the knowledge that it was more than that, "I mean come on, how could he not know the 'beast' in the Chamber of Secrets was a basilisk? All the signs were there and Hermione figured it out and her only twelve at the time. He's what? Two centuries old?"

"Close to it anyway." Remus mumbled with a nod. He knew the sort of person Dumbledore was, what he hid behind those twinkling eyes and that fluffy beard. Molly and Arthur didn't though and they had to figure it out for themselves. After trusting the man all their lives it must be difficult to see him in another light, at least they had started to question Dumbledore and a few choices he'd made.

Molly was quiet as she thought about what her son said. As much as she really didn't want to admit it, he was right. How could Dumbledore not have known about the Basilisk? And if he did, why on earth had he let her baby girl get into such danger? Why had he let Harry fight the monster alone.

Arthur eyed his son with speculation. He knew his sons, knew Ron and the way he thought, he was the one who'd taught Ronald how to play chess after all, and he recognized that his son was leading them toward something. He'd think on it later because he didn't think he'd react well when he came to the conclusion Ron obviously already had.

Harry sipped at his tea, "Eh we'll see what happens. Either way I'm not standing idle and what I'm learning now will come in handy eventually I'm sure." Considering the way his life went and his plans for the future it was a given.

"There's no doubt about that, learning is never a waste of time. Somehow and someway it will always come to use." Remus smiled at Harry. "And know that what you've done, your cause has made a difference. Plenty of werewolves have finally found the courage to stop hiding, especially young ones. Now they're not hiding away afraid and thinking they're alone. Some of them are even like me, a wizard too and thinking about coming to school, believing they can do it. It matters Harry, you matter." Remus had been getting a lot of letters from hiding werewolves after Harry had named him in the first article. He didn't mind, he'd always wanted to help his kin, that was why he'd kept on accepting the missions to the colonies that Dumbledore had thrown his way back in the days of the first war.

Harry turned red and scratched the back of his neck, "I'm glad, they shouldn't be caught alone and scared like that. They're people too and deserve to have a good life." He wondered about those children needing schooling. He didn't think Hogwarts would be open to them yet but they should still be able to go to school and make friends. An idea planted itself in the back of his mind, one that he'd have to write his goblin financial advisor about when he got back to Hogwarts today.

Ron lifted a brow. He knew that look on Harry's face, his best friend was planning something.

Hermione noticed too and she wondered just what Harry was planning, she'd weasel it out of him sooner or later. For now she left it alone and concentrated on the lemon curd pie on her plate, "This Molly, this is heaven on a plate. I must agree with Ron there, it does come close to ambrosia." She
smiled at the older witch.

Molly blushed more and hurriedly offered Hermione another piece.

Sirius just let his tail thump on the floor, happy to stay in dog form since the Weasleys had brought the best present for Harry anyone could give and one he'd hoped for ages to give him. He lifted his muzzle and nosed Remus' hand in contentment. Now if they could just get their son free then things would be perfect.

Remus rubbed Snuffles' velvety ears and scratched behind them as he had tea and talked with their visitors. He could tell that Sirius was probably thinking along the same lines he himself was. Good things still happened, something very good had happened to Harry today and someday Orion and Sirius would be free as well. Remus had to believe that.
Chapter 24

Harry stretched as he finished the last of his homework and got up to roam the shelves. He passed by offense and defensive spells, not really up to studying for the Task at the moment, and walked his fingers along the spines of other sections until a dark blue tome caught his attention. He pulled it down, humming at the Old English then casting the translation spell to read. He was about half way through the book on rituals of varying kinds when his heart stuttered and he had to re-read a page before flying out of the library and the Chamber itself, and up to Snape's office lab, slamming the door against the wall, "Professor!"

Snape eyed the slight damage to the wall behind the door. "Mr. Potter I trust you've a good reason for abusing my wall?"

Harry slammed the door shut and rushed over, plonking the book down on a clear section of the potion table, right under Snape's nose, "This ritual, is it what I think it is?"

Severus nudged Harry over and pointed at the cauldron he was brewing a potion in, "Watch that and inform me as soon as it turns blue." He then began reading the book, Old English one of the many languages he'd learned to read due to potion texts. Halfway through reading the ritual he froze and began picking it apart in his head, "Where did you...never mind. It is but he must have modified a few aspects, used a concentrated potion as it had to fit in a goblet but this is it. I can't create a true counter ritual from this but the discussion on freely given dragon's blood is now very, very valid."

Harry grinned, "The potion's blue now," he moved out of Snape's way as the professor went to work on the potion he was brewing, "Looks like I'll be visiting to Romania this summer."

Snape snorted, "If you can get away from your relatives without You-Know-Who becoming aware of it."

"Oh didn't you know?" Harry's grin widened and he edged toward the door, "The Weasleys were made my magical guardians," he snickered at the shock on Snape's face as his head came up, "So I'm sure they won't mind letting me go say hello to Charlie. Bye!"

Severus raised a brow and shook his head. Impudent boy. Still this would deal Albus' plans a blow, one that would be wonderful to see.

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Hermione looked up from her books as Harry entered the common room, she had taken to studying there or in Slytherin's library these days. She wasn't exactly avoiding Viktor but she wasn't seeking him out either. She knew she would have to speak to him though, to let him know that she wouldn't be visiting and that they could be nothing more than friends. Her eyes narrowed as she noticed the expression on Harry's face. "So, what's gotten you all...Twitchy?" Hermione closed the book and laid it down on the low table in front of the plush armchair she was sitting in.

"If you were a girl I might suspect pregnancy." Ginny added looking at Harry upside down as she was lying on the couch. "You're almost glowing Harrykins."

Harry grinned, "Don't you mean if I was into boys you might suspect I was pregnant? Cause you know guys can get knocked up," he settled on to couch next to Hermione and cast the shielded privacy spell, even over the floor, "I found the ritual Dumbledore used!"
Hermione pointedly ignored Ginny as she gave Harry a two fingered salute. She straightened up with a gasp and leaned closer to Harry. "The ritual? How did you manage that? Oh this is great, is there something I can do? What do we need? Gods I want to hurt him." Hermione's mind was moving like lightning and unfortunately her tongue followed in suit.

"Easy Mione. I brought the ritual to Snape. Seems like Dumbledore modified it enough that Snape can't make a complete counter ritual just yet but he can do what we thought about earlier and make a potion that will block the connection a bit, just enough to give someone time to take the old bee out before he could kill Orion." Harry lifted his hand and rubbed the back of Hermione's neck.

"Sorry...Over excited." Hermione apologized sheepishly and tilted her head forward, Harry's hand on the back of her neck felt really good. "I think it's amazing you found the ritual and I just want to stick it to the Bee so badly. I know it will take time and patience but any small thing helps. A weakening of the connection can go a long way. Orion won't be safe but he will be safer than he his now."

"Don't be sorry. I love the way you get charged up really," he said it without thinking and didn't register how it could be taken.

Blushing red Hermione squirmed under Harry's hand. "Ah...Well...Good then since I...Um, charge up easily." She had no idea what she was saying but she had a feeling it didn't sound intelligent at all.

"Sorry, am I tickling you?" Harry moved his hand, completely misinterpreting her squirm, "But yeah, we're one step closer to kicking old buzz in the stinger."

She didn't bother to correct him, it was better that Harry believed she was ticklish than that he figured out the truth. "That's good, I don't think the Bee is having his best year and I couldn't be happier because of it."

"Very much agreed." He dropped the privacy bubble, "So what are my favorite ladies working on this afternoon?"

"Dull stuff." Ginny answered him, still lying upside down on the couch. "I'm working on my Transfiguration homework, can't you tell?" She grinned at him cheekily.

Hermione snorted. "Just because there won't be any end of the year exams doesn't mean we can allow ourselves to grow lazy. There's always something to work on."

Ginny rolled her eyes with a smile.

Harry chuckled, "Want some help on the Transfiguration homework then Gin? I've already finished my homework for today."

"Merlin yes!" Ginny clambered into an upright position. "It would be great if you have time to help me. We need to transfigure a lantern into a fire salamander and write five inches on the usefulness of being able to do so." She sounded absolutely miserable, it was so boring, especially the essay part.

Hermione opened her eyes and then closed it again, having a feeling Ginny would not appreciate her lobbying for the usefulness of essays and why it was important to write them. Instead she picked up the book she'd been reading when Harry came in and opened it again.

Harry laughed, "Oh I remember that one. Okay let's see you give it a go," he waved at her lantern, "and then I'll see what I need to advise." He settled in to help her out, happy that today seemed to
be going well.

Julian Delacour strode purposefully through the English Ministry to the department of International Cooperation and paused as he watched Crouch's assistant bring order to utter chaos in the wake of his employer's disappearance. Seeing the young man so competently and calmly deal with the insanity of the office further assured him that he was making a good choice. "Monsieur Weasley may I 'ave a word?"

Percy looked up from the latest mass of documents shoved onto his desk. "Of course Deputy Minister Delacour, is there anything I can help you with." Percy straightened his glasses and offered the Deputy Minister a seat. Lately he'd been working over twenty hours a day and things weren't slowing down any. Percy liked the work though and sad to say it was easier when Crouch wasn't there to sabotage things.

Julian moved and sat in the chair before Mr. Weasley's desk. "I am 'oping you might oui. You see I could not 'elp but over'ear you during the Yule Ball feast and I found myself impressed."

"I...Thank you." Percy fought down his blush. He was a grown Ministry Official, those didn't blush. "It's only ideas I have, nothing too impressive about them."

"Actions begin with ideas Monsieur Weasley and unlike Mr. Crouch I know to listen to a good idea when I 'ear one." He steepled his fingers and met the redhead's eyes, "I 'ave also taken a look at your work record and school records and again I must say I am impressed. I would like to offer you a job in my own Ministry, in my department."

Percy dropped the quill he was holding, completely shocked and very much excited though he did his best to hide it. "A position in the French Ministry, working under you Deputy Minister? I don't know what to say? Are you sure? I'm just an under secretary...You know that right?" Percy had to make sure, this was all his dreams right in front of him on a silver platter, good things didn't happen to him that easily. Somehow he waited for the other shoe to drop.

"Oui I am aware of that Monsieur Weasley," Julian's features gain a gentle amusement, "and I am very sure of my offer. I understand if you need time to consider my offer. It is a big change after all."

"I'm very interested Deputy Minister, of course I am." Percy had to admit that much, this was a chance of a lifetime. Something that wasn't likely to come around again. "I do need some time to consider and discuss things with my current employer and my family but I am very, very interested." There wasn't really anything or anyone to hold him in England. His family and those he cared about would only be a floo call or port key away.

The Frenchman smiled, "Bon, of course you may take all the time you need. When you are ready," he pulled a small communication mirror from his inside robe pocket and set it on the desk in front of Percy, "you may contact me with this. Simply use my name, Julian Delacour, and I will answer."

"Thank you Sir. I'll do that and thank you for even considering me." Percy rose from his chair and bowed to the other man. "I promise I won't take too long to decide."

Julian stood as well and bowed shortly before offering his hand to shake, "Merci for your time and consideration. I know you are very busy at the moment with Monsieur Crouch's disappearance. I will leave you to your thoughts and work and look forward to 'earing from you Monsieur Weasley."
Percy bowed again and watched the French Deputy Minister leave his office dazedly. He really wanted to take the position offered so badly but he had to sort things out first. Couldn't leave the division in the chaos it was in now. Barty Crouch was a lousy boss, to himself Percy had no qualms about admitting that. A lousy boss and a not so good Ministry Official either but it wasn't like him to just up and disappear, he liked his place of power too much to simply walk away from it. Something must have happened to him and Percy needed to figure out what before he could move on to other things.

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Viktor looked over at Harry as all the champions headed for Hogwarts' Quidditch pitch. He'd not seen Hermione since the second task and if he hadn't already been certain she was not interested in anyone but Harry that would have made it painfully clear. He did feel a bit badly knowing he'd never had a chance but he understood that a woman's heart was a precious gift to be given to whom she pleased. He looked up ahead when he heard both Harry and Cedric choke on air and saw the cause in the torn up dirt and short hedges being raised on the Quidditch pitch.

"What are they doing? What are they doing to the pitch." Cedric had actually gone pale. So they didn't have a Quidditch league this year, the pitch was still...Sacred, something that shouldn't be meddled with. "That's not right." He was more upset about the harm done to the pitch than the labyrinth rising in front of their eyes.

Ludo Bagman clambered over to them, a wide grin on his face, "Hullo! Well! What do you think eh?"

Harry narrowed his eyes at the man in the old quidditch robes, "I think you've desecrated our Quidditch pitch is what I think."

Fleur chuckled at the way Bagman shifted uncomfortably, "Er yes well, no need to worry you'll have it back to rights by the end of the year but! Can anyone guess what we have going here?"

"Maze," Viktor grunted, arms folding over his chest.

"Precisely! The Third Task is fairly straightforward, the Tri-wizard Cup will be placed at the center of the maze and the first champion to touch it will receive full marks."

"We seemly 'ave to get through ze maze?" Fleur looked around at the hedges.

"There will be obstacles. Spells and traps and Mr. Hagrid has provided a number of creatures as well. Now the champions will enter the maze based on the number of points they hold. Mr. Potter first, then Mr. Diggory, then Mr. Krum, and last Miss Delacour. You should all have a fighting chance depending on how you get through the obstacles though. So what do you think? Should be fun eh?"

"Oh yes, it sounds like a grand old time." Cedric's voice dripped with sarcasm, so unlike the usually perfectly mannered boy. He doubted very much that it would be as easy as just making their way through the maze, he knew the kind of creatures Hagrid found interesting and he guessed all of them would be lethal in one way or another, if they weren't then Hagrid wouldn't find them interesting or cute.

"Well if you've no questions then you're free to head back."

As they left, Harry groaned a word that sounded suspiciously like 'skrewts' to the other champions and ran his hand over his face, "Joy. Can I just reiterate that I'd like to find who put my name in
and feed them to Fluffy?"

"Oo ez zis Fluffy?" Fleur looked over at him in question.

"A Cerberus, one of Hagrid's pets. He named him Fluffy," he gave Fleur a look, "if I were you I'd look into ways of defeating the ugliest, most dangerous creatures you can think of."

She flinched, "Oui if 'e names a Cerberus Fluffy."

Cedric groaned. "Is it bad that I just want it to be over with?" He ignored Bagman's shocked outcry. "This Tournament has been nothing like I thought it would be, I actually thought it would be about us working together and pushing our own limits but this...It's like a pissing contest and we're the piss." He ran a hand through his hair. "Also Mr. Bagman, I just have to ask, is there a reason you're showing us this before it's done and do the judges know you are showing us the maze?"

"Just what are you implying young man?" Bagman drew himself up, "Of course they know. You've got to have a little time to prepare after all." He stormed off all insulted pride.

Harry snorted as he walked away, "Where on earth does he get the stones to feel insulted by that after he's cheated a few hundred people?"

Fleur shook her head, "I do not know but 'e eez certainly a good actor. Well I must get to ze carriage. I 'ave research to do. I don't suppose zere are any ozzer creatures you can warn us about 'Arry?"

He thought about it for a moment then, "Acromantula, fully grown." At her wide eyes he shook his head, "Trust me you do not want to know."

"Oui. I will zee you all later," she bustled off, visions of spiders assuring nightmares tonight.

"So the spider story is really true then?" Cedric looked at Harry, not feeling guilty at all that he had managed to insult a Ministry employee, his Dad had no good things to say about Ludo Bagman. "Please tell me that he doesn't have the dragon still, facing one dragon in this Tournament was more than enough."

"No, Norbert is in Romania thank Merlin and yes, the spider story is true, and the basilisk, and the one about Quirrel and the Philosopher's Stone, and the hundred dementors last year." He tilted his head at Cedric's wide eyes, "What?"

"Nothing." Cedric shrugged but then hesitated and opened his mouth again. "Actually yes, I don't understand why it's all hush hush and covered up. You do have friends Harry, in more houses than Gryffindor who would be willing to stand by you and fight by your side when these sort of things happen to you. I know the heaviest burden falls on you but if monsters and evil lords are at Hogwarts even then I think the students should be aware, learn to stand on their own feet and protect themselves instead of relying on you. It feels as if all of us just sit back and wait for you to finish the rough stuff for us and it's not right."

Harry shrugged, "That is a really good question. Why is it hushed up? I've never asked that it be, course I don't ask for it to be spread all round the world either but I really don't care who knows what. Just so long as I'm not called the next Dark Lord or evil I'm a happy person really."

Viktor chuckled, "Dere vill alvays be people who villify you but dere should be more who stand beside you."

"Exactly, that's my whole point." Cedric agreed. "You should have more people to stand beside
you and I'm not the only one willing to do it Harry. There are plenty of students who'd much rather stand beside you than cower behind our Headmaster. Just so you know." He looked out over the desecrated pitch again. "I'm a Hufflepuff but I'm not an idiot, that man is not what he seems."

Harry waved his hands, "Shhhhh! On Hogwarts grounds, except for a very select few places, Captain buzzy hears all. It's really kind of a pain in the bum. You might also, if you don't already know it, want to learn Occlumency or just plain not look him in the eye."

Viktor nodded, "He is said to be a world-class Legilimens."

"He is, not fun let me tell you. And Cedric," he looked at the Hufflepuff, "I know better than to think Hufflepuffs are idiots. Just because you lot don't jump up and down to answer every question doesn't mean you've not got brains."

Cedric gave him a crooked smile. "Yeah, if anyone knows better than to believe preconceived notions it's you Harry. I'll take the advice to avoid eye contact until I'm stronger at Occlumency and know that if you ever need help, you just have to ask. We're here for you Harry, you don't have to do it all alone."

"Thanks Ced," Harry saw a familiar fall of straight raven hair peeking out from behind a tree and chuckled, "I think you've got a girl to spend some time with right now though," he nodded in Cho's direction but before Cedric could take a step and very haggard Barty Crouch came stumbling out of the trees toward them.

"What the?" The smile that had lit up Cedric's face at the sight of Cho fell and he took a step toward Crouch. "Mr. Crouch, what's wrong?" He wondered where the man had been, had he been in the forest the entire time. "Cho, run and get Madam Pomfrey please." He called to his girlfriend. "Harry, will you help me with him?"

Harry's eyes were wide and he moved to Crouch's other side to support the man who looked as if he'd been through hell as Cho ran as fast as her feet could carry her, "Viktor, keep an eye on our backs while we head for the castle. We don't know if someone did this to him or if he just ran into Aragog and his children or something."

"Ov course," Viktor had his wand out and was watching the tree line as they slowly made their way towards the castle.

It went slowly since Crouch wasn't exactly helping as Cedric and Harry more or less dragged him toward the castle and the hospital wing. Crouch did mutter something under his breath over and over again but Cedric couldn't make out what he was saying. The older wizard's eyes were staring out at nothing and it seemed as if he saw things no one else could see and tried to get away from them. There was a lingering sense of...Wrongness around Crouch and Cedric pulled his wand as they walked just in case, it did feel as if something wasn't right.

Harry'd already had his wand out, being far too conditioned to expecting a threat, and he breathed a sigh of relief as Madam Pomfrey and Cho came back into view, Pomfrey already casting a stretcher spell and floating Crouch ahead of her into the hospital wing. "Well that was exciting."

Cho looked at him as she snuggled up to Cedric's side, "I expect you're tired of exciting."

"And how!"

Cedric wrapped an arm around Cho's shoulder and leaned down to kiss her forehead. She was tiny but in his eyes she was absolute perfection. "Thank you for helping me with Mr. Crouch and
remember what we talked about Harry." He smiled at the younger boy. "Go, take some time to spend with your own girl...You have asked Granger out by now yes?"

Harry's eyes went wide. Was he that obvious? "She just sees me as a friend Cedric, not to mention she deserves way, way better than me."

"Harry, I'm no expert on love but for some insane reason I got blessed with the most perfect girl in the world." Cedric smiled down at Cho besottedly before looking back up at Harry. "And believe me when I say she looks at you as more than a friend. Maybe you are too close to see it but when she looks at you, she looks like I did when I looked at Cho before I got the courage to confess my feelings to her. It's your choice and I don't mean to pry or push but...Just look a little closer next time you see her."

Cho squeezed her arms around Cedric and looked at Harry, "She does see you as more than just a friend Harry and, speaking as a girl who never thought the Hufflepuff Heartthrob would so much as look at her, she probably thinks the same thing you're thinking. That you only see her as a friend and nothing more and why would you look twice at her when you could have someone as stunning as Fleur as a girlfriend. Think about it." She led Cedric away, leaving Harry and Viktor to stare at each other.

Harry's mind was whirring. Really? Could Hermione really want him? Speccy, skinny, awkward, gawky him when she deserved someone who wouldn't pull her into danger with him, someone who didn't have a target painted on his back.

Viktor saw the thoughts chasing themselves around in the younger boy's head and gruffly spoke, thumping Harry on the shoulder, "At de lake, vhen I spoke vith her, I could see only one person in her eyes and dat vas you."

Harry winced, knowing that had to have hurt the Bulgarian, "I'm sor-"

"Do not be. You can not dictate a woman's heart and any who vant to are fools. I only ask dat you make her happy and treat her like de treasure she is." He pat Harry on the shoulder then walked away to the Durmstrang ship.

Harry scrubbed his hand through his hair and headed down to the Chamber library to do some studying and maybe decide if the others were just seeing things or not.

When Harry hadn't shown for lunch after his mystery meeting with the other champions Hermione was worried. She couldn't help but wonder if something bad had happened, she'd seen both Fleur and Cedric so she knew the meeting was over. She nagged on Luna and Ron until they agreed to go look for Harry with her and of course the first place they went to look was down at the chamber, it was the best place to hide after all.

Hermione breathed a breath of relief when she saw the warm light spilling out from the library. "There you are, we were worried." She stepped inside the library looking over Harry to see if there were any external reasons for him to hole up in here. "You missed lunch...Again." She tried for a smile. "Don't let Molly know, she'll grab you and forcefeed you." She walked closer. "Are you alright Harry?"

He looked up from the book on Parselmagic and blinked at her, "Hermione? Er I did," he looked at his watch and blushed, "I guess I did. Sorry. I got a little absorbed," he waved at the books surrounding him on labyrinths and spells and traps used in them traditionally, "I didn't mean to worry you."
"You know me, I worry about all things, big and small." Hermione sat down in the armchair next to him and looked at the books spread out around him. "So, Third Task is a labyrinth? Is that it? Did you learn anything else?"

Luna smiled at Hermione's rain of questions, she knew it was Hermione's way of dealing with her worry and a way to make sure Harry really was okay. She pushed Ron into a chair and settled on the armrest of that chair, leaning against her boyfriend. "So you'll be the mice who'll look for the cheese then?" She blinked as Hermione looked at her, almost awestruck that there weren't any creatures only Luna knew about in that sentence. "What Mione? I've taken Muggle studies, isn't that normal there? To lure mice through a maze with cheese?"

Harry chuckled, "Yeah pretty much only mice don't have to work through traps and creatures Hagrid is providing," he exchanged a knowing look with Ron and Hermione.

Ron winced, "You know, you might want to call the robe provider and amend your robes for the Third Task to dragonhide armor mate."

Harry laughed but, following Cho and Cedric's advice watched Hermione from the corner of his eye to study her expression. There was something there but he just wasn't sure. "Yeah maybe."

"Harry don't just brush that off, I think it's an idea valid of consideration." Hermione bit her lip on worry as she looked at Harry. "Dragonhide armor would protect you and it can't be against the rules to wear protection." Not to mention how Harry would look in dragonhide leather, the thought made Hermione blush. This was supposed to be about Harry's safety, not her dirty mind. "Remember how Hagrid's hand looked where a Skrewt had blasted it, I don't want that for you."

He caught an interesting glint in her eye that reminded him of Cho's when she was looking at Cedric and reached out to play with a frizzy curl, "I'm not brushing it off Hermione, promise. So other than lunch did I miss anything?"

She flashed him a smile, relieved that he would at least take dragonhide armor under consideration, Hermione couldn't bear the thought of Harry getting hurt, she just couldn't. "No, not really. Well there was a bit of excitement about Crouch being in the infirmary. You should have seen Moody, he acted really strange...Almost afraid." Hermione leaned closer to Harry as he played with her hair. It was so hard, much harder than she'd thought to keep her feelings for him under a tight lid. She was happy to be his friend, she really was but it hurt too, to know that; that was all she would ever be.

Harry studied her then flicked a glance over at Ron, asking for some privacy.

Ron got it fairly quickly and nodded, taking Luna's hand, "Come on pretty girl, let's go ask the elves for some food for our wayward champion here."

"Sure thing Brightfire." Luna smiled happily and let herself be pulled along. She liked the kitchens, the house elves had the most fascinating outlook on things. "See you later." She waved at both Harry and Hermione as she and Ron walked out of the library, heading for the kitchens.

Harry tugged on the lock of hair in his fingers, "Hermione? What is it, what's wrong?" He could see the hurt just behind the pretty brown of her eyes and he did not like it, not one little bit.

"Nothing is wrong Harry, I was just a little worried before but it's fine now." She pressed out a smile. What she felt was her problem and hers alone, she wouldn't make Harry feel bad about it. That was the last thing she wanted.
"Uh-uh, I don't buy that. I can see it," he trailed a finger down the bridge of her nose, "something's hurting you. I know you too well Hermione not to see that." He searched her eyes and took a breath before taking a chance, "You know it just about tore me in two having to leave you in the lake and hope that Viktor would get you out, it made me realize something."

Hermione's eyes widened and she cursed herself for the spike of hope that went through her at Harry's words. There could have been a million different things he'd realized, it was highly unlikely it had anything to do with her wildest dreams. "What did you realize?" Her voice was breathless and she cursed herself for that too as she held his gaze, as always mesmerized by the bright green color of them. No one had eyes like Harry.

"I'd be shattered if I lost you. Losing Ron or anyone else I care about, I'd break, it would hurt but eventually I could stitch myself back together and live on. But losing you?" He shook his head, "I'd never get over it, never move on. Just the thought of it hurts here," he moved one of her hands over his heart, "so sharp and strong that I've never felt anything more painful. I realized that somehow, without me really understanding it or knowing it, you slipped into a place in my heart that's just for you, a place that's much, much more than friendship.

"And I'm scared because I know you deserve so much more than me. You're amazing in so many ways and you deserve someone with a lot less baggage than I come with but this," he tapped his fingers over the hand she had over his heart, "it beats for you now. I'm sorry if it makes you uncomfortable or if I'm being way, way too forward but you deserve honesty from me."

Hermione swallowed loudly, almost believing she'd fallen asleep and that this was a dream. Things like this didn't happen to ordinary brown mouse girls like her. To her absolute horror she could feel her eyes burn and fill with tears. "I feel the same way Harry. I don't know exactly when it happened but you're all I think about. When I'm close to you my heart beats so hard it feels as if it's about to jump out of my chest. I want to hold you and keep you safe and never ever let you go."

She bit her lip. "What are you talking about though? You are the one who deserves so, so much more than me. I'm just me...Boring old me, what can I really give you Harry? You can have anyone. I love you, I've tried so hard to just be your friend but I love you...I do." If Harry was honest with her then she owed it to him to be the same, no matter how scary it was.

He cupped her face in his hands, "You don't see yourself. You're, to quote Ron, bloody brilliant, courageous, so very strong of heart, kind, gentle when it counts and stern when it's necessary, loyal, wonderfully fierce and I know you don't think of yourself that way but you are beautiful. It's not classic or conventional beauty," his thumb rubbed over her cheekbone, "but it's right through the bone and soul beauty. It shines from inside of you right out for anyone who cares to really look to see. You might not believe me but one day I'm going to hold you in front of a mirror and tell you everything about you that I think is beautiful. It'll have to wait because it's a list so long even Ron can't stay in the kitchens that long. You're beautiful and wonderful so why would you want me? Skinny, speccy, trouble finding me?"

"Because you are beautiful." She managed to smile at him then. Hermione still held her hand over his heart and she could feel its rapid beat, mirroring her own. "You have a light inside you Harry, a kindness that shows through in everything you do. No matter how much weight you have on your shoulders, you always have time to help someone else, think of someone else before yourself. You are brilliant and brave...You make me laugh when I'm angry and you comfort me when I'm sad. There's just something about you that calls me to you and I don't feel whole unless you're nearby."

Hermione licked her lips as she spilled her heart out. It was a strangely fitting place to confess your feelings, surrounded by ancient books and the thrum of old magic. "I went to the Yule Ball with
Viktor but all I could see was you...I...I was so, so jealous of Fleur." That little fact was harder to admit but it was better to get it all out at once. It was still so very hard to believe that this was actually happening, that Harry felt the same.

"Jealous huh?" He smiled a bit crookedly, "I've felt very much the same each time I saw you dancing with Viktor or especially after the second Task when he pulled you aside. I just wanted to grab you close and never let you go."

"You were the only one I wanted to be with...Even when I didn't know it myself, if that make sense." The corners of her lips turned upward. "Looks as if we've both been pining." When she said it out loud it didn't sound as dramatic as she'd painted it up to be in her head, though the reality of this...Of Harry wanting her as she wanted him was still too good to be true.

He chuckled, "It makes sense, a lot of sense." He leaned in just a bit and nuzzled her nose with his, "So would you like to go on a date with me next Hogsmeade weekend?"

Even the simple touch of their noses against each other made Hermione tingle and her cheeks to turn pink. "Yes, yes I would like that very much." She shifted just a little bit until she could brush her lips over his before pulling away.

Even with the lingering tingle that kiss left in its wake, Harry smiled broadly and linked his fingers with hers. This wasn't anywhere near as awkward as he'd feared. Hermione was still his friend, just one he wanted to kiss as well. "So if Ron decides he wants to take the mickey out of us over this, green or yellow skin?"

"How about striped skin, using both colors?" She smiled and kept her fingers laced with his, it felt to good to have permission to touch him like she'd longed to do. "I may even include antlers of some sort if he makes fun of this." Hermione went back to nibble at her lip. "I don't think he will though, or I hope he won't. Maybe if he didn't have Luna but he does."

"Of us together no, of us taking so long to figure it out? Well it's Ron you never know if he will or won't tease," he grinned and squeezed her hand, "the dragonhide is a good idea, though I'm probably going to specify shed hide or hide from one who died of natural causes rather than being hunted."

Hermione nodded. "Shed hide provides exactly the same amount of protection as skinned hide, even though the poachers want you to believe differently." She grinned when she realized she was slipping into lecture mode, it felt good though, comfortable. It was nice knowing she could still be herself around Harry. There had only been another layer added to their relationship.

The door creaked open and Ron came in carrying a tray, "Here you go mate, Mulligan Stew, fresh bread, and tea." His gaze fixed on their hands and a considering look passed over his face before he nodded, "it's about bloody time. Much longer and Luna and I were probably going to stuff you both in a closet."

Luna smiled and nodded as she walked in behind Ron. "We'd given you until Thursday before setting our dastardly matchmaking plan in motion. Good to see that you managed to dust your minds free of Wrackspurts on your own."

Hermione reluctantly let Harry's hand go so that he would be able to eat as she looked up at Ron and Luna. "Did everyone know before we did?" Had they really been that transparent?

"I'll put it this way Hermione, even Colin asked why you two hadn't gone public yet." Ron settled down in a chair and pulled Luna into his lap as Harry choked on a carrot.
"Colin asked that?!"

Not knowing whether to groan or giggle at that, Hermione did some strange mixture of the two. If even Colin had asked then that meant that truly everyone did know. It was a little embarrassing to be the last one to get it right but since the prize was Harry, Hermione found that she couldn't be too upset.

"Ron had to stop Colin from whipping out his camera and making a love collage of the two of you." Luna chuckled and leaned back against her boyfriend. "It was quite an amusing sight."

Harry groaned and covered his face with a hand, "Ron I owe you a bag of chocolate for that." He sighed and went back to his stew, "I really don't mind Colin but private is private, especially before one's realized it."

"I'll never say no to chocolate but you don't owe me anything mate."

Harry exchanged a grin with Ron and lifted his teacup, "Cheers then. I wonder if anyone could convince Colin to try landscape photography?"

"Have Parvati ask him." Hermione had found her voice again and curled up in her chair, tucking her feet underneath her. "Colin would walk through fire if she asked him to do it."

"Poor Colin, Parvati is all twizzled up over Michael Corner." Luna sighed. "Maybe that's why he's so focused on Harry's lovelife? It's easier than focusing on his own."

Harry hummed, his eyes taking on a thoughtful gleam. He understood wanting to escape your own life so maybe that was why Colin took pictures of everyone and everything to do with Harry's life. From what he understood Colin was fairly average in grades, flying, just about everything, except his photographs. As much as Harry found it uncomfortable to be the focus of them, he had to admit that Colin's photography was excellent. "I think I'll talk to Colin myself this evening."

Luna sent him a knowing look and smiled gently. "I think that's an excellent idea. Gimmerwams are drawn to Colin, he's a good person and if you talk to him Harry then I believe he'll listen."

Hermione thought it was a good idea too and she couldn't help but wonder what she really knew about Colin, other than the obvious. This was a huge part of why she loved Harry, how he cared about other people, how he was always willing to listen.

Ron played with Luna's hair, "What do you plan to say?"

"I'm just going to tell the truth and ask him if he'd mind taking other pictures around Hogwarts. Sort of like how a muggle yearbook photographer would do." He left out that he'd be offering to foot the bill for the photography equipment as well as pay a fee to Colin for taking the pictures because he knew how important pictures were to those left behind after a tragedy and he knew tragedy was on its way.

"That's brilliant Harry and it really would be nice having solid pictures of Hogwarts and the happenings here. Memories like that are priceless and I think all the students would treasure it."

There was a storm on the horizon, things were going to change and even if all of them made it out the other side of safely memories in the form of photos would be appreciated. Hermione smiled at Harry, truly appreciating his way of thinking.

"Good man." Luna nodded, resting her head on Ron's shoulder, letting him play with her hair all he wanted.
Ron nodded, "And it'll give him something other than stalking you to do."

Harry razzed him then started a conversation on labyrinth traps and good counters for them.
Chapter 25

Harry whistled lowly as he read the account statement and information Gringotts had sent him. If there was anything he could now say with absolute certainty it was that the goblins certainly knew how to make money multiply. They'd already tripled the principal amount of 2,000,000 galleons from the Basilisk profit. He'd keep a third of that for himself and the rest would go into the idea he'd come up with last time he'd visited Remus.

According to the goblins it would take another year but it was absolutely doable with two thirds of the interest made off of the investments he had them working for him. He wrote a brief reply and thanks to the goblins, sealed it with the special seal they'd provided him which would prevent anyone from reading his mail, then sent Hedwig off with it before noticing that the twins were sneaking about in the owlry. "Alright what are you two about?"

"Harry, fancy running into you up here." George's head went up at the sound of Harry's voice and he turned to Harry with his hands behind his back, smiling brightly and much too innocent. "Up to? We have no idea what you're talking about little brother, we're just here doing the same as you, sending a letter." He blinked dark red lashes in Harry's direction.

Harry snorted, "Uh-huh, you know for someone so sneaky you can't lie very well George." He looked at Fred and lifted a brow, "Well? What are you up to?"

"Now Harry if we told you that it'd give the surprise aw-hey!"

Harry had held out a hand an hissed the summoning charm in Parseltongue, enjoying the fact that it could be done wandlessly, and caught a note addressed to Draco Malfoy. He pursed his lips, "To Malfoy?" He glanced up, lips twitching, "Are you two sneaking about just to send love letters?"

George's hand went up and rubbed the back of his neck, underneath fiery red hair. "Don't know if I would call it love letters exactly." He grinned. "We just have to make sure our little silver dragon doesn't forget about us. He's stubborn you know."

Fred nodded, "They're more...declarations of interest."

"Declarations of interest." He got two nods. "That you're sending to a guy you've got the hots for." Two more nods accompanied by narrowed eyes. "Who you're also growing to like for more than his bum and his face." More hesitant nodding. "That you're sneaking about to send. I'm sorry to tell you two but even I, romantically challenged as I am, know that means you're sending love letters."

Fred stuck his tongue out, "Prat. Give me back my letter for Draco."

"Hmm what's in it for me?"

"Except our loving gratitude you mean?" George asked, blue eyes still narrowed. "How about the fact that we managed to get our hands on a certain love song about you and a certain know it all and out of the goodness of our pure, loving hearts we won't spread it further."

Harry pursed his lips and grinned, "You know if I tell Hermione you could have stopped the spread and didn't..." he trailed off letting them draw their own conclusions.

"Merlin Harry you're acting decidedly Slytherin today," Fred leaned against a wooden beam, "what do you want?"
"You two know Hogsmeade better than anyone who's in the school. Where else is a good place for a date aside from Puddifoot's," he shuddered at the thought of Puddifoot's.

"A date...In Hogsmeade...Hmmm." George stroked an imaginary beard with glittering eyes. Just because Harry was having the upper hand at the moment didn't mean he couldn't still have some fun. "I'm thinking Carly's for a first date. How about you Freddie?"

Fred nodded, "Yeah. It's simple, not in any way eye-searing, and affordable. It's about three shops down from the bookstore. Now can I have the bloody letter back?"

Harry handed it over, "Appreciated. Oh and if I were the two of you, I wouldn't just rely on letters. Take it from an almost Slytherin, it's a lot harder to forget someone when they're in your face all the time. Later," he waved and trotted away with a merry whistle.

"The boy becomes a Weasley and is suddenly much more annoying. What is it with brothers really?" George watched Harry go, arms across his chest. "He does have a point though...And if there's anything we excel at it's our ability to be in someone's face. Our dragon should be out of Runes by now...Shall we?"

Fred draped his arm over George's shoulders, "Ron's a bad influence on him and yes, yes we shall. If memory serves he'll be taking the route past the greenhouses." He pulled his twin out of the owlry with him.

George laughed brightly and followed in his twin's lead. It might be just a little bit creeper like to have memorized Malfoy's schedule and habits but the first rule of getting what you want is to study it. George and Fred really wanted Draco Malfoy. They were more than willing to be patient but he was going to become theirs.

Out on the grounds Draco suddenly sneezed.

Pansy, walking alongside him, passed a handkerchief over absently, "I do hope you're not getting a cold. I certainly don't need to catch anything that will leave my nose runny and red."

Draco took the linen handkerchief and wiped his nose gingerly. "I'm a Malfoy, I never get sick, especially not with a cold. Much too plebian. More likely it's that horrid thing you call perfume that irritates my nose, it's very sensitive." A silver blond brow rose and he regarded his best friend coolly.

"Oh yes ever so sensitive. Now tell me darling, who was it who dumped an entire bottle of his mother's French perfume out on the rug in front of the fireplace just so he could bury his nose in it and breathe it in ad infinitum?" She gave him a bright smile, "And who was it who, at the tender age of eight, went slogging about in the muck for an entire day with Professor Snape looking for some sort of fancy potion ingredient and wound up contracting a very common cold?"

"First of all in my defense Mother's perfume sells for six hundred Galleons a bottle so you can't fault me on my taste there. Secondly it was not a common cold, I got poisoned by that loathsome swamp insect. How many times to I have to tell you that?" His mentioned and pointy nose went up in stubborness. "Besides that time it was for the greater good, for your art you have to make sacrifices and with me, my potion skills is an artform."

She turned and pat his cheek, "You keep telling yourself that darling." Her eyes caught a flash of red hair from over his shoulder and her lips twitched. She was enjoying the Weasley twins' pursuit of her best friend. It got him ruffled, which was amusing, and kept him from growing truly cold, which was important. In her humble opinion anyway. "Oh goodness I just realized, I left my
lipstick back in the classroom. I'll be right back, do carry on and I'll see you in the common room in
a bit." She dashed off in the opposite direction that the twins were approaching from as she knew
Draco would be watching her in confusion as she bustled away for a few moments, just long
enough to allow those reprobates to close in on him.

"You're already wearing lipstick you scatterbrain." Draco called after Pansy even though he knew it
was futile. Once that girl got something in her head it was impossible to talk her out of it. Shaking
his head he turned back to the path and took a few steps forward before he almost walked into his
own personal demons. "Oh no." It came out as a despondent groan he would forever deny.

"Awww one would think you're not happy to see us little dragon," Fred grinned and plucked a
white blond hair from the shoulder of Draco's robes. "And here we've been looking for you."

"Why in the name of magic do you continue to do this to me?" Draco looked up into identical blue
eyes. "I'm this close to reporting you for harassment." He held up his thumb and index finger,
showing a tiny gap between them.

"But we're not harassing you dragon, we're appreciating you." George smiled at him.

"What does that even mean?" Draco hated that these two could make in flustered and unsure with
only a few words. He couldn't read them, didn't understand what they wanted from him.

Fred shook his head, and met the steaming silver eyes, "Draco, we like you. It's all very simple, we
like you, a lot, and so we're being stubborn and going after who we like and want. Namely you."

"Why? Why would you like me? I've been nothing but horrid to your whole family and most of
your friends since forever. I am not a nice person." Draco was honestly confused. Even though he'd
decided to think for himself didn't mean a was a different person.

"Well when you get right down to it," Fred tugged on the strap of Draco's bag, "neither are we.
Sure we're jokers and seem friendly enough but other than our family, Lee, Hermione and now
you, we've never really cared about anyone's good opinion so if someone makes us angry-

"-We make them pay." George finished, leaning a little closer. "We can be as sneaky as a Slytherin
and we always find a way to get our vengeance. Our close ones matter but the rest of the world can
go to hell. We know you better than you think little dragon and we like what we see. Perfect is
boring. We like prickly pride."

Draco sniffed and raised his chin. "Well you can like all you want. I'm not that easy."

Fred laughed, "Oh little dragon, if we wanted easy we'd have gone for Zabini." It was very
common knowledge that the Italian Slytherin was already racking up notches on the bedpost. "You
can be as difficult as you like, we're not bound to give up."

"It's your time wasted, not mine." Draco shrugged and gave them a muted glare, secretly feeling a
slight thrill that someone was willing to pursue him at all, even with all his faults. "Just be prepared
to work for it." He took a step close and lowered his voice until both Fred and George had to lean
in to hear him. "Oh and Blaise might be a slag but he's also my friend. Insult him again and you'll
wake up missing your bits."

George grinned like a loon, oh was it any wonder they were mad about their dragon?

Fred's grin mirrored his brother's and he replied, almost purring, "See we understand each other
and that little loyal threat is part of the reason we like you. And really we're far from afraid of hard
work." He tapped the end of Draco's nose softly, "You'll figure that one out when you see us open
"What makes you think I'll be there to see it? Now if it had been Paris I might have been impressed." That silvery blond brow rose again.

Fred laughed again, "Oh we'll get there. We have to start somewhere though. Just you watch while you shine your scales, the triple W is going to make Zonko's go out of business."

"You'll see our brand everywhere little dragon, just wait and see." George was still grinning, loving the sharp bite Draco had.

"Well see." Draco stated calmly though he really had little doubt they would achieve anything they put their minds to. "Now that time wasted...It's coming awfully close to be my time so I'm leaving you here, don't follow."

Fred hummed as Draco strode away, his eyes dropping to the bum under the regulation cotton trousers. Once he was out of sight Fred looked over at his brother, "Something just occurred to me brother mine."

"Hmm?" George pulled his own gaze away from that exceptionally fine behind to look at his twin. "What's that Freddie?"

"Harry, he essentially gave his blessing for us to go after our little dragon there. Think he might know more about getting under his scales?"

George made a considering hum and scratched at his neck. "Well, our dragon and Harry have always had that eternal rival, polar opposite thing going on. I think that underneath it all they are probably more alike than either of them knows. We should probably have a chat with our littlest brother, Harry's always been able to get a reaction out of Draco...Mostly anger but a reaction none the less."

"You two might also consider French truffles before getting that desperate," Pansy smirked as two redheads spun to stare suspiciously at her.

Fred tilted his head, "Well now why would the little Queen of Slytherin be giving us advice?"

"Amusement," Pansy cocked her brow, "Draco does get so delightfully worked up each time you two make your presence felt."

"There are about a million ways to interpret that sentence wrong." George had to fight down images of a delightfully worked up Draco and remind himself that their dragon was still only fourteen. "There must be more than amusement though, despite rumors you snakes don't sell each other out...Oh and what kind of French truffles are we speaking about?"

She tsked, "Really you must ask that? He's a Malfoy, do your research boys. I'm not going to hand you every last bit of information on a plate. Of course if you really want to impress, you go for Belgian instead of French but save that for the big guns. And my reasons aside from amusement...are my own."

Fred narrowed his eyes, "How does he feel about Hirsinger?"

She smiled, "Brava. I'll leave you two to plot and plan with but one teeny, tiny warning," she flicked her wand at a tree so fast that Fred almost missed it. It was impossible to miss the tree shattering into neatly cut pieces that clattered loudly to the ground though, "Be good to my boy there or I might just mistake the two of you for pines. Ta!" She skipped away, heading for the
Slytherin common room so as not to miss Draco's rant.

"Bloody scary, I can't help but admire that." George looked from the retreating girl to the pile of neatly cut wood. "It's a good thing our little dragon has friends like that though. With the times coming I have a feeling he's going to need them."

Fred nodded, "Agreed. You know Georgie, before we resort to chocolate I think I'm going to send a little something else to our silver dragon."

"I'm all ears brother mine. Tell me what you have in mind to soften our dragon's tough hide a little." George thrived on things like this, when he and Fred had to use their brains and all sneakiness they possessed.

Fred grinned and began walking with his brother, "Well I was thinking he might like a copy of a few of those potion books in the special library and perhaps instructions on a certain bit of transfiguration."

George fell back until he could jump on his brother's back, wrapping his legs around Fred's waist. "Lead the way Freddie, for love and for glory." He leaned in and bit his brother's ear. "You're lucky I use my turn to ride you this way...Now giddiup."

Fred just laughed and murmured back, "Well I could always give you two turns if you'd return the favor," he broke into a run, heading for the Chamber in a burst of surprising speed.

"You know me, I always return the favor and pay what I owe." George chuckled huskily and held on tighter.

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Harry shifted his shoulders under the leather jacket Sirius had sent him for 'getting his head out' and had to admit he looked better in clothes that fit. He'd shrunk down and repaired all of the hand me downs as well as changed the colors. Why he'd never thought to do it before was beyond him. He clambered downstairs to wait for Hermione. He wasn't too terribly nervous aside from hoping that this would be a good first date.

Hermione looked into the mirror, wondering if she was trying too hard. Her hair was gathered into a high ponytail and she was wearing a silky purple top along with a pair of brand new jeans. Well trying too hard or not she didn't have time to change anything, she didn't want to keep Harry waiting. Hermione grabbed her coat and bag and left the dorm. As she walked down the stairs she saw Harry and her mouth dried up. He looked wonderful and once again she couldn't comprehend why he was with her. "Hi, you...you look really good."

He looked her up from toe to head and held out a hand, "That is very much my line. You look wonderful Hermione."

"Thank you." She smiled at him and cursed herself for blushing...Again. "Should we get going?" Aware of the whispers and the looks of the students around them, Hermione held out her hand.

He took it and thread his fingers through hers then fell into comfortable step with her as they headed for the carriages, "We have strict orders from Remus and Snuffles not to bother coming for a visit. Course that's the edited version, the raw had Snuffles getting a newspaper over the head."

He rolled his eyes, "I'm leaving whether we defy them or not up to you." He squeezed her hand, his eyes dancing in amusement.

Hermione laughed, she could just imagine what the un-edited version had sounded like. Most
likely Snuffles had deserved that newspaper over the head and more. "As much as I love visiting them it could be nice to have a day to ourselves." Her blush deepened, books and smarts she knew but she had no idea how to be a part of a couple. "It's nothing we have to decide now though, let's just have fun and see how the day turns out."

He leaned in and kissed her cheek, "Sounds good to me," then helped hand her up into the carriage before clambering in after.

She settled in the carriage, very aware of Harry's closeness as the carriage started to move. Hermione had been here plenty of times, the carriage, the road to Hogsmeade...Even the company was familiar but everything still felt different, completely new in a way she couldn't describe. It seemed the poets were right after all, love changed things. The colors were brighter, the air smelled sweeter and it was as if the very air around them was electrically charged. Hermione knew that they were young but she also knew that what she felt for Harry was more than a crush, it really was love. She had no idea what would happen in the future but right here and right now it was real.

He watched her with a soft little smile on his face and saw the emotions chasing themselves across her face until settling on one of contentment, "Did you figure it out?"

She turned to look at him, a soft, secretive smile on her lips. "You know what? I think I did yes." Leaning her head on his shoulder, Hermione grasped his hand and laced their fingers together again, tracing nonsense figures on the back of his hand with her free one.

He blinked then just leaned his head on hers and let her play with his hand until the carriage came to a stop then he got out so he could be there to help her out. It was something he'd done a dozen times before without thinking, the same way he went down stairs before her or up them after her, wanting to be there to catch her just in case she fell, but now it had a different feel, a different flavor to it. He noticed the gentle buzz under his skin where her skin touched his and paid attention to the way his eyes went to her face and curves and how it lingered on the turn of her wrist. "I know you're not hungry yet so where to first?"

"Um..." She looked up at him from underneath her lashes. "The bookshop? I know this is a date and I promise it won't take long and afterward we can do anything you want but I've preordered this book on labyrinths and how they were used to trap enemy forces trying to make it to the castles in the past and I just thought it could help you and now....I'm babbling." Hermione took a deep breath after talking and talking without pause. She gave Harry a sheepish look. "I don't want to ruin our day together, I just really want to help you Harry anyway I can."

He cupped her chin and tilted her face up so her eyes met his, "Hermione, you don't have to act like or be anyone or anything but who you are. I love you for who you are and wouldn't want you to be or act like anyone else okay? I like when you go off on your tangents and I'd be absolutely barking to reject your help," he tapped her on the end of her nose, "so no beating yourself up for being Hermione."

Smiling she moved her head so that her cheek rubbed against his palm. "Okay, no more beating myself up." Another apology was on the tip of her tongue but Hermione had a feeling Harry wouldn't appreciate it so she kept it in. Harry was her best friend, no matter what was happening between them now that was the first and foremost thing. Remembering that she felt a whole lot better. She decided to listen to her own words from before and just have fun, see where the day took them. "So bookshop first then?" Hermione smiled again and took one of his hands from her face, kissing the inside of his wrist, feeling his pulse under her lips for a second.

That pulse jumped just a bit before steadying and he nodded, tangling his fingers with hers again, "Bookshop first." He walked hand in hand with her to the bookshop, happily ignoring the people
"Thank you." Her smile was easy and warm as she walked into the bookshop and waited inside for Harry to follow. The scent of ink, paper and dust was like coming home. It was a smell that made Hermione feel both safe and inspired. Within the pages of a book you could find the answer to almost anything. Without lingering to peruse the shelves, Hermione walked over to the counter and spoke to the old wizard there, getting the book she'd pre ordered neatly wrapped in brown paper as she paid for it. Turning to Harry she shrunk the book and placed it in her bag, it would be time to look through it and see if it was any useful later. "Do you have a favorite book Harry? One you can read over and over again and it never stops being wonderful?"

He rubbed the back of his neck, "Er well...I never got much chance to do any reading at the Dursleys' and I couldn't linger long in the school library before Dudley came to roust me out so, I don't know yet. I know I've got favorite parts of books from what we'd read in our textbooks for Language Arts or the bits I managed to read before Dudley and his monkeys came round."

He could quote from those textbooks and little bits he'd managed to sneak in here and there, tucking them away in his memory like precious gems to help him escape into his head when things got really bad. "That was usually poetry because you could finish a 'story' quickly. The one I remember best is, 'She walks in beauty like the night, of cloudless climes and starry skies; and all that's best of dark and bright, meet in her aspect and her eyes.' I think that's Byron but I'm not sure."

"It is Byron." Hermione said softly as she nodded. "It's beautiful isn't it? Imagine having that gift, to take words and string them together in that way, creating utter beauty." Hermione had always been in awe of those able to do so. She could write a scientific essay in her sleep but when it came to write for pleasure and beauty then she was hopelessly stunted. She had to settle for reading the words of others, admiring them and treasuring them as she read.

"I've always loved poetry, it means something different to everyone who reads it and no interpretation is wrong." She reached out and took his hand again, squeezing his fingers. Someday, someday down the line when Harry's life didn't revolve around training, fighting and surviving. Some day when they had time, then she would read her favorite books to Harry, share them with him. For now she smiled at him and walked toward the exit of the shop. "Where to next?"

He squeezed back and smiled looking around the street, "Well as Honeydukes isn't the be all end all for me like it is for Ron. Why not check that out?" He nodded at a little hodge podge shop across the street. The display window was well done, showcasing clothes, home decor, jewelry, bathing goods, and wizarding ritual supplies.

"That'd be nice, I've never been there." Hermione nodded and walked across the street with Harry. The shop was cozy and filled with all sort of different things without being cluttered. Honeydukes was a nice but as with Harry, sweets weren't her everything and this was great too and Hermione was happy that she got to explore this little shop along with Harry.

Harry tilted his head at a display of toys and the flick of a fingertip sent a wizarding top spinning. As it spun it projected images of the Arthurian legend. "Hey Hermione?"

"Yes?" Hermione placed the small crystal dragon she'd been looking at back on its shelf and walked over to where Harry was, the images still swirling around him.

He watched as, wholly different from the bits and pieces of story he knew, Arthur gave Guinevere away in marriage to Lancelot then moved to a young man's side, clasping hands with him. "Are there any books in the Hogwarts' library about the Arthurian legend? I mean everything we've got now is based off what Merlin accomplished right? But there aren't any classes that talk about it.
Binns just goes on and on about creature revolts and not about how we really got to...where we are."

"If it's that you want to know young man this would do you better than a Hogwarts book."

Harry jumped and spun, hand reaching instinctively for his wand and the top ceased spinning from the defensive burst of magic startled out of him. He stayed his hand at the sight of the worn, grizzled old woman holding an equally worn, thick leather bound book in her gnarled hands and amusement twinkling in eyes just as unnaturally green as his own though a paler shade. "Er beg pardon?"

She cackled and passed him the book, nodding in satisfaction as he cradled it carefully, "You'll find that Hogwarts books, even those in the second library, are biased and don't tell the real story."

His eyes went wide, "Wh- how do you know about...."

She pat him on the cheek, "This old woman knows many things others don't lad. You've a hard road ahead of you but those you've chosen to surround yourself with will guard your back unflinchingly," she turned her sharp gaze onto Hermione and grabbed the girls hand, studying the palm with practiced knowledge, "and you dear, you've more than just brains, you've power and grace enough to stand toe to toe with your chosen though you've yet to find it," she pat the back of Hermione's hand, "you will. In time you will."

"I...Thank you?" Hermione didn't really know how to respond to this old woman. She had an aura around her though, an aura of power that demanded respect. Hermione wondered who she was and how she'd come to manage a little store like this one in a small wizarding village. There were so many things she wanted to ask the woman but as pleasant as she seemed she didn't really invite to questioning. Hermione looked from the shopkeeper to Harry before she took an unconscious step closer to Harry if it was for protection or to protect him she didn't know. The old witch didn't seem threatening but looks could be deceiving.

Harry watched the old witch smile and nod again as he wrapped his arm protectively around Hermione's waist.

"Aye you'll both do well." She released Hermione's hand, "The book is free of charge with one other purchase, whatever it may be even if only a Knut." She met Harry's eyes again, "Everything is marked, you can leave the money on the counter." She turned and moved away to a back room with a chuckle.

Harry looked at the closed door of the back room then down to the book in his other hand then over at Hermione, "Well that was...interesting."

"That's putting it lightly yes." Hermione pulled her eyes away from the closed door the woman had disappeared through and looked at the book Harry still held. She had a strange feeling that if they were to return to this shop another time they would find a completely different store manager. She didn't know why she had that feeling but she did. "What should we buy?"

"I think I'm going to get the top but I want to look at the crystals before we go if that's alright?" He ran his hand up her back in a gentle soothing stroke.

"Of course that's alright, you can look at anything you want. I'm in no hurry." Hermione turned her head and kissed Harry's cheek. She'd seen a small wolf carved out of some sort of black stone that she pondered buying for Orion.
Harry smiled and picked up the top, carrying it over to the display of crystals. He walked his fingers through a large basket of amethyst crystals, selecting and rejecting. First he selected twelve, then added eight more after some thought. He'd have gotten another but he saw something even better for the last. He put the amethysts he'd picked out into one of the provided velvet bags then went to the wall where several pendants hung and lifted down one on a gold chain. It was an amethyst point that had small cabochons of sodalite, hematite, and lapis ringing the top. He put it into a velvet jewelry bag, picked up a leather messenger bag on impulse to carry everything in, then went to tap Hermione on the shoulder.

"You've chosen?" Hermione smiled at him and fished out the coins needed for the carved wolf. It wasn't expensive and something about it seemed fitting for Orion. She placed the coins on the counter and took one of the paper tissues stocked there and wrapped the small wolf in it before sliding her purchase into her bag.

He nodded, "Yes," and dug out the money for his own purchases, placing it on the counter before putting it all in the leather messenger bag and reaching for her hand, "Feeling hungry?"

"I could eat." Hermione grinned and slid her hand into his happily as she took one last look around the strange little shop before she and Harry exited it. "Where should we go? Broomsticks?" Hermione didn't really fancy going there and get looked at but she wasn't very familiar with the different places you could eat at in Hogsmeade.

He smiled and tugged her down the street, "I've a better idea." He found the little corner cafe restaurant exactly where the twins had said it would be with the bright green script of Carley's painted on the window, "Eat inside or out?"

Hermione looked at the restaurant with surprise and a smile spread across her face. "I vote outside, it's a beautiful day, for once not raining and not cold. We should take advantage." Her smile widened. It looked like a really nice place, no ruffles or scented candles in sight.

He grinned, "Outside it is," he pulled out one of the pretty wrought iron chairs at the outdoor table seating area for her.

"Thank you." Hermione sat down and smiled as Harry pushed the chair in for her before walking around the table and sitting down himself. He was always so polite and considerate, Hermione both appreciated it and found it adorable. The outdoor patio of the restaurant was cozy, clean and even though out in the open it was private, the tables placed behind large potted plants and happily striped fabrics, hiding them from view from the people walking up and down the street. An apple cheeked blonde young witch came out in a crisp green and white uniform and handed them menus with a smile and a bright hello before disappearing again, giving them time to choose what they wanted.

Harry scanned the menu and settled on bangers and mash along with the ever popular butter beer to drink and just set his menu aside until the waitress came back to take their orders. He studied Hermione quietly for a moment then asked, "When did you get your ears pierced?" He remembered the little piercing dimples having been there on the train the first time he'd seen her so obviously before then, "Was it your choice or did your parents have them done when you were a baby?"

"Hm?" Hermione's hand went up and fingered the small, discreet golden studs in her ears absently. "No it was my choice, I had to do a lot of talking and be very convincing for Dad to finally agree." Hermione smiled. "In other words I nagged and begged until he couldn't take anymore and caved. I was eight when I got them pierced, I've thought of getting more done up my ear but I've never gotten around to it." She shrugged and put the menu away, having decided on the local salmon
with herb spiced rice.

The same waitress as before came and took their orders before leaving again. She had looked a little extra at Harry, her eyes flashing up to his scar but she didn't preen, giggle or ask for an autograph and that endeared her in Hermione's eyes.

He pictured Hermione with the triple hoops in the ear lobe and smiled. She'd look good with them, "Would your parents let you get more or will you be waiting until you're of age for that then?"

"They wouldn't mind me getting more piercings as long as I stick to my ears." Her smile turned wicked. "Anything beyond that would warrant a horrified objection. The only reason I haven't done it is that I haven't gotten around to it, something sparkly catches my eye and I forget about it."

He laughed, "Sparkly?" He reached across the table and tugged on a lock of her hair, "and you know I doubt you had to nag and beg all that hard to convince your Dad. I saw the way he looked at you and your Mum, he'd run into a burning building to save your books if it would make you happy."

"Ah but you see that having my ears pierced meant someone actually stabbing a permanent hole through his little girl's earlobes. Believe me I had to beg and nag like a champ." She smiled, seemingly unable to stop. She was happy being right where she was with Harry. "Dad is wonderful, his only fault is that sometimes he tries too hard. Both Mum and I love him just as he is and for who he is. Somehow he's gotten it into his head that he has to be and do better...He doesn't."

Their food was brought out and Hermione's mouth watered at the smell of it.

Harry cut a bit of sausage, "Well see, you're his princess, your Mum is his queen. He's always going to want to give you a perfect castle in the clouds surrounded by unicorns and rainbows and gorgeous flowers, incredibly beautiful clothes made of the best materials in the world, and jewelry that would make the Queen of England turn green with envy. That's the way it works or is supposed to."

"I suppose so but that doesn't mean I have to like it. The more he tries, the harder he works the less time we get with him. I understand that he means the best but it doesn't turn out that way in reality." Hermione cut a piece of the buttery fish and put it in her mouth, moaning at the flavor.

He nodded in understanding, smiling at her enjoyment of the food, "You and your Mum just want him, not all the gold and jewels in the world." He definitely understood. He'd give up every last knut and penny he had and even his magic to have his own parents alive and with him. Nothing in this world was more important than family and spending time with them, not to his mind.

Hermione nodded in agreement, seeing the shadows in Harry's eyes and wished desperately she could remove them. She knew that was impossible but that didn't stop her from wishing. Hermione reached out and placed her hand over his, giving it a squeeze.

He turned his hand palm up and squeezed back with a smile, "I'm okay. So is your Dad going to want to deck me for dating his princess?"

She squeezed his hand again but followed his lead and changed the subject. Hermione didn't want Harry to be upset, not today on their first date. "No, he might bring out the serious caterpillar eyebrows and snap his latex gloves threateningly but nothing more than that. He likes you remember, he and Mum hated leaving you at the Dursleys last summer as much as much as I did."
"Yeah I remember. Are you going to write them, about this with us? Give them a little time to come to grips with the idea before I introduce myself when we get off the train?" He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles.

"Yes I'm going to write them." Hermione's smile was warm and gentle. "I want them to know how lucky I am, that I'm in love with my best friend. It's a wonderful thing and nothing I want to keep hidden."

His cheeks colored but his smile turned brilliant, "Good, I'm glad...I wonder though, since we were so obvious," he chuckled at himself, "if they might not be expecting it."

Hermione laughed. "I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if they were. Apparently the whole world knew except us...Even Skeeter." Hermione wrinkled her nose when she said the reporters name. "Although she hasn't been quite as horrid since she targeted the Bee instead of you."

"Something I am eternally grateful for, for so many reasons. I've not had one moment of well meaning false grandfatherly 'concern' since she started in on him hallelujah." He lifted his mug of butterbeer in a silent toast.

Lifting her own glass of lemon water Hermione bumped his mug with her glass. "I'll toast to that and hope it stays that way." She took a sip and placed the glass back on the table.

He took a drink as well and nibbled on another bit of sausage, "I'll have to thank the twins for telling me about this place. The food is great."

"Mm yes, it really is. This fish melts on your tongue." Hermione waved her fork over her plate. "The twins told you about it? That was kind of them, usually they keep their gems close to their chest."

He grinned, "Wel~l I might, just might have blackmailed them out of it."

"Now that sounds more like them." She chuckled. "Good on you Harry, what on earth did you find to blackmail them with though?"

He chuckled, "I accioed a letter they were about to send to Malfoy and threatened not to give it back. I wouldn't have actually kept it but they didn't need to know that," he gave her a wink, "then after they told me about Carley's I told them they'd have better success if they got in Malfoy's field of vision themselves rather than sending a letter." He ran a finger down the frosted outside of the mug, "They're almost scary besotted with him."

"So that's why Malfoy's been having two ginger shadows this week." Hermione nibbled on her lip. "And yes they really seem to like him. I don't think Malfoy hates the attention as much as he pretends to either. If he really was bothered by them he certainly knows enough curses to get them to stay away. Even a year ago I would never have believed it but as weird and strange as it is...The three of them sort of fit together in the most unlikely way." She finished her food and placed the silverware on her plate. "Poor Arthur if it ever gets serious...He'll have a conniption having Lucius in the family."

Harry swallowed his last bite as well, "I don't know about that. If Malfoy makes the twins happy Mr. Weasley will swallow his protests and...well I don't think Lucy would be coming round much if at all unless he was wielding hexes."

"You're right, Arthur will bear almost anything if it makes his children happy and Lucius...Well he's just hopeless isn't he? Not even Malfoy seems particularly fond of him, bound by blood and
almost afraid but not fond of." Hermione leaned back in her chair, letting the food settle.

He nodded, "He is afraid of him but I think he's starting to pull away. He's not seen around Crabbe and Goyle much anymore, sticking to Parkinson and Zabini for the most part. Zabini is firmly neutral and even though Parkinson's parents are DEs I don't think she's going that route. She a bitch of epic proportions but she's not the type to lick someone's boots."

"No, definitely not. I can't see Parkinson bow to anyone at all." She couldn't help but grin. She and Parkinson weren't friends at all, they practically loathed one another but Hermione could admire the other girl's strength and intelligence. "Despite Malfoy's anger and humiliation last fall I think you got through to him. It's a good thing. No matter how pratty and horrid, both Malfoy and Parkinson are teenagers, they haven't chosen the path they are on and no one, no one deserves to be stuck underneath someone else's boot heel."

Harry nodded, "I'll be interesting to see how things play out for the twins and their dragon. I caught them making copies of the potion texts in the library. Sneaky little buggers."

Hermione chuckled. "Sneaky yes but I have to admire them too. If I wanted to woo a snarky potions mad little snake that would be the perfect gift. Copies of potion texts that can't be found anywhere else."

"Like to be a fly on the wall when Malfoy gets those," he looked up as the waitress came over and asked for the check.

"Yes, I wish I could witness it, see if it makes Malfoy drop his mask." Hermione smiled as the waitress gave a happy nod and walked inside to bring them the check.

Harry pulled out his coin purse as the check arrived and paid the bill, "Well either way if Malfoy won't treat those copies like Neville treats sprouting plants then I'm a fish." He stood and offered her his hand, "Want to see if anything's blooming along the path to the Shack yet?"

"Yeah, that sounds great." She took his hand with a smile and got up from her seat. "Thank you so much for a delicious meal, next time it'll be my treat." Hermione leaned her head on his shoulder as they slowly made their way out on the main street again, walking toward the Shrieking Shack slowly. "It's strange, knowing that the spirit haunting this old house was Remus, Remus in pain."

He looked at the ramshackle house, "I know. It's so unfair, not only that he was infected with the lycanthropy but also that he had to hide it. No one should have to hide or feel guilty about something they can't control." His arm slipped around her waist.

She nodded. "I understand that Remus had to remove himself from the rest of the students to keep both them and himself save but having to hide away and not being able to be who you are. Make up lies about your injuries and coming back to classes much too soon not to raise suspicion. It shouldn't be that way, for anyone." Hermione turned so she faced Harry. "Have I told you, really told you how incredibly proud I am of you for shining some light on this issue? To make those cursed with this understand that they are still people and shouldn't have to hide away? I am you know...So proud."

He blushed bright, bright red, "Erm well," he coughed, "I'm also sorta...putting my money where my mouth is too. You should save the pride until that works."

"When it comes to you Harry, my well of pride will never run out." She leaned in and kissed his cheek. "What do you mean though, putting your money where your mouth is? What have you planned?"
"I got to thinking, when Remus mentioned the children who are infected, how some are magical children who want to learn to use their magic and then there's the adults who can't find and keep jobs and well...I've been corresponding with my goblin financial adviser and using the interest from the invested basilisk profit we're going to build a school." His gaze was fixed on the Shrieking Shack, "One for those afflicted with lycanthropy. The teachers, for the most part, will also be werewolves so they can really understand and look after the kids properly."

"That's...That's incredible Harry." Hermione let go of Harry's hand so she could wrap her arms around him, hugging him tight. Her heart was full with pride, admiration and love for the young man she was holding. "You'll give them a life Harry, a place where they meet people who are like them, people who won't judge. You'll give them an education and an identity as something more than a werewolf." Hermione's eyes welled with tears. "It's an amazing thing to do and if anyone can do it, it's you. Oh Harry you're wonderful, this is wonderful." She buried her face in the crook of his neck, still hugging him tightly.

He held her close, not fussed too much by the tears and pet her hair, "It's a long way from being ready though. The land and funding is no problem at all, even the wards to keep threats out won't be a problem as I'm commissioning the goblins for that. The main problem is finding a potion master who can brew that much Wolfsbane each month and even more a Headmaster or Headmistress."

He pulled her over to a log to sit comfortably. "I know there are werewolves who embrace the violence, the ones who give them all a bad name. I found out that there's this one, name of Fenrir Greyback, who's the worst of the worst. He goes round and bites children on purpose to infect them. More than half the werewolves in the UK were infected by this bastard.

"I need to find a Headmaster who's strong enough, alpha enough to protect the kids from Greyback because he'll try to get at them and try to kidnap them to raise in his warped image of a pack. That's going to be the real challenge because a true alpha isn't going to be coming forward like the others. One strong enough to stand against Greyback is strong enough to care for himself and keep out of Ministry hands. I want to ask Remus if he knows anyone but I'm kinda worried I'm going to get the 'you crazy idiot' speech."

Hermione burrowed into Harry's side, wiping away the few stray tears left with the heel of her hand. She wasn't sad at all, it was pride over Harry that had her leaking this time. "He might give you the short speech but I think you should ask him. I don't think Remus will think you a crazy idiot for wanting to do this, I think he's going to be just as pride and just as humble as I am. The werewolves coming out of the shadows now are contacting him so he is your best bet to find the alpha you're looking for. You should speak to Snape as well, it's doubtful he'll be able to brew all the wolfsbane needed but..."

Hermione broke off as a thought went through her. "Oooh, I think I got it...There's a few elite students in every seventh year class from all the houses, vying for potion scholarships and apprenticeships right? What if we could work something out with Snape, come to an arrangement of some sort? This group of students could brew the wolfsbane needed as their project, that would give your school the potion needed and Snape can grade the students on how well they are doing it and such. It really could work Harry." She looked up at him, an excited gleam in her soft brown eyes.

He wiped the lingering dampness from the tears away with his thumbs and smiled, "That's a brilliant idea, Snape would burn his own tongue off before letting a sub par potion be shipped out. The school still needs one to teach the potions to be accredited though so I'll still ask him about both." He kissed each of her cheeks then brushed his lips over hers in a brief ghost of a kiss,
"You're a genius. I still don't want to get the lecture but I'll grin and bear it next time I see Remus."

"Don't worry, I'll protect you from the big bad wolf." She smiled at him, cheeks flushed before she leaned in and pressed her lips more fully against his. Her first real kiss.

His hands curved tenderly and protectively around the side of her neck and he felt his way through the kiss, not wanting to make a mistake and disgust her. He moved his mouth a bit, feeling the texture of her lips under his. They were softer, smooth skin tasting faintly of peppermint he thought came from her lip balm and the simple kiss made him feel warm all over.

It was an easy, innocent kiss, just pressing and moving of lips but Hermione felt it all the way down to her toes. Her hand went up to cup Harry's neck and the other one held on to his shoulder. Harry's lips were slightly chapped but they felt wonderful against her own. She couldn't help but smile into the kiss when she felt a small brush of stubble on Harry's chin as they moved their lips. Harry was definitely growing up.

He ended the kiss and nuzzled Hermione's nose with his, opening his eyes to look into hers with a happy smile, "All the faith, the virtue of my heart, the object and the pleasure of mine eye, is only Hermione."

Hermione blushed even as she returned Harry's smile. "Shakespeare," She moved her hand from Harry's neck to brush over his cheek before removing it completely. "For someone who hasn't had the chance to read very much you certainly know when to use your words. It's beautiful."

"Well I remember a few like I said and until I manage not to stumble over my own words, I'll just have to borrow his beautiful words for a beautiful lady."

Leaning her head on Harry's shoulder again, Hermione continued to smile. "You know that it doesn't matter to me, I like your words, whether you stumble over them or not."

He gave her a squeeze, "Yeah well, that kiss deserved a bit more than my 'wow' or something just as weak."

Her laughter was happy as she leaned even heavier against Harry. "So I shouldn't admit that I was just about to say wow when you spoke then should I? It was a pretty wow-worthy kiss after all."

He chuckled, "Yes it was, very wow-worthy." He ran his hand through the tail she'd pulled her hair into, "But then you're an amazing girl so any kiss from you is worth a wow."

"You're amazing too, it certainly feels like I'm the lucky one here. And there's no one else I've even wanted to kiss before." Her smile turned a smidgen wicked. "If the first one was wow-worthy, imagine how it will be with a little practice."

He blushed but laughed anyway, "We'll turn into fireworks." He kissed her temple, "Bad girl putting wicked thoughts in my head."

"That's me, bad to the bone." Hermione grinned. "Seriously though, I like you Harry, a lot and I'm not going to pretend that I don't want to kiss you when I do." She looked down at the ground, hoping she hadn't been too forward and made things awkward. She could sight of a tiny blue flower in between brown grass. "Looks like spring really has come."

He brought one of her hands to his lips and kissed her palm, "I wouldn't want you to pretend to something you don't feel and I have no objections about being kissed by you at all." He gently tapped the grass with his boot, "Spring brings all kinds of beginnings and this is one I'm very, very grateful for."
"Me too, very grateful and happy." Hermione reached down and picked the blue flower before placing it in her hair, behind her ear.

He smiled and got to his feet, tugging her with him, "Come on then. Let's see what other spring surprises are in store for us." He lead her down the path so they could spot flora and fauna until time to go back to Hogwarts.
Chapter 26

Pansy watched Draco open the box delivered to him with cautious hands and suspicious eyes in great amusement. "So what did your little creepers send you?"

"Hush you nosy hag and let me look before you start badgering me." Draco replied and started to leaf through thick parchment pages with furrowed brows until he caught a stray word here and there. Then gray eyes grew very, very large and Draco's hands were almost shaking as he sat down on the couch in front of the fireplace, starting to read the pages in order, not believing his own eyes.

"What? For the love of Merlin what is it Draco?" Pansy scooted over to him, poking him in the leg, "Give over what'd they send?"

Draco narrowed his eyes, he loved Pansy dearly but should he really just hand over a treasure like this? Shaking his head at his own thoughts he shifted so Pansy could see the papers, a copied down book or several. "You think this is real? If it is then...Imagine what I can do with this." A slow grin spread across his face.

She peered at the pages and pursed her lips, "Looks like some Old English potion mumbo jumbo. Ask Professor Snape for confirmation about how genuine it is but really, I don't think the twin terrors would send you anything that wasn't real. They're after wooing you, not pissing you off."

"Hold your tongue you bint." Draco warned. "It's not some Old English mumbo jumbo...Really how is it you have the grades you do? Look at this," He waved the parchment in front of her eyes. "These are potion recipes and tips dating back to Salazar Slytherin himself. Things thought lost a thousand years ago." Draco looked almost reverent. "As for the twin fools wooing me...Well they can try."

She pursed her lips, "Dray, darling, from the look on your face just talking about those copied books they're not just trying, they're succeeding."

He scoffed though a slightly uncertain gleam showed in his eyes. "Just because I enjoy the gifts, doesn't mean I enjoy the gifters. I'm not a Hufflepuff. If I'm given something I'll make the best use of it."

She pat his cheek, "What ever helps you sleep at night darling."

"Oh I sleep just fine. Except for Nott's snoring and Blaise's flavor of the week. How difficult can it be to put up a silencing charm?" He glared at her, hating and loving that Pansy knew him so well.

"Hmmm who is our little incubus' flavor this week by the by?" She let him change the subject, having already said her piece that she knew he'd stew on for hours.

"Ugh, don't even get me started." Draco shuddered. "He's with Smith of all people and the little Hufflepuff is loud." He wrinkled his nose. "Do you remember the sort of huffing sounds Zacharias Smith makes on his broom during Quidditch matches? Imagine that but much, much louder."

"[i]Smith[/i]? Oh dear, the quality of his flavors is dropping," she wrinkled her nose, "bleh. I know he's all for boinking his way across the country until he finds his mate but really [i]some[/i] standards must be maintained."

"I couldn't agree more." Draco sank into a lazy yet still elegant sprawl on the couch. "It's
impossible to make him see sense too...I almost wish his mate would just show up and haul him off by his ear. I need my sleep Pansy...Look at these bags.” He motioned toward the flawless skin beneath his eyes.

"Oh yes so horrible," it was perfect sarcasm. "I do want him to find his mate though, before I'm forced to hex him into impotency to maintain the integrity of Slytherin choices for bed partners."

"Thank goodness that Professor Snape force fed him the potions and charms to keep him free of any unwanted sickness or children." Draco groaned. "As it is now Blaise is fifteen going on fifty and not a fresh fifty year old either." Draco wouldn't let any outsider speak badly of Blaise but even Draco could recognize that his friend was in trouble, looking for something no amount of casual bedpartners could give him.

"There's a potion we could use, a 'find an incubus his mate' potion. See if that's in any of that stuff the redheads sent you. Before Blaise was a bit of a size queen but now he doesn't seem to care," she sighed and rubbed her fingers over her lips, "I could still kill that little twit Milicent for slipping him that love potion that awakened the incubus nature early."

"There, there darling," Draco reached out and pat her hand. "there are worse things than death and I've already made sure Millicent will experience it." His eyes turned slate gray and absolutely cold. "I can't believe she thought she was his mate." He shook his head in disgust. "I will look for a potion in here and I'll speak to Severus too. We should try and find his mate to save Blaise."

She nodded, "Completely beyond the surface of bad matches it's getting scary his near desperation. He's not really feeding like he's supposed to because none of them are 'appetizing' and I don't want him to starve. I'm telling you Dray, if there's an answer to this one in that sheaf of papers your redheads sent I'll kiss them."

"You'll do no such thing, keep your lips away from my stalkers Pants." Draco sent her a glare before picking up the copied books the twins had sent him. "I'll start looking right away, I don't have enough family to afford to lose any and you and Blaise are my family." He sighed deeply. "I'm going to send Potter a note too. Not about Blaise but about our dear DADA professor. I need to keep him in my debt if things turn pearshaped."

She moved to kiss his cheek, "Have fun with that gorgeous and really I do so look forward to Potter's reaction to that truth."

"Ah yes, Boy Wonder is entertaining in his quest for justice and vengeance isn't he?" Draco moved to grab his white peacock feather quill and wrote a note quickly before folding it into the familiar crane shape and enchanting it to find its way to Potter. "There, now I'll focus on Blaise and his problem." He pulled the copied books into his lap and started to go through them, nibbling on the end of his quill as he read.

Harry looked at the new animals gamboling about the chamber when he opened the door after finishing his meeting with the Crystal Theories professor. There were two foxes, one a regular red fox and the other an arctic fox who were pouncing on Orion, who'd wrangled an 'invite' into the Chamber sessions from the twins, a great big Kodiak bear sitting happily with a teeny tiny humming bird perched on its nose, and right next to the dhole that was Ron a little ermine was curled up. "Huh well blow me down." He walked over to where Hermione was shaking her head in amusement at everyone, "They all got it down then?"

"They certainly did and around the same time as well." Hermione grinned and pulled Harry down
next to her. "Not too hard guessing who's who is it? Not with how they've paired up." It was amazing how still and gentle the large bear was with the tiny, tiny bird perched where it was. The foxes were going wild though, causing Orion to both giggle madly and yelp when the arctic one got a little over excited and managed to nip skin instead of clothes.

"Definitely not hard to figure." He shook his head at the whine the arctic gave as it sidled close to Orion and licked his chin in apology. "Only mystery is which fox is who. I'm putting my galleons on George being the red and Fred the arctic." That was a source of amusement for him that he'd noticed. Fred loved the cold and was always too hot while George didn't.

Orion grabbed the arctic fox and nuzzled large ears and a pointy little snout, showing that there was nothing to apologize for. He was used to rough housing. Sirius was his father after all and despite his Daddy's gentle appearance he did have werewolf strength.

"I'm not betting against you." Hermione smiled at Harry. "I've learned that when it comes to gambling you're freakishly lucky."

"I call it fate making up for other moments of misfortune." He gave a low whistle that got everyone's attention, "Alright you lot back to human. I've got something for everyone."

Ron shifted first, the ermine in his lap instead of snuggled into his side once he'd finished. Then Neville shifted, the little hummingbird perched on his finger.

Luna shifted, as easily as if she'd done it her entire life, staying where she was in Ron's lap. Ginny fluttered her wings and flew closer to the floor before she shifted as well, looking a little disoriented as she got used to her normal, human size again. She smiled brilliantly at Neville and sat down next to him.

The twins changed at the same time, pulling Orion down between them as they sat down as well.

"So Harry, what is it you've got then?" George tilted his head to the side as he asked.

He tossed an amethyst on a leather cord to them each one by one, except for Hermione, "I got a little help from Professor Trevelyan in tuning those, if you'll just put a little of your magic in to charge them, they'll offer some protection." He moved around behind Hermione and slipped the gold chain of the one with the added stones he'd picked up for her around her neck, fastening it, "I chose a little extra special for you. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind, thank you so much. It's beautiful." She ran her fingers over the cut amethyst gently before leaning back and placing a chaste kiss at the corner of Harry's mouth.

"This is wicked, thank you Harry." Orion glomped his brother, hugging him tightly.

Harry laughed and ruffled Orion's hair, "I got some for your Dad and Sirius too, and the rest of my new siblings and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Just trying to cover all my bases." He'd sent Cedric and Cho the points he'd tuned for them through Hedwig. "I'll give Moony and Padfoot theirs next Hogsmeade weekend."

Neville held his amethyst point in his hand and gently pushed a bit of magic into it, making it glow for a moment before it settled back to its normal appearance, then he slipped it on over his head.

"Thanks Harry. It's appreciated."

"Yeah mate, thanks." George echoed and pushed some of his magic into the stone as well. "Mum and Dad will appreciate it and we appreciate that you thought of our berk brothers as well."
Harry went over to him and playfully punched him, secretly dropping three more crystals into his inside robe pocket and murmuring very low so only the twins heard him, "For your dragon and his clan, when he finally accepts that you two aren't going anywhere."

Fred's eyes went wide. That went beyond just sanctioning their pursuit of Draco, it was full blown approval and active participation in keeping their dragon safe and happy. "Thanks Harry."

"Eh well you're family aren't you?"

"Yeah, of course we're family but still...Thank you for this." George was happy that Harry wouldn't mind them going after Draco, it might have started as just a fancy but now both he and Fred wanted their dragon in every aspect of their lives. He was the piece missing in their puzzle.

"You're welco-oof!" He growled as Ron grabbed him round his neck, "Oi ger off!"

Hermione laughed as Ron, very much aided by Orion wrestled Harry to the ground. If possible she fell a little more in love with him for this, for thinking about all of them and providing them with some measure of protection.

Suddenly Myrtle appeared along with a slightly haggard looking paper crane who flew straight for Harry, almost attacking the poor boy as it repeatedly bumped into his head.

"It's a very insistent crane." Myrtle said in a matter of fact tone of voice.

Harry managed to twist away from Orion and literally sit on Ron, grabbing the crane from the air, "So I see. Familiar too, speak of the Slytherin and all," he unfolded the crane while Ron complained about his fat arse. Both brows shot straight up at the message inside. 'If I were you I'd study the DADA professor much more closely Potter. You might be surprised what is hiding beneath his veneer of craggy paranoia.'

"What does it say?" George slowly crawled closer, trying to peer over Harry's shoulder, placing his elbow right on Ron's thigh while he was at it. "Does he mention us? Is there any mentioning on what he thought of the gift?"

Hermione snorted though she was curious too, it was just amusing to see how bad the usually suave twins had it.

Ron grunted from under Harry, "Merlin save me I'm going to wind up with a Malfoy brother-in-law."

Fred leaned close trying to do the same as his twin, "Well? Anything about how dashing and charming Gred and I are?"

Harry's lips twitched and he spoke solemnly, "It's about Moody."

"Moody?" Ginny furrowed her brows. "Why would Malfoy write to you about Moody?"

"Yeah, he's the last one I want to hear about. It's bad enough I'm still dreaming about him." Orion groaned. "No cute girls or boys for me...No I get to dream about our old, gnarly and frankly scary professor."

He read the note out loud and if he'd been in lion form his tail would be swishing like he was about to pounce.

Ron managed to get out from under his friend and read over his shoulder, "Yeah that doesn't sound
good but can Malfoy be trusted?"

"Well he was right about the dragons." Hermione fiddled with her new necklace, it felt warm and right against her skin. "And he told you that early on too, gave Harry some time to really read up on it."

"I don't know about trusting Draco but I think you can trust the information he's giving you." Luna walked over and pushed Harry off of her boyfriend. "He's behaving like the Slytherin he is. If he doesn't want to end up with a mark on his arm he needs to get some insurance that won't happen. He helps Harry and Harry will owe him. Help him back when it's needed."

Harry chuckled, "Yeah that's what I reckon too."

Fred leaned his head on George's shoulder, "Our sneaky little dragon. Does he even know that he'd only have to ask Harry?"

Harry snorted, "Probably but he's a Slytherin remember. He'd owe me then and that's the last thing he'd want."

"Especially not after your [i]'conversation'[i]. He made it quite clear he had no interest of joining your little group of 'do-gooders' back then and even if he did change his mind he wouldn't be able to admit it." Orion added. "I wouldn't either if I were him. Favors and return favors, that's a completely different thing all together."

Harry nodded, "Thing is Moody's paranoia will make it difficult to investigate this," he waggled the note.

Ron yawned and stretched, "Well you could always pretend to ask him about help with the Third Task. I mean he tried to help you on the others just a little late on 'em."

Hermione nodded. "Ron's right, he seemed very eager to help you on the other tasks. Only you had them figured out long before that." She nibbled her lip as usual when she was thinking. "Something has been off about Moody from the very beginning and I think Malfoy's note pretty much proves it. Look closer...I wonder what Malfoy means, does he mean look closer physically or at Moody's actions?"

Neville settled down on the floor, "I don't think he meant his actions, they really can't get more dodgy really."

"Physically then." Hermione nodded. "Still don't know how you're going to go about it but asking for help with the final task sounds like the best bet."

"Do you have your map Harry? Where's Moody now"? George asked. He trusted Draco's note.

"I almost always have it," he pulled the Marauder's Map out and activated it looking for Moody, "he's in his...the bloody hell?" He looked closer, frowning.

"What is it?" Hermione inched closer. "What do you see?"

He pointed at a spot on the map, "Am I just seeing things or do you see what I do? Isn't Crouch supposed to be in St, Mungos?"

"Yes he is, he's supposed to be there until tomorrow. What is he doing in his office?" Hermione and the others crowded around Harry, looking at the dot on the map that showed quite firmly that Moody was completely still in his office.
"That...is an excellent question. Here," he handed the map to her, "You all watch the map and I'm going to see what's going on. No time like the present right?"

"Take someone with you Harry, don't go alone." She accepted the map and looked at the still unmoving dot.

He shook his head, "I can't. I remember that foe glass in his office and he'd get suspicious if I brought someone." He kissed her cheek, "I'll be careful and if I'm not back in fifteen minutes send in the calvary."

"Okay, fifteen minutes...I will be timing you." She had a frown line between her brows but recognized that he was right. "If you're not back by then you'll get a whole zoo chasing you down. Be careful."

"Promise, cross my heart." He dashed out and up the stairs blowing Myrtle a kiss for helping the crane through. He sprinted through the halls and arrived at Moody's office door then knocked sharply.

"Harry my boy, long time no see." A silvery ghost floated toward Harry, holding his head straight when it threatened to tip to the side. "If you're looking for Professor Moody then I'm sad to say that you're out of luck. He's away on business until tomorrow, even his classes have been cancelled.

Back in the chamber they watched the ghost next to Harry on the map and the still unmoving dot of Moody.

Harry blinked and frowned, "Oh, good afternoon Sir Nicholas. Away on business? When did he leave?"

"Why he left yesterday evening, just after supper." The ghost nodded and quickly had to hold his head steady again. "I overheard him speaking to Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall, he had an overnight bag and everything."

"Huh," Harry looked at the office door and boy was he ever tempted to ask Nick to peek inside and make sure but instead he just nodded, "Thank you for telling me. I appreciate it."

"It's nothing Harry, I'm always glad to be of use when I can." The ghost smiled. "I wish I could stay and chat with you more but I'm afraid I have to leave. I'm meeting the monk in the library, we need to discuss what to do about Peeves, he's been dropping animal urine in the Hufflepuffs beds. Completely unacceptable of course."

Harry nodded and watched Nick float away. Only Peeves would drop piss in the Hufflepuff beds. He looked at the door with narrow eyes and muttered, "Away on business my foot. Peeves you ought to put the piss in the Professor's bed." He stalked back to the Chamber, irritated mightily.

"What happened?" Orion was waiting by the entrance of the chamber. "Did you find something out? We saw nearly headless Nick there and Moody hasn't moved at all inside his office, not even shifted to walk around."

Harry laid a hand on Orion's head, still scowling in thought, "What about Crouch?"

"Crouch? Why are you wondering about him?" Orion frowned in confusion as the two of them walked further into the chamber. "I think he's still in the infirmary, Sev said something to Poppy about the risks of moving him."

"Hmm," they clambered back into the the main chamber where everyone waited and looked at
Hermione, "Who's in Moody's office?"

Hermione blinked and looked at him with wide eyes. "Um...Moody's in Moody's office Harry."

"And Crouch, was he still there when I was outside the door?"

"Yes, look here." Hermione nodded at the dot that said Bartemius Crouch Jr. "He's still there and moving around too, only Moody is still."

Harry twitched and took the map gently from her, spreading it out further and looking at the hospital wing and seeing Bartemius Crouch in a hospital bed. "Nick said that Moody left yesterday to attend business and look here," he tapped the second Crouch dot.

Ron peeked over his shoulder, "Blimey, two Crouches and apparently Moody lied or something cause he's there."

"It's not possible." Luna shook her head causing her long blonde hair to fly all over the place. "There can't be two Crouches, Crouch only had one son and he died in Azkaban...After Crouch himself put him there for being one of the Dark Lord's most devoted followers. His wife died too soon after and Crouch doesn't have any other family."

"Possible or not there's still two of them there." Hermione argued.

"Two...Just like my dreams about Moody...Him being two." Orion looked from the map to Harry.

"Oh this makes my head hurt. Alright, one thing I know is that the map is never wrong. It recognizes people through animagi transformations and even p..." he met Orion's eyes and ruffled the boy's hair, "polyjuice potion. That would make sense for there being two Moodys. Someone is polyjuicing themselves as Moody."

Fred crouched next to them, "And obviously Crouch's son lived."

"So our Professor is really a convicted and presumed dead Death Eater." George pursed his lips. "I'm guessing his agenda here isn't about puppies and cotton candy and I'm guessing there must be a reason he wanted to help you with the Tasks. For some reason he wants you to win the Tournament or at least be in the final." Blue eyes narrowed. "How much do you want to bet he's 'away on business' because he ran out of Polyjuice potion and had to wait for a new batch to finish brewing? Where is he keeping the real Moody in there though? Do you think he's still alive?"

Harry shook his head. He had no idea. "This is so messed up. Okay until we have proof we can't go to anyone except maybe Snape but he won't be able to do anything about it either."

"I don't think dead people show on the map unless they're ghosts so I think Moody, the real one that is, is still alive. Other than that you're right Harry, there's not much we can do until we have solid proof. We'll just have to watch our backs and yours especially. Do as Malfoy said and watch him closely." Hermione growled. "I hate this! Hate the Death Eaters and I hate Dumbledore for letting this shit happen right underneath that crooked nose of his."

Harry wrapped an arm around her, "Believe me I know and agree. I think though that learning the heavy duty near illegal spells in the library just became a necessity. If I've an alleged Death Eater trying to get me to win I need to have a boat load of offensive and defensive spells."

Ron nodded, "Yeah. This sucks but you need to be prepared."

"We'll study and practice with you until you know these spells in your sleep Harry." George
nodded, being completely serious for once.

Hermione just looked at Harry, both heart and stomach clenching. It was so unfair and she wanted to help him so badly, protect him from everything that wanted to hurt him.

Harry wrapped his arms around her and just nodded, "Thanks." He started a tactics discussion and continued to hold Hermione as his mind whirled. He'd be glad for the next Hogsmeade weekend for a little advice from Remus and Sirius.
Chapter 27

Remus felt almost giddy. It was rather sad that the most exciting thing that happened to him these days were the visits of school children. Still Remus had missed them since they hadn't been around the previous Hogsmeade weekend. He looked forward to see them and talk to them. Not as much as Sirius though, Remus could understand him. Sirius had only him to speak to, at least Remus could get out of the house and see other people when he went shopping and such. Sirius was stuck with him.

He looked over at the other man, his longing for Sirius had only grown and Remus still didn't know what to do about it. They were friends now...Finally and Remus didn't want to ruin that for something that might destroy all they had managed to build over the last year. "They should be here any moment now Pads."

Sirius made a soft grunt, eyes focused on the paper in front of him until he felt the now familiar whack on his nose. He rubbed his nose and looked up at Remus, "Sorry Moony. Harry's letter about things we have to discuss has me on edge." That wasn't all that had him on edge. Sharing a home with a man who make his every hormone sit up and beg was driving him demented especially since he couldn't sate the hunger.

"It's okay, no need to apologize. I'm worried too." Remus' voice was soft and he looked away from Sirius and out the window, checking if he saw any sign of the youngsters coming.

Sirius followed his gaze and smiled at the sight of the three familiar heads approaching the house. It didn't take long until they were inside, tea cups passed around and he was demanding answers from Harry about the letter. "Alright what's going on. Spill. Now."

Harry took a sip of tea and edged Hermione just in front of him, much to Ron's amusement, "Er well first, some good news, you know to lift the spirits before I bring them down."

"Oh well said mate, that's encouraging." Ron snickered at Harry flipping him off.

"Any way the good news, well I hope you'll consider it good anyway. Is that I've been working with my financial adviser at Gringotts using the interest from the investments made with the money I kept from the basilisk to build a school. One for the people afflicted by lycanthropy. I'm hoping to have most of the teachers be werewolves to better help the kids you know? Um according to Slipstout, so long as I find proper staff, it'll be up and ready by next year."

Remus picked his jaw up from the ground and stared at Harry. "A school? Do you have any idea of what kind of responsibility that entails Harry? Even with staff and a Headmaster the outmost responsibility will still be with you as the owner. I'm not trying to put you down or talk you out of it." He quickly added when it looked as if both Harry and Sirius were about to protest. "It's a noble thought and a good thing to do. A school like that is needed, I just want to make sure you know what you're doing. Even with wolfsbane for them all you are going to need containment chambers, some wolfs react...badly to wolfsbane. Werewolf teachers are a good idea too but you should keep the staff mixed. The point is to get these children to accept who they are right? Both wolf and wizard. Being completely segregated can be counterproductive. Plus you should have someone there who doesn't change on the moon. Someone who can step in if something should happen."

Remus scratched his graying hair. "Again I'm not saying it's a bad idea Harry, it does need a lot of
planning though.

Harry rolled his eyes with exasperated affection, "I said most of the teachers Remus. I plan on the groundskeeper, the caretaker, and at least three of the professors to be regular wizards or witches. I'd like more Moony but..."

Sirius nodded in understanding, "Even with the awareness you're raising people are still prejudiced and that's the last thing you want at this school."

Harry nodded, "We've already got the basic blueprint for the school," he reached into his bag and pulled out a rolled up piece of very large parchment, "and we did include several large containment chambers for groups as well as individual ones but I want your opinion before I give Slipstout the go ahead to contact a builder. I've spoken to Snape about an unprejudiced potion master to teach potions there and he said he'd look around. I put a lot of thought and research into this even before I contacted Slipstout Remus, it's not an impulse and I know it'll be a lot of responsibility but I want to do it. Having the adult werewolves teach isn't just to help the kids but to help them too. To give them a good steady job and also give hope to others," he ran a hand through his hair, "I didn't just charge in like a lion without any thought on this."

He knew he tended to do that a lot but it sort of smarted that Remus thought he wouldn't put days of study and contemplation into this. He'd had his hopes raised and then dashed far too much to do that to anyone else. He wasn't even making an announcement about this for sign ups until after he had every staff position filled, all materials prepared, the school built and accredited, and the wards set in proverbial stone. He was determined to do this but it startled him how much he wanted Remus' approval. Startled and hurt him to think he might not have it.

Sirius saw that creeping shadow of insecurity in Harry's eyes even though it was quickly shuttered and hidden and unrolled the plans Harry'd passed over to looked at them, "Whoa, this place is big. You have the land for it?"

Harry nodded and pulled out a folder, hiding himself behind the 'business' of the school he was putting more of himself into that he'd first thought. He set the folder down next to Sirius' elbow, "Yeah, it's a small mountain in Wales."

Ron snorted and gave Harry a noogie to cheer him up, "He just casually announces that he's got a mountain just like that. Mate you are one of a kind."

"Well it's just a small one," Harry nudged his best friend in thanks.

Remus had seen the shadows in Harry's eyes too before he hid them and he didn't like it one bit. He walked over and wrapped his arms around Harry in a big hug, holding him tightly.

"You have no idea how proud I am of you cub. Not just for this although it is a wonderful idea that will help so many but for who you are. You're my cub too Harry, just as Orion and I couldn't be more proud. I think you misunderstood me when I spoke of responsibility, I know you wouldn't rush into this or not make plans. You're so young Harry and already have so much weight on your shoulders...I guess I just want to protect you from anything else that can weigh you down."

He held on to Harry but motioned toward the blueprint. "This is great, a school that is truly needed and you know I'll support you and help you in any way that I can."

Sirius hid his smile as Harry returned the hug, "But this is something I can choose to do or not and that makes it different. I'm not saying it's not going to be less of a weight but it's one I want to carry instead of one forced on me."
"I understand, burdens we choose to carry are always easier, not weight wise but in what we get back from it. You've done a good thing here Harry, one of many good things." Remus smiled and ruffled Harry's hair as he ended the hug.

Hermione was happy that Remus showed Harry he was proud, she knew Harry looked up to Sirius and Remus as parental figures.

Sirius was flipping through the pictures of the land Harry'd gotten and whistled lowly, "Man Moony look at this, and I thought the Forbidden Forest was awesome," he angled to show Remus the pictures, "There's a wizarding town nearby but not too nearby as well."

Harry nodded as he watched Remus and Sirius look at the photos. "I wanted the kids to be able to have trips into a town, like we've got here in Hogsmeade and the town, according to Slipstout, is neutral in their views on werewolves," he nibbled at a biscuit, "Apparently there was a pack that wintered in the forest for several years and none of the townspeople were ever attacked or turned so it makes acceptance easier for them."

"Good choice of town," Remus nodded, amber eyes looking over the photos. "Good land too with both the forest and the open spaces...This," He pointed to a photo showing a cliff side on the mountain along with several shallow holes or caves. "This will be a popular spot," He flashed Harry a bright smile. "The town will gain from the school too, just as Hogsmeade does. How many of the little shops and café's would survive if not for the students of Hogwarts? Very good choices." Remus repeated.

Sirius grinned at Harry's smile, "The cliff face will probably become a make-out spot too. You and this Slipstout have done a good job for location and I've got to say I like the building design. Check it Moony, all the classrooms are on one level, then the dorms on a second. The containment areas are in a basement," he tilted his head in question at Harry.

"I figured if anyone reacts badly and breaks out, having to go up stairs would give the non shifters time to keep things from going pear-shaped."

"Good thinking. Having the containment areas in the basement isn't a bad thing, in werewolf form we are basically wolves, think like a wolf and behave like a wolf. If something is wrong, even caused by ourselves we like to burrow down. Make sure the colors and lighting are muted in the containment areas. Not dull and dark but soft and muted."

Hermione was beaming with pride where she was next to Harry. She was happy that both Sirius and Remus took the plans seriously and volunteered their input.

"Oh and remember...No silver in the cutlery and silverware." Remus grinned teasingly at Harry.

"I'm crazy not stupid remember?" He grinned back before sobering, "I need to know something though. Slipstout said that it'd be best to hire a strong alpha as Headmaster for now because of people like Fenrir Greyback," he saw Remus suck in a breath at the name and Sirius' expression cloud over with violence, "er...I'm guessing you guys know him."

"You could say that yes..." Remus' said quietly and unbuttoned a few buttons of his shirt pulling it to the side and showing the large, ragged, violent bite scar on his right shoulder. "He was the one who bit me...I was almost five." He quickly covered up again. "You're right though, you are going to need a strong alpha, someone who can both protect the students and staff but also hold them together, like a big pack. A school like this will both be a temptation and a threat to Greyback and he'll want it leveled to the ground. He really doesn't like to to lose out on the individuals he's chosen for himself."
Ron saw the pure fury that shuddered through Harry's eyes before it was banked and buried and saw a matching fury in Sirius' eyes, "Well he can't have them and he can go lick his furry balls."

Harry snorted, "Only you would say something like that."

Sirius grunted, "Forget licking them, I'd like to make him swallow them," his eyes were nearly glowing, "That sadistic monster had better pray he never, ever comes cross me." He didn't use the term monster lightly, never did since it'd taken years to get Remus to believe he didn't think a werewolf was a monster and they weren't. But someone who preyed on children? That was a monster no matter what skin they wore.

"Easy Pads." Remus placed a hand on Sirius' arm, squeezing it gently. He looked up at Harry again. "But that bastard aside you are still going to need a very strong alpha holding everything together. Teenage werewolves both alpha and not...That's conflict just waiting to happen."

Harry nodded, glad to see Sirius relax under Remus' touch, "I was hoping you might know one who would accept the job because I don't think an alpha that strong is going to be with the crowd coming out."

"Hm?" Remus scratched at his hair again. "It's been a while since I had close contact with the packs but I can ask around. Give me some time and I'll see what I can find out." Remus had a few wolves in the back of his mind but he needed to speak to them. Though they were strong they might not be interested in running a school.

"No rush. We've got a year so take your time."

Sirius gave his godson a smile, "You really do like pulling surprises don't you pup?"

"Cub, not pup." He stuck his tongue out at Sirius, "And remember that was the happy part of our program for today."

"Oh joy, so what's the unhappy part? Has someone we like been blown up? Did Snape get caught in a massive potion mishap teaching first years and grow knockers?" He dodged Remus' swat, "What?"

"First of all you wouldn't find Severus growing female parts a bad thing you mutt and second...If you shut your gob for a minute or two then maybe Harry will have a chance to tell us the bad part." Remus sent Sirius a halfhearted glare. He could feel coils of worry wind through him though, Remus knew enough to know that for Harry to even tell them it had to be something really bad. He knew that Sirius knew it too, that was why he cracked jokes and wouldn't shut up. Sirius was worried too. "Please tell us Harry."

Harry started telling them about what had happened with seeing Crouch and Moody on the map and Orion's dreams, "We don't have proof but I think that Crouch Jr. is polyjuicing himself as Moody. The only question is if Moody is a willing accomplice or not."

Remus shook his head. "Moody is strange and fanatic but he would never ever aid a Death Eater or even someone just dabbling slightly in the dark arts. He just wouldn't, right Padfoot? You worked with the man when you were an Auror, what do you think?"

Sirius nodded, "Moody's a little cracked and a lot paranoid but he'd bite his own tongue off and choke on the blood before willingly helping a Death Eater."

Ron wrinkled his nose, "Lovely imagery there Snuffles, really poetic."
"Um...Well as descriptive imagery as that was I think we've gotten our answer then. If Moody is not helping voluntarily then Crouch must be controlling him somehow." Hermione was back to chewing her bottom lip. "Imperius? And why is Moody always in his office, never moving? Oh and one more thing, if Crouch has Moody's leg and eye, how does that leave the real Moody?"

Remus wrinkled his nose at the thought of wearing someone else's glass eye and prosthetics. "It would suggest that the real Moody is being locked up somewhere, maybe kept unconscious."

Harry scooped a hand through his hair, "Somewhere in the office but for all we know the fake could be keeping him in a ladies' handbag thanks to expansion charms."

Sirius snorted, "Oh that's an image that'll stick with me, Moody carting round a ladies' handbag, beaded and sequined," he snickered a bit.

Ron rolled his eyes, "Focus fluffy. How're we supposed to find the real Moody?"

"Honestly I'm drawing a blank. Animagus forms won't work because the fake will be warding the office, heavily, and any sort of break in would be detected. The advanced wards that Crouch Jr. will likely use are beyond you lot right now. It takes years to learn how to build and then disassemble advanced wards without triggering them," his expression was somber with no hint of the humor that they were accustomed to seeing.

"Sirius is right." Remus nodded. "As much as it pains me to say it, I don't think there's a lot any of us can do at the moment. I will talk to Severus about it but there's not much he can do either without blowing his cover. For now just watch your backs very carefully, especially you Harry. Don't go off alone with the fake Moody and be sure to keep your thoughts hidden from him." It grited on Remus, to know something was so off, that one of the worst Death Eaters were at school masquerading as a Professor in the midst of his cubs and not being able to do something about it.

Harry nodded, "Oh no worries there," he tapped on his temple, "I've got my occlumantic shields up and strong as can be. Even Professor Snape is impressed though he shows it with a grunt and 'Passable Potter, passable.' which we all know is as close to raving compliments as he'll get."

Remus threw his head back in a rumbling laugh. "Ah yes, praise indeed coming from him." He continued to snicker quietly, thinking about his best friend. He missed Severus, with Orion at school he didn't see the other man as much. Sirius was nice company but with all the tension between them it was...Difficult to speak to him about everything. Severus had been a large part of his life for going on thirteen years, he could talk to him in a different way since there was absolutely no romantic feelings or attraction between the two of them.

After he'd composed himself, Remus turned amber eyes on Harry again. "How are you feeling about the Third Task Harry? Confident?"

Harry shook his head, "Not really. Truthfully I've got a bad feeling about this one. I can't really explain it but it's got me on edge, same feeling I had about the Philosopher's Stone really." He rubbed the back of his neck, just the thought of his bad feelings about this final task making the hair there stand on end.

Hermione slid closer and slipped her hand into his in silent comfort. "Your feelings are usually correct Harry and you should listen to them." She spoke softly.

Remus nodded again. "Hermione is right. I know it's not an easy thing to do when you don't know what will happen. I wish there was some way to stop the Tournament but there isn't. All we can do is cross our fingers that nothing will happen and trust in your abilities Harry. I so wish there was
more we could do." Remus' eyes were earnest and once again the pain of being shackled down shone in them. He wasn't the kind of man who stood at the sidelines when his loved ones struggles and being forced to do so was killing him slowly.

Sirius saw the flicker of pain in Remus' expression and wanted to haul the other man into his arms and hold him but things were still too wobbly between them to risk that so instead he reached over and squeezed Remus' shoulder. He hated not being able to fix this, to be stuck hiding. He was so used to being able to take charge and do something using either his pull as an Auror or Lord Black. It was maddening not having that ability anymore and to see Remus hurting and know that it was partially his fault.

Remus gave him a small smile and placed his hand over the hand resting on his shoulder. It was getting harder and harder not to follow his heart and throw himself in Sirius' arms, hold on and never let go. They had already lost to much time but Remus was still scared. Things had gone wrong between them long before everything else went to hell and what was to say it wouldn't just be the same this time around? With Orion in the picture, Remus wasn't sure he could risk it, no matter how much he wanted to.

Harry squeezed Hermione's hand before speaking, "The two of you do more than you know just by being here. Knowing that you are, it's one more reason for me to get up in the morning and keep fighting."

"We'll always be here for you Harry, when ever you need us we're only an owl, floo or patronus away." Remus smiled at him gently, his hand still on top of Sirius'.

Sirius gave him a smile as well, "We're here for you Scar." Orion's name for Harry had rubbed off on him.

Harry rolled his eyes, "I think Orion inherited your abysmal naming skills."

"Hey! The names I come up with are epic!"

"Epic stupidity," it was a dry drawl.

Remus turned and sent the one who said that a beaming smile. He couldn't really disagree with those words either, he adored Sirius but it had taken a full year to get used to Moony, he still thought it was a stupid nickname but for some reason it didn't sound stupid when Sirius used it. It was a gift Sirius had.

Hermione smiled, she thought the nicknames were cute and since she was muggleborn and a not so secret lover of the Disney classics she thought Scar was a perfect nickname for Harry...Except for the evil part.

Sirius pouted, "I do come up with good names."

Harry snorted, "Uh-huh, you named yourself Snuffles."

Ron snickered, "Sounds like something my Aunt Muriel would name her Chihuahua."

"Prats. Be happy I love you lot."

"We are happy about that and we love you too Snuffles." Hermione grinned at him. "We love you even though you are pants at coming up with nicknames, everyone has their talents, this just isn't one of yours." Her brown eyes glittered teasingly. At first Hermione had been worried that Sirius wouldn't think she was good enough for Harry but she was getting back into her teasing with the
older wizard, realizing it was only her own insecurities speaking.

He stuck his tongue out at her, "Okay can we stop picking on the dog now and focus on other things? Like this school, you already have a curriculum planned out Harry?"

"Eh the basics of one. Not all the children are magical so it's going to be more than just a wizarding school," he scootched closer to the table and started going over the basic ideas he had for the school, pulling out a notebook and pencil as Remus and Sirius both gave him input that helped refine the plans, Hermione putting in her golden galleons too.

Ron grinned and nibbled on another biscuit as the brainiacs chiseled away at rough ideas, turning them into brilliant plans. He didn't mind being left out of these sort of plans. His talents lay more along the lines of tactics and predicting how your enemy would move. So while his friends worked on the school, he'd think about ways to possibly get around the fake Moody or get Harry through the rest of the year alive. If Harry's gut feeling and Luna's comments were anything to go by, things were going to get bad soon and he wanted to do all he could to help look after his best mate.

Harry twitched just a bit as the fake Moody drew closer to his desk. DADA was quickly becoming his least favorite subject with this bastard and his bellowing and dangerous teaching methods and this evening being the final task did not help to ease his raw nerves. He was two seconds away from drawing his wand when the door was knocked on and McGonagall opened it and stepped in.

"I apologize for interrupting Alastor but Mr. Potter needs to come with me."

Moody's glass eye swirled around, looking at both Harry and McGonagall before giving a nod. "Of course Minerva. Young Mr. Potter here already knows most of what I'm teaching anyway." He gave Harry a gruff smile that was supposed to look friendly.

Now that they knew what they did, Hermione felt shivers run down her back when she saw it and she made sure not to meet the Professor's eyes, just in case. She leaned over and whispered good luck to Harry, wondering what was up. When she'd been called away by McGonagall she'd ended up at the bottom of the Black Lake and she really hoped it wasn't something like that that awaited Harry.

Harry gave her a smile and tugged on a brown curl, "See you in a little while," he wiggled his fingers at Ron receiving a nod in return and got up. Once out of the classroom he looked up at McGonagall, "I'm not about to be knocked out and dropped somewhere am I?"

Her lips twitched just a bit, "No Mr. Potter. All the champions are given the rest of the day off to spend time with their families."

"Er but I don't...I mean who's here for me?" He really doubted the Dursleys would have come even if someone had held a gun to their heads and though Remus and Sirius would be here for the Task he didn't think they'd have been told about this.

She held the door leading to the courtyard open and lifted a brow, "Why don't you see for yourself?"

Even before Harry had made it all the way through the door a loud voice rang across the whole courtyard. "There he is, our hero!" Molly rushed over and enveloped Harry in a tight hug, smooshing him to her bosom. Bill and Charlie followed their mother in a more leisurely pace, knowing their mother wouldn't be done with her hugging and fussing and complaining that Harry was much too thin still for quite some time yet.
"We were so happy when we were called to spend the day with you. How have you been since the last time we saw each other Harry? Arthur is unfortunately busy at work...You should see the work he's done to yours and Ron's room, expansion charms and a new bed, bookshelves and everything. We so hope you'll like it." Molly beamed at him without letting up on her hug.

Harry managed to wiggle so he'd be able to breathe and returned the hug with a big, wide grin, "It's home so I know I'll like it. I've been brilliant actually, outside of worrying about the Task anyway." He looked at Molly's eldest sons and grinned wider, "Bill, Charlie, good to see you two."

Charlie grinned back, "Well newest little brother we just had to come and make sure you had plenty of people here to fuss over your skinny bum."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." Bill grinned wildly. "I hope I'm forgiven and safe from becoming blue skinned this time." He stepped in and gave Harry a one armed hug when Molly finally released him. "Good to see you little brother, looks as if you've grown."

"Oh but he's still scrappy." Molly clucked her tongue. "I so wish I'd been allowed to bring some of my food for you Harry dear."

He elbowed Bill playfully and beamed at her, "But then I'd eat too much in one sitting and they'd be rolling me through the labyrinth. I could never say no to your cooking."

Charlie laughed at his mother's pleased blush and handed Harry a bag he had with him, "Mum couldn't bring food but I was able to bring something that'll help."

Harry blinked in surprise and took the bag, peeking inside and grinning when he saw it contained dragonhide armor, "Shed skin and scales?"

Charlie nodded, "Yup, the bronze scales came from Norberta by the way."

"Norberta? Hagrid's dragon was a she?"

"Yeah, she's not old enough to mate but sometimes they'll lay unfertilized eggs. That's what she did. I'm just glad she seemed to know they were unfertilized. The reserve doesn't need another nesting dragon debacle."

Bill made a face. Still abhorring the Ministry and those in charge of the Tournament for even including nesting dragons in the first place. "Oh yeah Charlie, how did that whole thing go? What happened to the Fireball who got half of her eggs crushed? Did the dragons find their way home to the reserve safely after somehow getting loose?" He sent Harry a glance from the corner of his eye, blue eyes glittering.

Molly had pulled out a comb from her bottomless handbag and started a futile attempt to tame Harry's hair as her boys spoke.

Harry just smiled innocently at Bill and let Molly fuss with his impossible hair.

"They made it back just fine. Most of the keepers keep getting blasted at whenever they come close to the nesting caves though. The Fireball and her mate are holed up, we're pretty sure the remaining eggs will be hatching soon but no one's crazy enough to even try to get close." Charlie, just like Bill, was pretty certain how the dragons had escaped but he was more proud of Harry and ashamed of his colleagues than anything else, "She's still drooping from what little glimpses we've caught but she's caring for the eggs so it's just a matter of time for her to heal."

"Major cockup, placing their real eggs in the line of fire." Bill grumbled. "I'm glad she has her mate
close and that she seems to care for the remaining eggs." Bill's eyes caught on a blond young woman walking with her family across the courtyard and his eyes lit up with interest and he unconsciously straightened up and made sure his hair was safely ensconced in it's usual ponytail as he followed her walk with his eyes.

Molly rolled her eyes at her eldest son and gave up on Harry's hair with a sigh and a kiss to his cheek.

Harry gave her a hug then lifted a brow at Bill, "She's way, way out of your league Mr. Forgets-to-Knock and she really hates being leered at."

"I'm not leering." Bill didn't take his eyes off Fleur until she was out of sight. It felt as if lightning had struck him. "I swear I wasn't leering, she's just....She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life."

Harry shook his head, "And she hears that oh about a thousand times a day."

Charlie laughed, "I'm finding this cute though. Bill's never looked so gobsmacked by a girl before, even the veela at the Cup didn't get him stunned."

"It's not like that, not like the veelas or even the other girls. I don't want to shag her...I want to get to know her." A slight blush spread over lightly tanned cheeks and even before it happened he'd tensed for the slap to the back of his head he knew was coming from his mother.

"Language William Arthur Weasley. You don't talk about a young lady that way, even when you mean well." Molly placed her hands on her hips as she glared at her son.

"Sorry." Bill mumbled, still feeling strangely empty after losing sight of the lovely blonde vision. If she was here in school as a champion she was too young for him anyway, he'd just never felt like this before.

Harry's lips twitched but before he could take the mickey out of Bill, a little blond ball of French energy called out his name and nearly tackled him in a hug, "Oof! Er..."

"Mere de Dieu," Fleur came rushing back into view, shaking her head in amusement at the sight of her sister hugging Harry to death and thanking him in French for his help in the lake, "Je suis desole 'Arry. You remember my sister oui?"

He nodded and pat the little girl on the head, "Gabrielle right?"

Fleur nodded, casting a quick glance at Bill, feeling her cheeks warm seeing that he was looking at her as well, then turned her attention back to her sister and Harry, "Oui. Harry ne parle pas français petite sœur. Utilisez anglais."

The younger Delacour bounced back, "Je su- I mean I am sorree. I wanteed to zank you for 'elping Fleur en ze lake."

Molly cooed at the adorable little girl, she couldn't help herself, the girl looked like an angel and the way she was so obviously caring for Harry instantly endeared her to Molly.

Bill smiled at the girl and her halting English but his eyes were on Fleur, drinking in every detail of her. It was silly but even the sound of her voice made him shiver. He was drawn to her like a magnet and it was a very bad thing. She was a schoolgirl and completely off limits.

Harry smiled at Fleur's sister, "Well she's my friend, I couldn't let her get swarmed by the
grindylows but you're very welcome." He looked up at Fleur, "Fleur this is Molly Weasley, she's the lady who brought Ginny, Ron, the two terrors, Percy and these two lugs," he gestured behind him at Bill and Charlie, "into the world so I'd say she's a candidate for sainthood. She's also the best cook on the planet."

Fleur's lips twitched before she held out her hand to Molly, "Eet ez a pleasure to meet you Madame."

"Oh none of that now." Molly ignored the offered hand and pulled Fleur into one of her famous hugs. "The pleasure is all mine, any friend of our Harry is a friend of us. How are you liking England? Have my children treated you well during your stay here. You are awfully skinny, are they feeding you alright here?"

"Lighten up Mum, let the poor girl breathe." Bill gently tried to persuade her mother to let the French girl go before she suffocated in the hug.

Fleur laughed in delight, "I can breathe Monsieur Weasley and muzzerly 'ugs are always welcome." Her eyes gleamed with good humor as she was released by Molly and she answered the questions, "I wuz not certain at first but I 'ave come to enjoy England very much. Ze land ez beautiful and ze people I 'ave met, your children most especially, are wonderful. Oui ze food ez good I simply burn through eet to fast, Maman worries I will waste away to nozzing."

"Worrying is what mothers do." Molly smiled. "I worry all the time and none of my children listen to me. Speaking of children, this is my eldest one Bill." She motioned to Bill and then to Charlie. "And this one is second in line Charlie, I think you've met the rest of them, including Percy...I think he'll join your father in France when the Tournament is over." Molly's eyes shone with pride at her middle son's job offer at the French Ministry.

Fleur beamed, "Papa looks forward to eet. 'E wuz very impressed by Percy's ideas and is quite proud of 'imself for snapping 'im away."

Charlie laughed and held out his hand for Fleur to shake, "Nice to meet you. I remember you facing the Welshie."

Fleur shook his hand and pulled a face, "I liked zat robe. Someone should 'ave warned me zat dragons snore zeir fire."

"Oh I knew I forgot something," Harry snapped his fingers, "darn."

Bill smiled at Harry and held out his hand too for Fleur to shake, not expecting the jolt that went through him at the skin to skin contact. "It's a pleasure to meet you and rather the robe catching on fire than something more precious. A robe can be replaced."

Molly was beaming, she loved spending time with her children and she hoped she would have a chance to say hello to the rest of them before she left. Maybe even get a chance to talk to her Ronald's sweetheart. She placed an arm around Harry's shoulders, squeezing her youngest boy close to her.

Harry just smiled and leaned into her, happy for the motherly affection as he watched Fleur's cheeks pinken and saw her catch her breath at the contact with Bill before a clever gleam flickered through her eyes. She might be out of Bill's league but it looked like Fleur was willing to bat for him. Poor man, might as well stick a fork in him because he was done. Speaking of people being twitterpated though, he'd best tell Molly about his change in relationship with Hermione. "Did I tell you that Cedric whacked me with a cluebat? Got me to look past my nose so that I finally asked
"Really? Oh..." Molly's eyes welled up and she squeezed him even tighter. "That's wonderful news, you and little Hermione, a perfect couple and now she'll really be our daughter as well. Oh I am so happy for you. I hope she will come to the burrow and visit this summer as she usually does...No shared rooms though." She smiled teasingly. "Oh my babies are getting so big, having sweethearts, thank goodness you all have excellent taste."

Charlie grimaced, "Let's hope it's not catching. I'd hate to saddle someone with me."

"Oh you hush Charlie, you are a wonderful man and anyone would be lucky to have you. Quite frankly you could use someone to take care of you and whom you could take care of as well. Dragons aren't everything, they can't share your dreams and support you when you're wavering. A loved one is a gift Charlie and I haven't raised you to turn your nose up at such a gift." Molly's voice was stern as she looked at her second born son intently.

He smiled sheepishly, "I know. I just don't think there's really anyone who'll fit just right is all," he leaned in to kiss her cheek, "besides I have high standards. Who could ever match Molly Weasley for taking care of someone?"

"Flatterer." Molly blushed and released Harry to give Charlie a hug. "I'll always take care of you but a mother is nothing compared to a lover, a soulmate. You'll see when you find yours and it will happen, of that I have no doubt. It's no hurry though, you're still young. Not everyone can be in the rush your Dad and I was in." The blush on her round cheeks deepened.

"And on that disturbing note, I need to deliver some ingredients to the local dungeon bat," he ruffled Harry's hair and punched Bill in the arm, "I'll be back in a few ticks."

Harry grinned, "Careful in the snake pit Charlie. I know a couple redheaded Gryffindors who've met their hearts' match in there."

He stuck his tongue out at his new little brother then headed for the dungeons with a laugh as his mother began interrogating Harry.

Bill narrowed his eyes at Harry's words. Redheaded Gryffindors meant either Ginny or the twin terrors, he had some snooping to do. He was the eldest, taking care of his siblings was his duty, taking care and taking the piss out of them. Both holy duties for an older brother. "Say hello to Orion for me if you see him!" He called out to Charlie before his attention turned back to Harry and his Mum but mostly to Fleur who hadn't left yet.

Charlie lifted a hand and waved, smiling and trailing his hand along the stone of the walls as he walked down to the dungeons. He missed Hogwarts sometimes, the way you would your favorite blanket or bathrobe, and it was good to revisit where he'd grown into his 'wings' so to speak. He dodged a pair of running first year Slytherins who were yammering on about an exploded cauldron and how Snape was going to skin the idiot who'd dropped mango worms into the brewing potion.

Blaise was on his way to the common room in an attempt to hide from the dark haired Ravenclaw girl he'd spent Saturday night with. Regina? Renata? Her name was something with an R but he couldn't be bothered to remember it. One tumble and she thought they were destined to be. Blaise hated it when they got clingy.

He sighed, it hadn't even been a good tumble, none of them were. His body was on fire and no matter what he did he couldn't put it out. At the same time there was a huge hole inside him, something vital was missing and it felt as he would die if the hole wasn't filled up soon. He was
starving but as soon as he as much tried to feed during his 'encounters' it tasted like ash and he felt even worse than before. He was looking behind him to see that R something girl wasn't following him when he bumped into something solid and warm.

Charlie reached out and gently held the arm of the dark skinned boy to steady him, "Careful there. You don't want to wind up running into a wall next time."

A low moan escaped Blaise and he burrowed into the warmth in front of him without thinking. He didn't even open his eyes, just rubbed his cheek against a broad chest. It felt like cool spring water after having been roasted in the pits of hell for an eternity. Blaise couldn't really explain the feeling, he just knew he didn't want it to go away.

Prewett blue eyes went wide in shock and Charlie's hands both went to rest on the unknown teen's shoulders and he looked down at a truly beautiful face that held bone deep relief. The same protective drive he felt when it came to his family reared up and he squeezed the slim shoulders under his hands softly, "Hey are you alright?"

"I am now." He was in such emotional chaos that his Italian accent was much more pronounced than usual and he still hadn't looked up, long inky lashes shadowed his cheeks as he breathed in the scent of the mystery man. Finally he managed to at least open his eyes and look up into bright blue eyes surrounded by a tanned face and red hair. There wasn't much mystery as to who this man was related to but Blaise couldn't care less. This man calmed the burning, searing pain inside him and awoke his hunger as nothing or no one had ever done before.

There was something in that tone and the look that gave Charlie a sense of inevitability. His brows furrowed in confusion and concern before he noticed a drain of excess energy. Most people had a field around them of excess life energy that wasn't needed though few, even among witches and wizards could feel theirs. Charlie had learned to constantly monitor his because how much he projected it could bother the dragons. Now he felt something pulling on it like sipping water through a straw. It didn't take a genius to figure it out. He studied the dark eyes of the boy holding onto him, "You're an incubus."

Dark eyes grew shuttered and Blaise stiffened though he couldn't make himself let go of the redhead man or turn away from him. He was so hungry, so needy and this man was the only thing that could provide him with relief. Blaise wanted to burrow inside him and be one with him forever and that feeling scared him more than he could express. "Si Io sono...Yes."

Charlie frowned. From what he could remember of incubi their powers didn't awaken until their bodies and magic were fully matured yet this boy's, for that was what he was despite the beautiful features, had. "How-" he was cut off by an irritable female voice.

"Blasey boy I swear if I have to hex down another one of your-" Pansy froze as she rounded a corner and saw Blaise practically clinging to a broad, muscled redhead she recognized as a member of the Weasley horde and her eyes went wide, "Oh. Oh goodness."

Blaise turned very unusually vulnerable eyes on one of his best friends before he reluctantly let the redhead go. His body and mind already screaming to step close and reattach himself. It wasn't enough, he was still craving, still starving. The hole inside that hadn't hurt so much in the man's arm started to ache again. "Che cosa é bella? What can I do for you?" He was trying very hard to get a grip on himself and failing miserably.

Never one to leave things be, especially when it came to her boys, she pointed at Charlie, "You, Big Red, follow us," she marched forward and grabbed the sleeve of Blaise's shirt, pulling him to the Slytherin common room, where Draco was sitting by a window reading. There were only three
others in the room that very, very quickly vacated when she barked out, "If you don't want your bits and bobs hexed permanently off leave, now." She glanced back to make sure the Weasley was there and pulled Blaise with her over to Draco.

Charlie was more amused by the Slytherin girl than anything else, not to mention he wanted answers, so he walked close behind her and the boy who'd crashed into him.

Blaise was still out of it, feeling high and low at the same time so he followed Pansy docily while turning and casting worried glances at the redhead to make sure he was still there. His entire being ached for the other.

Draco raised a slender eyebrow in curiosity, silver eyes narrowing slightly at the redhead, recognizing a Weasley when he saw one. "What's all this then?" He shuffled his copied potion books into the soft as butter leather binder he'd commissioned especially for them, not that he would tell anyone that of course.

Pansy pointed at Charlie again, "You, sit!"

He settled into a wingback chair with an amused tilt of his head and the next thing he knew the girl had pushed the dark skinned incubus boy into his lap.

Pansy pointed at the two of them and the way Blaise snuggled into the redhead, meeting Draco's eyes. "That."

"O~oh." There was a world of meaning behind that single word. Draco's eyes widened as he watched Blaise bury his nose in the Weasley's neck and just breathed him in. "Well this is a surprise, are they aware of what it means?" He turned to Pansy as he spoke, aware that Blaise wouldn't listen to a word he said right now, not with his hands splayed out over that broad chest, still sniffing him while a content purring sound rose from him.

Charlie cleared his throat, "I take it the two of you know something about the incubus currently in my lap?"

"Oh gee, you think?" Pansy drawled, "We've only known him since we were all in nappies."

"Good, mind explaining how a fourteen year old has awakened incubus powers?" A red brow lifted.

Pansy blew out a long, slow breath and flopped to sit next to Draco, "An idiot that's how. A stupid, silly, selfish twit with a brain the size of a poppy seed."

"Long story short, bitch with a crush slipped him a potion awakening his powers much too soon, thought it would make them soulmates." Draco's voice was pure acid. "I gather I don't have to tell you what kind of damage that has caused Blaise, both physically and mentally. He's dealing with powers he can't control. Always hurting, always searching for the one thing to ease his pain and make him whole." Draco pinned the Weasley with an ice cold, slate gray stare. "Looks as if he's found it."

Charlie could easily add two and two and come up with four and both his brows shot up, "Well that explains that." And opened a great big can of worms he had no idea what to do with. A slight distressed noise from the boy in his lap had his hand rising automatically to rub up and down the incubus' back.

Pansy relaxed just a bit, "It does indeed. So now the question is what do we do about it. From what I understand you live in Romania of all places."
"No..." Blaise protested, the words that his saviour lived far away penetrating his confused mind. He wiggled on the man's lap, trying to get closer still. "Must stay, must be one." His voice was husky and low and burrowed closer to Charlie's neck, sticking out his tongue and laving kittenish licks over whatever inch of skin he could reach. The taste of his mate was wonderful, addictive and soothing all rolled into one.

Pansy smirked at the way the pale freckled skin across the older man's cheeks burned a bright red but she had to admire the fact that his hand didn't reach to grope Blaise nor push him away. That big hand just continued to pet up and down Blaise's back.

"Take it easy," Charlie looked at Pansy and Draco, "How long has he been starving?"

Draco's eyes had softened when he saw the gentle way Charlie Weasley handled Blaise but he was quick to hide it when the redhead looked up at him and Pansy. "Millicent the moron slipped him the potion at the beginning of the school year, the middle of October so...Almost seven months by now, isn't that right Pans?" He looked over at his friend.

Blaise didn't care much what they talked about, not as long as there wasn't any more talk about his salvation leaving. He continued to lave attention on spicy tasting skin, feeling as if a golden warmth filled up the hole inside him.

Pansy nodded, "Two hundred and four days precisely," her fingers still twitched to wrap around Millicent's throat and throttle her.

Charlie sucked in a sharp breath. No wonder the boy was so desperate. He concentrated and pulled his excess energy into a concentrated ball and gently nudged it to Blaise, feeding him purposely so he didn't have to exert effort to siphon. His protective drive and the honor he'd learned from the time he was born were already making decisions for him. There was no way he could walk away from the boy and let him starve. "I could likely get a temporary transfer to the reserve here in Wales."

Blaise hummed in joy over those words and leaned his head on Charlie's shoulder, feeling grateful and close to ecstatic at the energy Charlie fed him. He'd been burning for so long, it was almost like a dream now, to finally know some sort of peace again.

This time Draco couldn't hide the softening of his eyes. He respected this man, for being willing to practically uproot his life, for a while at least to help a total stranger. "Thank you Mr. Weasley, if you did that it would be incredibly helpful. Blaise means a lot to us and it has been horrible watching him starve and hurt himself, searching everywhere for a mate that wasn't here. Please help us take care of him." Please wasn't a word Draco Malfoy used often but Blaise and Pansy were two of the few people he really truly loved. For them he'd do anything.

"I could never let someone starve, especially a fourteen year old, not when I can do something about it. It's simply not in my nature." Charlie relaxed, relieved that Blaise wasn't licking him any longer. He did not need his body to react to that. "I've until the end of the school year as vacation so I can come by each day. Summer however, that's something I'd need to discuss with his parents."

"Mother," Pansy crossed her legs, hiding her smile at Blaise's expression of bliss. "He's only got his mother and she's between husbands at the moment. Livia nearly exploded after learning about what happened, would have killed Millicent had Professor Snape not stopped her."

"What else could you expect?" Draco's voice was dry. "She might be a man-eater but Blaise is her son, she loves him more than anything." He turned his eyes on Charlie again. "Oh and just for the sake of accurate information, Blaise is fifteen. His birthday was March third and another thing, if
you're going to stick around, don't get used to that clinging puppy in your lap...Blaise is normally as mean as Pansy and I." The corners of Draco's lips kicked up as Blaise mewled quietly and started to practically writhe on the Weasley's lap...Oh this Dragon handler would have his work cut out for him.

Charlie's hands went to Blaise's face and brought it back and up enough to meet his eyes and not be in danger of an attempted kiss, catching the clever gleam under the pleased relief, "I'll summarize, you're fifteen, I'm twenty-four, even creature laws don't cover that age difference and I won't be any good to you in Azkaban so you are going to have to employ patience."

"Patience has never been a strong suit of mine." Blaise answered slowly but he stilled his wriggling, leaning back against Charlie, he didn't want to be kicked off the man's lap. For now closeness and touching would have to be enough. For the first time in a long while Blaise started to feel like himself again and he didn't want to risk that. "The thing is that I don't just take. You're my mate and I will want to give back as I feed...An Incubus gives back in one way..."

"I'd say save it up but you'd probably chain me to a bed as soon as you turned seventeen and wind up giving me a heart attack."

Pansy laughed, "More like a St. Andrews cross!" She waggled her fingers at Blaise, "Italian, very kinky. I think I should feel sorry for you."

"Hey, don't go giving all my secrets away now." Blaise pinned Pansy with a glare before turning back to Charlie. "Don't listen to her...I'm just as kinky as you'll want me to be...I guarantee you will be nothing but satisfied." He bit down on his full bottom lip, causing Draco to snort and turn away. Blaise was definitely feeling better.

Charlie lifted a brow and pursed his lips, "You know someone has to do something about this image of Gryffindors being the good little vanilla boys. Then again we do like the element of surprise." His lips curled up in a knowing smirk that had brows raising.

Blaise's dark eyes heated and he reached out to steal another kitten lick. "I repeat...I'll be as kinky as you want me to be. I have a feeling we'll get on just fine when you come to your senses and give in."

"Believe me, I have no illusion that all Gryffindor boys are good little vanilla boys." Draco's voice was full of unknown emotion. "Especially not redheaded, stalkerish ones."

Pansy snickered and pat his hand, "There, there darling. At least you get lovely presents out of being stalked."

Charlie's lips twitched, "So you'd be the Slytherin then," he studied Draco for a moment, "the Twins are your stalkers I'm guessing."

Draco nodded cautiously, still not entirely sure how to feel about the whole being pursued by twins situation. "I am definitely a Slytherin...and your brothers are insane."

"Of course they are," it was said casually, as if stating a well known and accepted fact, "but they don't go after anything unless they really want it. If you want the best gauge on who they are underneath the joking and pranks, take a good look at how they play Quidditch."

Pansy lifted her brows. Those two were absolutely ruthless with those beater bats and though they still played and joked on the brooms when it was time to get serious, they really got serious.

Draco shivered when he recalled the intensity of how Fred and George played Quidditch. The
thought of being the object of such intensity was both thrilling and quite honestly somewhat frightening as well. He couldn't truthfully say that he was uninterested in the two boys chasing him, he just wasn't sure if he wanted to act on it or not. He opened his mouth to respond in some way when Blaise saved him from it by letting out a soft sigh of relief and falling asleep in the Weasley's lap.

Charlie looked at the boy and smiled a bit. He knew the boy had bite, he was a Slytherin after all, but he was alarmingly cute like this. "Would one of you mind giving me his mother's owl address? I need to speak with her about the summer."

"That won't be necessary Mr. Weasley," Snape's voice came from the entryway of the common room and he stalked forward to cast a stern eye on Pansy, who shifted a bit uncomfortably under that censoring gaze, then turned his attention to Charlie, "You may speak to Livia over my office floo connection."

Charlie inclined his head and stood up, Blaise scooped into his arms and undisturbed by the smooth movement, "Thank you Professor. Where should I settle Blaise?"

"In his dorm of course but before you do," quick as the snake of his house, Severus had matching wrist cuffs locked onto Charlie and Blaise's wrists.

Charlie looked at them, "Energy handfast cuffs?"

"Indeed."

Draco gave his head of house an approving look, things had been somewhat strained between them ever since that fateful day he'd hexed Granger's teeth but through it all Draco had no doubt Snape cared about his students. This way he knew that Blaise wouldn't get sick and starve when Charlie couldn't be close for a while. He stood up. "I'll show you which bed is Blaise's." He offered Charlie.

"Thank you," he followed the young blond to the dorm and laid Blaise in the indicated bed, pulling the blanket up over him and tucking it in before pulling a bit of parchment and what his dad called a ball point pen out of his pocket to scribble a note letting the boy know he was still in Hogwarts and to come find him when he wished. Then he turned to Draco, "Good luck with my brothers, whatever you decide to do about them."

"Thank you." Draco met Charlie's eyes. "Good luck with Blaise and don't let Livia intimidate you, her bite is way worse than her bark but she'll accept you for Blaise's sake." He walked in front of Charlie out of the dorm room and back to where Snape was so that the Professor could show the Weasley to his office floo.

Pansy watched her head of house and Blaise's mate walk out and melted into a slump where she sat, "Thank goodness."

"Agreed." Draco walked over and sat down next to her, resting his head against hers. "Blaise was on his last tether, if his mate hadn't come along now I'm scared to think about what could have happened."

She actually sniffled and dug in her sleeve for her handkerchief, "That big burly redhead has my assistance whenever he asks just for being willing to warp his life to feed Blaise. I imagine it's really going to hit him later and if he's a typical man he'll get drunk but, if he's a typical Weasley, he'll recover and stand by the decision he made down here."
Draco couldn't believe what he was about to say what he was going to save. His Father would have a stroke if he'd overhear it. "He's a good man, he'll stand by Blaise, help him without using him...Though Blaise is going to do his best to tempt him at every turn, we both know that. It is as you say though, I will do what I can to help as well."

"Of course Blaise will, he's Blaise but if anyone can handle him I'd say it's a dragon keeper," she dabbed at her eyes, "I'd like to know why my boys are attracting Weasleys though. Is it fate's little pun on us all?"

"More like a bad joke, what can you do though? We're Weasel-nip, irresistible through and through." He smirked at her. "Don't count yourself out of the woods yet darling, I think the middle brother is still free, you might find yourself with a Weasel admirer as well."

"UGH! Please don't say that. Percy Weasley, blech! Are you trying to scar me for life? Bad," she wagged her finger at him.

He chuckled darkly. "If I have to suffer you suffer, it's as simple as that. Oh the hardships of friendship." He poked her side with a long finger, knowing her ticklish spots. "So if Weasels aren't your thing, where does your favor lie then? I haven't seen you as much as flirt this year...And with all the strapping Durmstrang boys visiting too. Is something wrong?"

She pushed his hand away, "No. I am simply tired of the slim pickings and the Durmstrang boys may be strapping but by Merlin they're boring," she rolled her eyes, "all of them speak of nothing but their Champion. I've just got high standards and no one is meeting them as of yet." She smoothed his hair down a bit, "No need to worry about me."

Draco smiled at her. "Not worrying darling, just some friendly concern that's all." He leaned in and pressed a kiss to her temple. "You should have high standards, the highest even. I can't really think of anyone worthy of you darling. Luckily you have time on your side to find him. You have a few good years left before you're completely over the hill."

She laughed and hugged him, "I just want someone who can match my brains and is as playful as he is smart. Plenty of play about but all the smart ones seem to be taken."

"Who knows, maybe a miracle will happen and someone here grows a brain and a sense of humor of the summer...Stranger things have happened, just because I can't really recall what that would be, I'm sure it has happened all the same." He ran a finger down the length of her upturned nose. "Worst case scenario I'll become your handsome gay trophy husband, you can be the young Lady Malfoy with a different lover in every country while I boff the poolboy in secret."

She laughed, "Draco I adore you, never ever change," she kissed his cheek, "Oh there's a world of men out there and I've years yet before I have to take you up on that offer. Now will we be watching the insanity of the Third Task this evening or would you prefer to stay in?"

"Let's go watch, it will probably be chaotic and pushy and boring but I hate being left out of the loop more than I hate crowding so let's go and watch Boy Wonder win the glory and hearts of the adoring masses." He gave a slight groan. "Let's do our part, cheer for our champions like the other little monkies."

She patted his cheek, "We'll make our own little section. Potter is certain to win the Tournament I think. I have a feeling he's been the only one treating this as the lethal stupidity it is from the beginning and has been as sneaky and ruthless in preparing for it as he would for a war. Sometimes I really do pity that boy."
"Compassion? From my Lady Snake? Now I really am getting concerned." Draco feigned shock. "I agree though, a few years ago I actually envied him what he had, the fame and adoration but now I wouldn't want it if it was thrown at me. Potter is to be pitied for everything that's thrust upon him...Still I think he's the only one who could achieve what's asked of him."

"Such fickle fame. I prefer the solid loyalty I have with you and our blissed out incubus in the dorm. But yet he has been remarkably up to the task and maintained his humanity while at it." She kissed his forehead, "I'm going to primp. If we are going to cheer on the champions then I intend to do it in style."

"You don't need it since you're always gorgeous but go...Primp." Draco smiled at her. "I'll get some more reading done while I wait." He picked up the leather binder containing his stalker gift books again with a happy little grin.

Pansy chuckled and went to primp. She had a feeling they'd have two redheaded businessmen for pool boys even if Draco wasn't certain of it yet.
Chapter 28

Harry finished pulling on his armor and moved outside, smiling at the little group all four champions and their loved ones had made. He had to snicker at Fred and George as Viktor's father finished molting the canary feathers and Molly started scolding them before Mr. Krum began to laugh and Mrs. Krum saved a feather in her purse. He walked over to where Hermione and Orion were and kissed Hermione on the cheek, "Almost time now."

Hermione turned and wrapped her arms around him tightly. "Be careful Harry, promise me that you'll be careful." She had such a bad feeling about this whole thing and the fact that Harry did too only made it worse.

"You can do this Scar but Mione is right, keep your eyes open." Orion hugged Harry too at the same time as Hermione. He was watching the Task with the Gryffindors this time, so that he wouldn't draw too much attention to the Glamoured Remus and animagus Sirius.

Harry wrapped an arm around them both, "I will. You have my word." He ruffled Orion's hair, "Besides I have to make sure you learn all the tips and tricks I've got on flying."

Ron made his way over after grinning like a loon at his eldest brother blushing and speaking with Fleur like a lovestruck swain. He pat Harry on the back, "You have to be on the team next year too since I'll be trying out."

Harry grinned and nodded.

Hermione brought the redhead into their group hug before letting go. She found Bill's lovestruck expression amusing too but right now her stomach was in knots. She just wanted the Task to be over with and Harry safe and sound. Looking around she saw that all of the champions looked a bit grim, jaws set and eyes focused. She wished them all luck but selfishly enough wished for Harry to win but most of all come out of the maze unscathed.

Harry looked up when Dumbledore announced it was time for the champions to get into position to enter the maze. He cupped Hermione's face in his hands and kissed her, "A little luck to take with me." He met Ron's eyes, exchanging a look of understanding and saw Ron nod to the unspoken question he'd asked. He ruffled Orion's hair again and leaned down to murmur, "One day I want you to figure out how to literally set the Bee's beard on fire and make it look like an accident okay?"

Orion grinned. "I can do that, you just sit back and relax. By the last day of term I should have it figured out." His mind had already started to work on this newest prank, it was something he really wanted to pull off. "Good luck now Harry."

Harry said goodbye to everyone, getting one more bone crushing hug from Molly Weasley, then walking with Hagrid to the maze entrance while Dumbledore explained the rules of the maze to everyone. He looked up at the half-giant, "Hagrid?"

"Aye Harry, what is it?" The half giant placed a large hand on one of Harry's shoulders. He'd been a bit depressed after the Yule ball and Olympe's brush off but they had spoken now and seemed to back on track again. Hagrid looked out over the maze, knowing a bit of the creatures inside it. It was nothing Harry couldn't handle, of that he was sure.

"Sometimes I feel like I take you for granted so I just wanted to let you know that you're the best
adult I've ever met." He pat the tree trunk sized wrist, "You were the first person to show me that someone cared about me, just skinny, short, scrawny me. It was the best gift I could have ever asked for on my birthday."

"Oh Harry, who could not care about ye?" Hagrid sniffled unashamedly and fished out a horrid polkadotted handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. "I held you when you were no bigger than a baby niffler Harry, I've always cared, always will. Short and scrawny or not, ye're one of the best persons I've ever had the pleasure of getting ta know."

"It's a mutual feeling." Harry gave the huge man a hug. "I'll bring the others down for tea after the Tournament and we'll catch up."

"I'd like that." Hagrid nodded happily, still teary eyed as he reached down and hugged Harry back, lifting the boy off his feet before setting him back down. "I'll make sure to bake some fresh biscuits to have then." He grinned. "Best of luck now Harry, I know ye got this in the bag. Ye've become a bit of a beacon for all creature blooded, not only werewolves."

"Yikes," Harry grinned up at Hagrid, "I'd hate to disappoint everyone then." He took a breath as he was announced to enter the maze first, "See you later Hagrid." He ran into the maze, blowing Ginny a mental kiss for her pure sneaky move in flying over it once the hedges had grown to learn the basic layout. He didn't discount the possibility of the hedges moving but he had enough of a map in his head to know what turns and direction to take. A roar caught his attention and he ducked and rolled to avoid the stinger of a manticore. He flicked his wand, "Aguamenti! Congelasco!" Water surrounded the manticore and then froze, trapping the creature and letting Harry get away. He picked his way across a puzzle collapsing floor, worked his way out of a confusion fog, and wasn't that fun, and turned a corner coming face to face with Cedric, who was running and panicked, the reason for it being a humongous slavering nundu.

It didn't matter what spell Cedric tossed at the nundu, the beast just kept coming at him. At first Cedric thought he'd done pretty well, he'd snuck past the devil's snare easily enough and even the blastended skrewts had been pretty easy to get past. He'd started to believe the maze wouldn't be as bad as he had feared when he'd been caught in quicksand.

Once he'd struggled his way out of that, the hedge walls had changed around him and then this charming creature had showed up, leaving Cedric running blindly, not sure where he was going. He turned and threw another spell at the nundu, having a net shoot out of his wand but sharp claws slashed through the net as if it was nothing. "Run Harry!" Cedric yelled.

Harry's eyes went wide and he cast a reducto at the nundu to slow it down but then narrowed his eyes when it went through the beast. He moved around in front of Cedric and got ready to cast a lethal spell when the nundu morphed into a tall cloaked skeletal figure and Harry laughed in relief making it stumble back, "Riddikulus!" He giggled more as the dementor was covered in clown gear until the boggart made a shriek and popped disappearing. He looked behind him with a grin, "Alright there Ced?"

"Besides embarrassed?" Cedric had his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath. "A bloody fucking boggart, I should have realized it when none of my spells affected it at all." He looked a bit sheepish. "How've you faired? Thanks by the way...For saving me from my own stupidity."

Harry chuckled, "Eh you weren't that stupid. It's not like it had 'boggart' painted on it. I just figured that even Dumbledore wouldn't risk a nundu in this maze, not after the last Task. You're welcome anyhow." He pat Cedric on the shoulder, "It's been...interesting. I've run mostly into puzzles and traps and one manticore."
"Mostly the same for me, just exchange manticore for skrewt." Cedric shrugged. "Have you seen Viktor or Fleur? I thought I saw Fleur a little earlier, before the boggart but with everything going on I can't be sure." He looked over the darkened maze.

Harry shook his head, "No I haven't," he looked around, "Well you want to walk together to the next split?"

"Sure, seems a little silly to decline only to follow you until the split." Cedric flashed Harry a smile. He didn't really care about winning any longer so he didn't mind walking with Harry.

Harry started walking, the older boy falling into step beside him, "So did you ever decide on what you'll do after graduation?"

"My parents want me to join the Auror corps but I've been talking a lot with Madam Pomfrey lately and I think I want to become a medi-wizard. Dad will freak and go on about at least becoming a healer but I think a medi-wizard does a lot of good. It seems like a good fit, I like helping people, as a medi-wizard I can do that and not have the hassle of paperwork and healer politics and ambition." Cedric shrugged. "Sorry for telling my life's story as an answer for a simple question. I know you have a few years left but do you know what you want to do?"

"Survive," it was dry and Harry shook his head, "Really I'm not sure though I did enjoy flying against Viktor so maybe Quidditch, for a few years at least. Time will tell I suppose," they reached a fork in the maze and he turned to the older boy, offering his hand, "See you again soon Cedric."

"See you Harry." Cedrick shook Harry's hand. "Good luck the rest of the way and remember what I said before. Just because this is my last year here doesn't mean I'm not willing to help should you need it. You have people wanting to help you survive so you can play Quidditch professionally and bump Krum off the throne." Cedric smiled before taking the left path available.

Harry chuckled and took off running down the right path. He yelped a bit when something grabbed his ankle and turned to see Devil's Snape, "Incendio!" The snare released him and he continued running until he stopped short at the sight of a sphinx laying contentedly in an entryway, "Er...hullo?"

"Hello to you as well Mr. Potter." The sphinx's voice was calm and sounded a little like the wind blowing through treetops. It inclined its head a little to Harry but made no motion to move.

He approached until he stood before her, "I'd like to get by please."

"And you are welcome to pass...As soon as you've answered my riddle correctly." There was a small smile on the sphinx's lips but other than that she remained impassive. "Are you ready to hear it Mr. Potter?"

"If I get it wrong you'll attack but if I remain silent I may walk away unscathed?" He took in her nod and closed his eyes. Hermione would kill him if he got hurt but he'd risk it, "Yes tell me your riddle."

There was a flash of approval and respect in her eyes before she opened her mouth.

"First think of the person who lives in disguise, Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies, Next tell me what's always the last thing to mend, The middle of middle and end of the end? And finally give me the sound often heard,
During the search for a hard-to-find word.
Now string them together, and answer me this,
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"
After she'd finished the Sphinx looked at Harry expectantly.

He tilted his head, "Okay well I know that the last thing to mend, middle of middle and end of the end is the letter d." He had Luna to thank for that one she shared riddles like Dumbledore shared sherbert lemons, he'd have to tell her this one should he get it right. The first part was actually fairly easy as well knowing what he'd learned about Snape, "The first part is spy. Spy, d...hmm a sound um...er...uh...oh!" He grinned as it smacked him in the face, "I'd be very unwilling to kiss a spider!"

"Correct." The shadowy smile showed again as the sphinx slowly moved aside, showing Harry the path that lead further to the middle of the maze. "Remember that answer and be prepared for what you are about to face Harry Potter." She walked away on soft paws, tail swishing.

"Oh bugger," he had his wand at the ready and crept forward all senses on alert and jumped just in time to avoid the acromantula that lunged at him. He cursed and dodged and cast impeding curses at it. He wanted to find a way past the spider without killing it since he didn't want Hagrid to have to explain a dead child to Aragog but it was getting hard to keep it up. Suddenly he remembered Ron's boggart and how he made it funny and with a swish of his wand he transfigured the leaves on the path into eight roller skates on the acromantula's legs.

The spider fell and flipped onto its back. "Incarcerous!" The binding ropes came out and wrapped around the spider and its legs, immobilizing it. "Phew bloody hell." He ran past it and made a few more turns then saw the cup shining brightly on its stand. He looked across the center and saw Viktor just entering the center and their eyes met and a grin stretched across their faces.

Viktor nodded and got a nod in return and then he and Harry were both running forward at an equal distance to the cup to get to it first. Just like with the flight they'd had and the snitch Viktor felt the surge of plain fun fill him as he jumped and reached for the cup.

Harry's fingers wrapped around a handle just as he saw Viktor's do the same but any laugh was cut off by the now familiar tug behind his navel of a portkey. He cursed and had his wand ready and out and positioned himself as he spun and was pulled through the air so that when they arrived, he landed in a crouch next to Viktor, dropping the cup. "Did Dumbledore say the Cup was a portkey?"

Viktor shook his head, also in a prepared crouch, "Ne but he did say Mr. Moody carried de Cup to de center of de maze."

Harry's eyes went wide and he jerked his head to look at Viktor, "That's really bad."

Viktor opened his mouth to ask why but a disturbing hissing voice interrupted before he could.

"Kill the spare."

Wormtail nodded and cradled his precious burden before he raised his wand and shouted the killing curse in a clear unwavering voice. A green light shot out of his wand and the other boy dropped to the ground. It was so easy really, just a few words and...Poof, they were gone. No blood and no mess. Wormtail had thought it would be harder than this to actually take a life himself but it wasn't, he didn't feel anything. It was just like any other spell uttered. He turned his wand on Harry and quickly had him bound to a large headstone. "So very kind of you to join us Mr. Potter." He licked his lips nervously and his nose twitched as it did in his ratform. "You are the guest of honor
after all."

"Wormtail you bastard!" Harry struggled and snarled and hissed a levitation spell, growling when the rock he'd tried to throw was stopped by another hiss, one he recognized all too well and he remembered Trelawney's prediction from the previous year. *The Dark Lord will rise again greater and more terrible than before.* He looked at Viktor's body sprawled on the ground, like a life sized doll and felt his heart squeeze. He wanted to cry and scream and rail against the fates and he would, after he got out of this. He met the twitching, nervous man's eyes, his own nearly glowing with a hatred he'd never know he was capable of feeling, "One day Peter Pettigrew I am going to see you pay for everything you've done thrice over."

"Ah yes, that will have to be in another life I'm afraid." Wormtail got right in Harry's face and smirked at him. "Unfortunately you won't be around for very much longer in this one." He stepped away again and placed his precious burden on the ground as he got the cauldron ready, this was it, he was about to get his Lord and Master back completely. Wormtail pretended that his stomach didn't knot in dread at that thought. "You are about to witness something extraordinary Potter, a rebirth, a resurrection...Too bad you won't be able to tell anyone about it."

"Extraordinarily disgusting you mean," Harry snarled, "Are you really so hard up to get off that you have to dabble in Necromancy to bring the sick twisted puppet boy of a crazy old man back to life so you can beg to suck his dick?" Harry didn't normally delve into that degree of foul language but he needed to buy enough time to figure out how to wiggle out of his bonds. "I've got to ask, how many times did Dumbledore tell you something that made you doubt the Marauders' friendship or nudge you towards Riddle?"

Wormtail looked worried and confused for a moment as if he tried to reach into the fogs of his memory and recall the past before he shook his head firmly. "It doesn't matter, my path was chosen long ago, now there is nothing left to do but to walk it."

"Hurry Wormtail...Hurry!" The hissing voice urged on from inside the bundle.

"Of course Master." Wormtail got back on track, he didn't want to think, didn't want to doubt. Better just doing as he was told. He levitated something from the ground at Harry's feet. It dropped into the cauldron with a plop. "Bones from the father, unknowingly given, you will resurrect your son."

Wormtail's breathing quickened as he took the bundle and unfolded the cloth, gently laying what was inside it in the cauldron as well before he picked up a sharp, mean looking silver dagger. His heart was pounding, he didn't want to do this, didn't want it, didn't want it. He raised the dagger in a shaking hand. "Flesh of the servant...Willingly g-given...Y-you will revive your M-master." He brought the dagger down and screamed as his left hand was severed and hit the water of the cauldron with a splash.

Only one thing left now, he could do this, had to do this. Walking close to Harry he made sure not to look into the boy's eyes as he cut away the dragon hide armor from the boy's arm. He raised the dagger once more before cutting into Harry's right arm, cutting deep and pulling the dagger downward. "Blood...of...the enemy...Forcefully taken...Y-you will...r-resurrect your...foe." He dropped the dagger and fiddles with a vial to catch the precious drops and then walked over to the cauldron and dropped them in.

...It was done.

Harry felt his stomach ice over as smoke billowed from the cauldron and a form rose up from it. One whose red eyes were all too familiar. He pulled and yanked at the ropes binding him. He was
not about to face the spectre of death tied to a headstone like a virgin sacrifice. He threw his shoulders back against the stone, already partially uprooted to get to the bones, and managed to get just enough slack to work free just as Pettigrew draped a cloak around his master. Harry dived out of sight quickly, creeping in the shadows and trying to work his way around to a vantage point where he could summon his wand to him.

Red eyes narrowed when he looked over at the gravestone to see that his prey was missing. "Sssssloppy Wormtail, sssso very sloppy...My wand." It wasn't a request, it was an order. He took his wand from his cowering servant and looked around. There weren't many places a little mouse could hide here after all. "Come out Harry....Come out and face me like the hero you claim to be. Don't you want to get to know me better? Don't you want to know what your father's last words were? How your mother looked when I killed her like the mudblood she was?" Voldemort grabbed Wormtail and pressed the tip of his wand to the dark mark inked in his servant's flesh. It was time to see how many of his followers dared to come when their Master called.

He grit his teeth and remained hidden as Death Eaters began apparating into the graveyard. He hadn't spent hours training and learning to defend himself just to let his temper make him a perfect target. He had too many promises to keep. He slipped silently through the shadows until he could see his wand, laying beside the Trwizard Cup and Viktor's body and then he pressed his back against the stone of the sarcophagus he hid behind.

Watching as Voldemort hissed at his followers, getting a little personal thrill out of seeing him backhand Lucius Malfoy, then give orders to find him. He heard a rustle to his right and rolled into view to avoid the snake that had struck where he'd been crouching, his hand flung out and he hissed the parseltongue summoning charm, sending his wand smacking into his hand, "Protego Ultimas!"

The glimmering silver shield stopped the spells aimed at him but he was forced to move again by the humongous snake. He ducked behind another headstone to shield him as he shot a bone breaking curse at McNair, feeling pride when the bastard screamed and a thud was heard as he pulled back behind the headstone just in time to avoid the Killing Curse aimed by Voldemort. "Little rusty there Tom? From what I'd heard you're supposed to have good aim!"

"It's this new body Harry...Come talk to me again when you've been reborn. Don't worry though, I learn quickly. Besides, what fun would it be if I killed you too fast? We need to get to know each other first." Voldemort's voice was smooth and low and almost kind, that made it all the more terrible. He cooed at Nagini, praising her for finding Harry. "Let's make this formal shall we? Let's duel, you're good at that are you not? Champion, savior...Vanquisher of evil as you are."

Bare feet stepped closer to the boy behind the shield. "Tell me Harry, doesn't it ever makes you sick? To bow and scrape and fight for all these people cowering behind you? Knowing that you are so much more powerful than they are, that you could strike them down at a whim if you wished to?"

He looked down at Viktor's body, no emotions in his face. "It's sssso eassy Harry, so very eassy and the feeling is like nothing else."

Harry snorted and stayed hidden, "Let's take this in reverse order shall we? It might be easy to kill someone in cold blood to you but not to me because, surprise surprise, I actually have a heart, compassion, and love people and I don't want there to ever come a day when I'd feel good about taking an innocent life. I actually feel sorry for you Tom, you never had someone to show you how much better love is than anything else you can imagine.

"As for why I fight...you have no idea, you don't know me, who I am at the core, so you can't
possibly understand that I don't fight for the insipid little cowards who bury their heads in the sand, flinch at your silly little made up name, and hide away trying to tell themselves that monsters don't exist anymore. I fight for the brave ones who stand beside me, for the ones you'd call mudbloods and blood traitors who have bled for me in the past and would do it again no matter how much I wish they'd sit on the sidelines and stay safe. I fight so I can actually have a life of my bloody own, where I can make my choices to do or not do something because it's what I want and not what I need to do to keep you from taking over the bloody world."

He edged away a bit when he heard the scales of a snake slither close, "The Vanquisher, the Savior that night was not me, never me. It was my mother and you know it. It was her who made it possible for me to survive and it was her actions that made your curse rebound. Don't saddle me with a title that belongs to my mother if you please. You really want me to step out from behind here and face you in a wizard's duel? Then I want an answer to a question, something the bloody colorblind, flaming Bee refuses to answer and it has to be the truth, you've made my life a big enough pain in the arse that I deserve the truth on this. Why me? Why come to kill me that night? An infant? And I am not going to buy the 'kill a whole family when one pisses you off' line."

"Oh no you're right, it had nothing to do with your parents. They were a minor nuisance but nothing I really cared about. It was all about you Harry, you are the reason they are dead." The tone of Voldemort's voice was still very kind but the gleam in crimson eyes was pure evil and very much calculating. "If you want to know more then maybe you should ask one of professors, he's the one who told me the reason I went after you after all...Severus has always been a good boy. I look forward to getting to see him again."

He sent a glance toward the Death Eaters still standing behind him, still cowards, he was so disappointed in them. He missed his Bella, she was a true artist. Even Lucius, his prized pet had grown useless, Lucius had promised him his son as a replacement though and Voldemort only hoped that the boy would be...entertaining. "There, I've answered your question. Come out now and duel me."

He huffed, "Figures the bloody dungeon bat would be one of yours." He took a deep breath, his hand gripping his wand a little tighter then stepped out from behind the headstone, on high alert in case he needed to dodge. His gaze firm on Voldemort's with occasional flicked glances at the Death Eaters, including Malfoy with a deep bruise spreading over his cheekbone. Harry addressed Riddle, "You know I really, really don't like you but that," he angled his head to gesture with his chin at Lucius, "nice work."

Voldemort hissed out a truly scary laugh. "Shame on such pretty skin, still he need to know his place and since I'm getting a new model I don't really care if the old one gets dented." He saw Lucius stand up straighter and almost smiled again. It was too easy to take a shot at his pride. That pride would always be his downfall. He turned to Harry again. "You've grown, almost a man now." Raising his wand he made a slight bow, his shadowy cloak swirling around him. "Shall we?"

"Hardly a man. I'm still fourteen but I do what I have to," Harry returned the bow, never taking his eyes off Voldemort. "Can't say it's a bad trade, Draco for little Lucy over there," okay it was small of him but he did like the way Lucius' expression tightened and his hand clenched on the handle of his wand cane, "At least Draco's schemes to get me in trouble actually work." At the end of the sentence he shot a mild stunner. He knew it wouldn't get through but he wanted to see Voldemort's defense and reaction time.

Voldemort deflected it easily and tsk'd at Harry. "Poor form, you've been taught dueling haven't you? There are rules to it, a certain grace if you will. Now let's try this again, we bow and on the count of Wormtail's....Well whimper, then we start."
"When would I have time to learn to duel? What in between all the attempts on my life, trying to wriggle my way around an old man's attempt at manipulation and give him a solid boot in the arse at the same time, and dealing with my loving relatives," he twitched, "I've been a little booked. I've seen one, very short, very pathetic example of a duel between Snape and Lockhart. It's got to be the only time I've been pleased to see the giant git nail someone to the wall. But I'm fine with learning this under pressure so by all means."

"I like you Harry, I do. It's a shame you have to die, you remind me of my Bella." Voldemort cackled and bowed again, this time waiting until Harry had done the same. Wormtail let out a short shout and Voldemort wasn't late to throw a reducto at Harry as they moved around each other. "Learning under pressure is the only real way to learn." Another spell was cast at the boy who dodged with ease. "As for the old man you speak of, it seems we have one goal in common, to watch him choke on his own beard."

"Oh I don't want him dead," Harry dodged another hex and sent a cutting curse of his own at Riddle, "I want him to suffer. I can say that he is one of the few people I truly, truly hate," another curse dodged and returned, "You I don't like on principle, Lucy over there I really don't like because he's fucked with my godfather and my little sister, Snape is a big, snarky aching pain in my arse," he went into a forward roll to avoid Voldemort's next spell before trying out a new one, "Ignis Deglubere!"

Voldemort dodged it and it hit Crabbe senior as Harry rolled to his feet, "Well ouch. There are really only two people I hate. The buzzing Bee and I utterly loathe the bastard who's sniveling over his stump in the corner there." Harry's eyes glittered, "If I didn't need him alive I'd feed his arse to a nundu."

"If I didn't have use for him at the moment I would give him to you...As a sign of goodwill." He looked at Crabbe writhing in pain on the ground. "Now really, you need to stop taking out my underlings. They're not much to look at I agree but for now they are all that I have." Voldemort's lip curled in disdain.

"This has been fun and I would love to stay and chat longer but the longer you're missing the greater the chance that some little do-gooder comes looking for you. I have plans you know, grand plans and so I am sad to say we have to finish this." He shot the killing curse toward Harry, red eyes widening when all of a sudden his wand seemed to have a mind of his own, locking with Harry's cast spell, getting stuck together.

Harry's own eyes widened and he gripped his wand tighter. He didn't know what the hell was going on but he did know that he needed to do his damnedest to make sure that Voldemort's spell didn't reach him so he put his will and effort into pushing it back toward Riddle's wand. Beams of golden light shot out from where their wands connected, forming a cage around them, and Harry could swear he heard phoenix song. He heard the Death Eaters asking what to do and Voldemort snapping at them to do nothing just as he managed to push the connection all the way back to the tip of Voldemort's wand. Little flashes of silvery light shot out and then, much to Harry's shock, he saw Viktor emerge from the wand, then looked down at his dead body several feet away, "Viktor?"

The Bulgaria gave a sad smile, "Vell I had hoped to fly against you again Harry. Vill you do me the favor ov taking my body back to my parents my friend?"

He nodded, jaw clenching as more 'ghosts' of a sort came from Voldemort's wand, giving him encouragement and soon he was standing on edge and tiptoe, knowing who would be next.

Voldemort clenched the handle of his wand tightly, not knowing what this was but he was sure it
now there was a young woman emerging, her long, loose hair flowing down her back as she reached out a ghostly hand toward harry. "look at you harry, you look so much like your dad. we're so proud of you, love you so much." she looked at him longingly as another body emerged as well. long, lanky legs and impossible wild hair. james sent harry a smile almost identical to his own. "so proud son."

harry swallowed thickly and trembled just a bit as the phoenix song grew louder around them. "how are you...here? what is this?"

"your wands are made of the same core, they are brothers and will not fight each other. as for how we're here, you know how...we emerge in reverse to how he killed us." james ghost eyes drank in the sight of his son. "we're here to help you, there won't be much time. when we tell you to...run, get to the portkey and get out of here. we won't be able to hold him for long."

he nodded again and got ready to break the connection. "victor i'm sorry you got caught in this mess."

"not your fault my friend. sometimes bad things happen to good people. we should hurry." the ghost victor turned to prowl the edges of the golden cage.

voldemort growled and hissed angrily as the silvery ghosts closed in on him, obscuring his view of the boy. he didn't know what they were up to and he didn't like it.

"now harry, break the connection and go." it was lily who called out to him as the ghosts swarmed voldemort and the death eaters closed in.

he wrenched his wand away and hit the ground running, flinching when voldemort's snake tried to block his path. not in the mood to fuck around with it he cast the fire flay spell in parseltongue, making it lethal. the whips of fire sliced into nagini, cutting her to pieces and harry was vaguely aware of hearing voldemort scream out in pain as the snake exploded in a billow of black smoke. he reached victor's body, falling to one knee beside it and wrapping an arm around the dead teen's broad shoulders, "accio cup!" before it smacked into his hand he had to toss off one more spell, a cutting curse at lucius malfoy that laid his cheek open to the bone. then the cup was in his hand and he was being yanked through space again, holding tight to victor's body.

as soon as harry appeared the orchestra started to play and people stood up, ready to cheer.

hermione narrowed her eyes and grabbed ron. "something is wrong, harry is bleeding and why isn't victor moving? why is he not moving?" her voice got high and panicky at the end just as someone closer down the bleachers started to scream.

ron didn't bother with words, he grabbed her hand and began pulling her down through the bleachers, knowing that harry was going to need them.

harry looked up, bringing his wand to bear as someone rushed forward, lowering it as he recognized victor's mother.

"moeto bebe!" she tore her son from harry's hold searching for some sign of life, "ne, ne! vIKTOR!"

harry looked up at victor's father, his eyes swimming with unshed tears and regret, "i'm sorry. i am so so sorry. i couldn't protect him."
Mr. Krum hit his knees and wrapped his arms around his wife and dead son as she screamed out in denial and grief.

Harry hung his head but jumped and his hand came up, clenching tight on the bony wrist of the hand that had gripped his shoulder. He met the eyes of the Headmaster, gleaming with false concern.

"Harry my boy, what happened?"

He clenched his jaw, "He's back. Voldemort. There was some ritual and he got a body and now he's back."

"He's back?" Moody sounded more than eager. "What did he say? What did he do?" The one real eye Moody had bore into Harry's intently.

Hermione, Ron and Orion were making their way toward Harry as were Remus and Sirius from another set of bleachers. They had to be careful but there was no way that Remus and Sirius wouldn't be there for Harry when they needed him.

"Come on Harry." Moody still had the crazy gleam in his eyes. "Let's go to my office, I'll patch you up."

"Harry go with Alastor," Dumbledore pat the boy's shoulder. This was better than he'd hoped. Not only would Harry be in need of guidance but he could lay the foundations of deeper trust by 'saving' Harry from Barty Jr and letting him see the interrogation.

Harry got shakily to his feet, and allowed the imposter Moody to pull him away as if he was in a daze and perhaps he was a bit but it was more that he really, really wanted to clock the bastard in private.

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The interrogation was over and Barty Crouch Jr had been exposed and the real Moody found, locked up in his own trunk of all things. Hermione thought it all silly, it was all a show, put on by Dumbledore. There was no chance he wouldn't have known that he had a Death Eater straight under his nose. She still had chills knowing what Harry had been through. Harry had faced Voldemort alone, Viktor was dead and no one seemed to really talk about it. Hermione just didn't understand.

She walked in search of Harry when she caught sight of the Death Eater Crouch himself and three, tall dementors closing in on him. Oh wouldn't that just be convenient, kill the bad guy, the witness that could confirm the port key story and Voldemort's return? Without thinking at all she drew her wand and shouted an Expecto Patronum...Surprised when a silvery form actually shot out of her wand and stormed toward the dementors, chasing them off.

McGonagall had seen Fudge's 'guard' closing in and known she'd be too late to drive them off when a huge silvery lion burst into existence before them and crouched as a guard before chasing the dementors away. She spun and saw Hermione standing there, looking just as shocked as she was, with her wand out. She smiled and turned back to the unconscious and still living and ensouled Crouch Jr, studying the lion swishing its tail in protective irritation. It was a magnificent beast she had to admit. Powerful with a large fluffy mane and an odd little tick that looked like a scar above one eye. "Well done Miss Granger!"

"I...Thank you Professor." Hermione was still in somewhat of a shock that she'd managed a
corporal Patronus and somewhat amused by the form it took. Ron would have a field day with that. She was aware that Fudge didn't look exactly happy that Crouch hadn't been kissed but now there wasn't much he could do. His dementors were driven away and the real Auror guard was coming to take Crouch into custody.

McGonagall nodded and tapped her chin, "I do believe that will be fifty points to Gryffindor for a perfectly executed and functional patronus and for saving young Mr. Crouch from an unsanctioned Dementor's Kiss." She looked at her prize student, "If you're looking for Mr. Potter I believe he's escaped the hospital wing to speak with Myrtle. Minister Fudge I'm afraid I can not escort you to the Headmaster's office after this incident. I feel it my solemn duty to justice to remain and see to it Mr. Crouch is able to stand trial when the Aurors arrive."

Fudge looked as if he had sucked a lemon but again there wasn't much he could do. He simply nodded shortly to McGonagall and started to make his way to the Headmaster's office on his own.

Hermione waited a while so that she wouldn't be forced to walk with the Minister, she thanked her Head of House for the information and then hurried toward the chamber and Harry, hoping he was alright.

Harry was actually not in the Chamber. He was sitting and speaking quietly with Myrtle, one knee drawn up, his arms wrapped around that leg and his cheek resting on the knee, "I know he said it wasn't my fault and I know it, up here in my head, but I still feel like there was something more I could have or should have done. Bulgaria should still have their prize seeker and his parents should still have their son, should still be looking forward to him finding a nice girl and giving them grandkids."

Myrtle made a soft crooning sound and floated closer to Harry. "Take it from someone who's dead, there is nothing you could have done. If the boy doesn't blame you then you are not to be blamed. Blame the monster who killed him, blame the Bee that organized the Tournament but don't blame yourself. You were his friend. Life isn't fair...What makes you think death is? Good people die before their time, it's horrible but it happens. Make sure you live, with your nice girl and eventually babies of your own. That is all you can do."

Hermione listened to Myrtle before sneaking in and sitting down next to Harry, wrapping her arms around him and pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Myrtle is right Harry."

He jolted a bit and turned to her, his knee lowering, "Hermione." That was all he said before he turned and his arms came around her, his face burying in her shoulder. He gave a shudder. He'd been feeling cold and mostly numb since Crouch's apprehension but here, right here was warmth and feeling and everything good. He held tighter.

Hermione held on, one hand coming up to stroke his hair as she hugged him tight. She couldn't even begin to imagine what he'd been through this evening and she just wanted to be there for him. Harry didn't need to talk, she just wanted to hold him, to make sure he was still with her. "I love you."

It broke the wall he'd held everything he'd felt tonight behind and it all rushed out of him in ripping sobs as he cried into her shoulder. He clung to her, this girl who was so smart and so brave and strong and beautiful and who, by some miracle, love him when she deserved so much better.

She continued to hold him, rock him and press kisses to his wild hair. Hermione noticed Myrtle float away to give them some privacy. She didn't offer any trifle that things would be okay because she didn't know that they would be. She did promise to always be there for him, help him and stand by him.
It took a little time before the raw edges were washed away by the tears and her gentle support but he calmed little by little until he could lift his head, face still wet with the tears he'd cried. He cupped her face and pressed a soft, short, simple kiss to her lips. "I love you so much Hermione." He leaned his forehead against hers, "In that graveyard, hiding while I tried to get to my wand, it was you I thought of and my promise to come back to you. That's what got me through it."

Hermione's breath hitched and she leaned in to kiss him again, her own tears mingling with his. "In that case I'm glad you made that promise, that you did make it back to me. I love you too Harry, so very much. I was so scared for you, so worried. I know there are things you have to do but I'm supposed to be right there with you. Not being left behind." She pressed kisses all over his face, still rocking him and holding on. She did it as much for her own comfort as for his.

He just leaned into them and offered his own comfort to her, running his hands up and down her back and over her shoulders. "I'm a little glad you weren't there, what with all the other Death Eaters. Voldemort wants to end me himself but you'd have been swarmed by them," he squeezed her shoulders, "I never want us facing that many Death Eaters unless we've got the rest of our friends with us, or at least Ron."

"You know you've got me at your back mate," Ron's voice came softly from the door where he and the rest of their little group plus Remus and Sirius stood.

Orion rushed forward, sinking to his knees in front of Harry and hugging his big brother tightly. His eyes were red rimmed and puffy. Viktor had been a good friend and Orion couldn't really believe he was gone. Still he was so relieved that at least Harry came back alive. The conflicting feelings were hurting him, he didn't know what to feel in the end.

"We should go down to the chamber, where we can all fit and speak freely." Hermione didn't release her hold on Harry.

He nodded and got to his feet, one arm moving from around Hermione to pull Orion with them, hugging his little brother, "Come on then pup." He hissed at the sink.

Sirius stood at the back of the group as they all slid down the pipe one by one, or in Harry, Hermione and Orion's case, all at once. He badly wanted to go on a vicious tear. Both his kids were hurting because of that manipulating old bastard sitting up above them all in his office. How he had a phoenix for a familiar he'd never know, ever. He just wanted to grab Harry and Orion up and carry them away to safety until the danger was over and he knew he couldn't. He waved Remus into the pipe ahead of him, "Go on Moony, I'll bring up the rear."

Remus nodded but before he slid down the pipe he reached out and let his fingers brush the back of Sirius' hand, he understood exactly how Sirius felt since he felt the same. "See you down there Pads." Remus' eyes were an even brighter shade of amber from his struggles to keep his wolf under control. His pups were hurt, people had to pay.

It wasn't long until they were all in the Slytherin library and Harry settled onto the couch and hugged Orion, "Talk to me pup."

Sirius went to stand behind the couch and ran his hand over Orion's hair gently, letting him know he was there.

Tears spilled over in amber eyes. "I'm so happy you're okay Harry and I am so sad. I liked Viktor, he was my friend...I went flying with him earlier today and now he's just gone. I don't know how to feel, how to act or what to do."
Remus' heart ached for his baby, hated that any of the children had to be caught up in all this evil, the pointless deaths and violence. It was wrong, so, so wrong.

Harry rubbed Orion's back, "You do what you need to. You can be glad I'm okay and sad about Viktor as well." He kissed the top of Orion's head. "It's not right and it's not fair and no matter how hard I think about it I just can't see a reason why. I'm sad and angry and scared and glad to still be here and so bloody guilty it's all caught in the back of my throat and I don't know which one to let out first. So I let them all out at once, which is why Hermione needs a drying charm for her shoulder now." He gave his girlfriend a wan smile.

Hermione smiled back, she would suffer a damp shoulder any day if it meant having Harry there, alive and mostly unharmed. She was still worried about the cut on his arm but Harry had assured her it was okay and she had to trust him.

Orion burrowed closer to Harry suddenly feeling very small. He knew he was about to turn thirteen and he knew that Harry had fought a Basilisk on his own when he was Orion's age but it had just hit Orion that it wasn't all adventures. There was death too and he'd come so close to losing his brother tonight. He would never take anyone of his loved ones for granted again.

Even Fred and George were unusually subdued.

Harry ran his hand down Orion's hair and rocked his little brother, feeling better being able to do something, to be focused on helping him rather than his own pain. He looked around at his friends, the way Fred and George were standing so close, leaning against each other, how Ron held Luna so protectively as knowledgeable dreamy blue eyes met his with the assurance that it got better. Neville was rubbing Ginny's back as she stood stiff and tense, Sirius looked like he wanted to kill and so did Remus but they both also looked pained. These were his people, his family and as far as he was concerned it was his job to look after them and he imagined that they all needed something to do. "Ron can you and Luna get some of the stones from the outer chamber and bring them here so we can start transfiguring them into futons?"

Ron straightened, "What's going on in your head there mate?"

"I think we'll all do better just being here with each other for the rest of the evening and night," he took a risk, "Fred, George you're on food duty and you can invite your little dragon if you can get a binding promise of silence out of him."

Fred snapped to attention like a fox after a rabbit, "I like the way you think brother. Shall we Geogie?"

"We shall." George nodded. "Oh and Harry, is it okay if we bring Bill and Charlie too, Mum has gone home to Dad, we poured a calming potion down her throat, she was so worried about you but Bill and Charlie are still here."

"Have at it. Hell bring Parkinson and Zabini, same promise rules apply, if Malfoy wants back up. Tell Bill and Charlie to bring a bottle of firewhiskey for Remus and Sirius and I know you two can sneak some butterbeer for the rest of us."

"Of course we can. Back in a tick," Fred dashed out, George by his side.

Harry waited until Ron and Luna had returned and comfortable thick cushions now covered the floor, "Remus, Sirius sit down please."

Remus ran a hand through his hair, making it stand on end. He was still struggling with his inner
wolf. He'd seen war close up once and to know that it was about to start over was driving him insane. He let out half a groan, half a growl and walked over to hug Harry and Orion before obeying Harry and sitting down, pulling Sirius to sit down next to him.

Ginny was leaning into Neville, soaking up his strength. It was hard to believe that the specter she'd spoken to in that diary was real again, up and walking in his own body, spreading his venom.

Neville saw what Harry was doing and approved as he pulled Ginny over to a love seat and settled into it with her, running a hand over her hair. Harry was making this a 'den' for them tonight. The Slytherins were possible allies who were going to be offered a chance to join the 'pride' and tonight they'd see how they worked while they were seriously outnumbered.

Sirius melted against Remus' side, his head snuggled on the other man's shoulder, needing the contact right now though he'd move if Remus pushed him away. "Okay Malfoy I can understand but Zabini and Parkinson?"

"You didn't see the way Zabini just about devoured Charlie with his eyes sitting in the bleachers?" Harry quirked a brow, "Plus there have been some interesting tales about Zabini floating around school. If they're true there's going to be an Italian in the Weasley family eventually."

"The rumors are true, Blaise Zabini is an incubus." Luna stated calmly as she and Ron settled too, staying practically entwined with each other. "I've met his mother, a formidable woman."

"It's been like he's had a revolving door to his bedroom this year but he hasn't been happy, only getting sadder and weaker each day. If one of your brothers can help him then I'm glad." Orion was still pressed against Harry's side like a leach.

"Oh by the way, I heard about your Patronus Hermione, congratulations." Ginny smiled.

"Thank you, I just did it without thinking and then it worked." Hermione flushed pink.

Harry went from ribbing Ron gently over the grimace on his face at the mention of another of his brothers with a Slytherin to looking at Hermione so fast it was amazing he didn't have whiplash, "Wait what's this? Your Patronus?" A grin wanted to tug at his mouth.

Hermione's blush deepened and spread as she murmured something under her breath.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't quite catch that, what did you say?" Orion looked at her with curious eyes, leaning over Harry to see her.

"It's a lion okay...A lion." Hermione bit her bottom lip as the smiles and giggles spread across the room.

Ron grinned, "A lion huh? Any resemblance so someone we know? A certain Scar maybe?"

Hermione sent a stinging hex Ron's way while she resembled a tomato in color by now.

Sirius chuckled, "Well well Harry's is a lioness and Hermione's a lion," he looked up at Remus, "remind you of anyone Moony? Just maybe a bit in reverse?"

"Certainly does." Remus nodded. "I think I like the reverse better, James always liked blowing his own horn a little too much." Remus' smile was wistful as he remembered friends long gone. "A patronus of his own animagus form, not sure it's conceited or sad, that the one thing that made him feel safe was himself. Lily's doe was pretty though."
Harry blinked, "My Dad's patronus was a stag? And mum's was a doe?"

Sirius nodded, "Yeah. I tried to give Lily a nickname based on that but she threatened to turn me into a rabbit."

"Serves you right Snuffles," he looked at Hermione and smiled, "I think matching patronuses is a pretty awesome thing."

Hermione returned his smile and leaned her head against his shoulder, she wasn't really ashamed that Harry was what made her feel safe, it was the truth after all.

"Well it sure beats matching outfits." Ginny made a face. "Couples in matching outfits are just wrong in every single way imaginable."

"They are stronger too." Remus inched into the conversation. "The Patronuses I mean, matching ones are stronger if you cast them at the same time."

Harry kissed Hermione's brow, "We'd probably clear them all out of Azkaban then." He didn't need to see Hermione's patronus to know it was strong. Everything she did was amazing.

Neville chuckled, "I've wondered something, what's Sirius' patronus?"

Remus looked sideways at Sirius and when the other stayed quiet then Remus answered for him. "It's a horse, a stallion to be precise. It's beautiful."

"A stallion?" Harry tilted his head in question.

Sirius sighed, "I hated my mother, that's no secret, and after I started school I was never too pleased with my father either because he stopped shielding us from her but before that...he was my hero. He had the most amazing hand with horses and my favorite memory of childhood was when he brought me up in front of him on the back of this huge black stallion that he always rode names Hades. I'd always been scared of that horse. He was mean tempered and nasty and violent and let no one but my father near him. That day though, my father scooped me up and held me safe and secure on the back of that big bastard as we nearly flew over the countryside. It was the safest I could ever recall feeling."

Remus reached out and took Sirius' hand, stroking his knuckles gently. He knew that no matter what had happened with his parents, even Walburga, Sirius had loved them once and love mattered, family mattered. "As I said, the stallion is beautiful."

Orion looked at his parents before he rose from his place next to Harry and walked over to the loveseat where they sat and plopped down between them.

Sirius grinned and ruffled his son's hair and squeezed Remus' hand back just as a sharp female voice came, clear as a bell from the outer chamber.

"I can not believe you cretins would deface Slytherin's lair with streamers and stickers and dear gods is that a bloody party hat on that snake?!"

Harry snickered and pulled Hermione into his arms, "Sounds like the snakes are here."

Ginny snickered at Pansy's outrage and she could hear Malfoy's slow drawl muttering something to her and Ginny also snickered at Ron's expression upon seeing Blaise Zabini still clinging to her second oldest brother like a limpet. Whatever happened here it wasn't going to be boring.
"That snake loves his party hat, it covers his baldness." Luna looked at Pansy. "Harry told me so and I believe him."

Pansy flounced into the room took a look around, "Oh Merlin we'll never get Draco out of here," then she proceeded to lounge on one of the large floor cushions like an Arabian queen in her tent, "Lovegood trying to argue with you would be like a worm trying to swim upriver so I do believe I will just let you keep your opinion and I shall keep mine." She drummed her fingers and studied Potter snuggled together with Granger intently.

Hermione looked back but didn't move from her spot curled into Harry, if Parkinson wanted to look then she could. It wouldn't change anything about Hermione's feelings, she wouldn't hide on account of a Slytherin.

Bill looked around with wide eyes as he entered before he went to sit close to his baby sister, imagining her her alone and dying until Harry had saved her.

Draco was more than wide-eyed, he was almost reverant as he looked around, really wanting to examine everything in detail but being dragged over to sit in between his stalker twins.

Fred leaned his chin on Draco's shoulder, "You can look to your heart's content later little dragon. He can right Harry?"

Harry lifted a shoulder, "Books are for reading. Malfoy," he nodded politely.

Draco looked at Harry with sharp, gray eyes before inclining his head to the other boy. "Thank you." Then he growled and pushed Fred away from his shoulder. He might sit between them but he didn't need to be slobbered on.

Charlie sat down, once more finding Blaise in his lap as soon as he'd settled on the cushion at his sister's feet, "Alright I see a supposed fugitive in here so is there a summary or do I have to sit through a long story?"

Harry summoned a small leather bound journal that he'd been keeping down here from off the desk and tossed it to Charlie, "Everything you need to know up until this morning. Obviously some things have changed." His tone was dry.

Pansy saw something in that. She'd been studying Potter in a risk benefit analysis of sorts and now she made her decision, "I presume my parents were there?" His head whipped toward her and she could swear those eyes could be felt physically.

"Yes."

"Oh yippe, Blasey I am imposing on your mother this summer do request that she have the elves stock up on chocolate." Pansy buffed her nails on her shirt.

"Mhmm, chocolate...Yes." Blaise still had a blissed out expression on his featured as he snuggled closer to Charlie, apparently Charlie Weasley was the prime drug of his choice.

Draco snorted at him, now that he knew his friend would be okay, he felt no qualms about teasing him. "I don't even have to ask if Father was there, he was probably the first one to arrive. I'm just surprised he didn't stop to get me and hand me over giftwrapped."

Harry met Draco's eyes, "I imagine that is his plan for the summer."

Fred growled lowly, "Like hell!"
"Not going to happen!" George matched his brother's growl and placed his arms around Draco's slender torso, pulling the pale boy closer to both of them.

Pansy hid her amused smile behind her hand and Charlie turned a page in the journal speaking absently, "Did I forget to mention the twins' extreme hoarding tendencies?"

Fred flipped his brother off as several people in the room snickered.

Harry shook his head, "Fred, George let up on him. I don't think he's got any plans to fall in with that idea. Do you Malfoy? You've been giving me hints all year, racking up favors for me to owe you. What do you want?"

Pansy had to admit she was impressed that Potter had figured out Draco's game and not just assumed he'd turned over a new leaf out of the goodness of his heart. She stole a box of chocolate covered cherries from the Twins' goody raid bag and settled to watch the show.

Draco only raised his eyebrow at Harry, he was quite happy to know where they stood with each other. He doubted they would ever become friends but Draco had learned to respect the other even if he would never admit it to Potter's face. "I want protection, shelter and free pass for my mother and I. I have plenty of plans for the future and none of them includes becoming the Dark Lord's bum-boy."

Harry slid a glance over at Sirius, who lifted a shoulder as if to say it was up to him. He'd arranged to have Grimmauld put under Fidelus, with himself as secret keeper, in case he needed a place to run where he knew no one could find him or find Sirius if it came to that. "And you're not keen on paying for the ride in any way," he nodded, "Your mother is a Black right?"

"Yes she is, full cousin to that Black over there." Draco nodded at Sirius and then his eyes caught on Orion sitting between Sirius and Remus. "That really makes so much sense." He mumbled the last part more to himself than to the rest of the room as he struggled to get out of George Weasley's hold. He wasn't Blaise, he didn't like to cuddle.

Pansy pursed her lips and studied Orion before a spark lit in her eyes and a laugh burbled out, "That's who he reminded you of!" She turned toward Blaise, "Remember? You said he reminded you of someone when he was sorted?" She pointed at Draco, "Family resemblance!" Her laugh echoed in the room.

Harry looked between Draco and Orion then hid his face in Hermione's shoulder, his own shoulders shaking as he tried to keep from laughing and his voice was strained, "She's right. There is a small resemblance between all three of them."

Neither of the three males in question looked particularly pleased by that notion but now that she really looked, Hermione saw the resemblance too. It was something about the high cheekbones and the finely boned aristocratic features. Apparently the 'pointy-ness' was strictly a Malfoy feature though.

"See, I told you I recognized him...Hah!" Blaise looked triumphant from his perch on Charlie's lap. "And also, now I don't have to feel bad about not knowing the Moonstar name...Really though...Moonstar?"

"You're feeling better then Blasey-boy, almost back to your old snark I hear." Draco's voice was dry but relief was etched in his features. He'd been truly worried about his friend. Both he and Pansy had tried to get Blaise to feed from them at least but he had refused.
Sirius huffed, "Hey lay off the name. I happen to think it's an excellent name."

Ron snorted, "You would, Snuffles. Really I'd have expected better from Remus he's so smart...then again the brightest witch of our generation did call her cause spew...guess brains aren't everything," he yelped and threw himself backwards to avoid the two stunners shot his way.

Pansy watched Granger and Lupin put their wands away in intrigue, "My my who knew Gryffindors could be so..." she trailed off and met Blaise's eyes asking for him to fill the blank.

"Sneaky? Devious, vicious and snake-like?" Blaise's dark eyes glittered. "I for one find this new side of the lions extremely intriguing. And since we were just told that Gryffindors aren't just plain vanilla I think it bodes very well for the future." He gave a slight wriggle on the lap he was on just to show that he wasn't losing his touch. It wasn't all about teasing though, Blaise was a sensual person and everything in him already called out for Charlie, no matter his age.

Ron peered at his brother's blush and the way he just stroked his hands down Zabini's sides. "You know I'm on the fence here, sympathy or horror?"

Charlie lifted a brow, "I'm almost terrified to ask but, what?"

"I don't know whether to be horrified that another of my brothers seems to have a Slytherin fetish or feel just a bit sorry for you."

Pansy narrowed her eyes, "And why would you feel sorry for him?"

"Well look at your housemate!" He waved at Blaise, "I know Charlie seeks for the home team and even I can admit Zabini was sex on legs before he was an incubus and he's perched in my brother's lap but he's fifteen." Ron settled his arms around Luna, "Charlie's going to have the blue balls from hell for the next two years...okay I've settled on feeling sorry for him."

Charlie groaned and lifted a hand to drag it down his face, "Oh thank you so much for that brilliant summary little brother."

"The age of consent for creature blooded is sixteen thank you very much." Blaise raised his nose in a very superior manner. "If you don't believe me just ask the werewolf."

Remus nodded somewhat reluctantly. "He's right, the age limit was lowered on account of certain...Urges." He noticed Orion's interested gleam in the topic and turned sharp eyes on his son. "Don't even think about it cub. Besides it's still three years away for you."

"I didn't say anything." Orion's eyes were wide and much too innocent.

Sirius gave his son a noogie, "What I want to know is who's corrupting you! You're just twelve for Merlin's sake."

Ron raised his hands when silver eyes narrowed on him, "Oi don't look at me! We usually try to keep it clean around the pup there."

Pansy slipped a chocolate covered cherry into her mouth, "Mmm but Slytherin doesn't. We like to accept certain realities of life and research them intellectually. By that I mean we ask questions, read books and such. We don't put theory into practice, typically, for quite some time."

"Exactly." Orion agreed. "If you don't ask questions and read up on the subject, then how are you supposed to know what to do when it's time to do it? Besides Sirius, I'm turning thirteen in less than a month."
Remus felt another stab of nostalgia, his baby boy was becoming a teenager, how was that possible? Remus still saw the tiny baby he'd carried and rocked through teething and dragon pox, ear infections and scraped knees. Orion turning teenager also reminded him of the fact that he hadn't had any sexual encounter other than with his hand for almost fourteen years...That was just sad but still he couldn't regret it. Remus had never wanted anyone other than Sirius like that and he doubted he ever would.

"But you're still twelve now, which means," Sirius grinned evilly, "I can still tickle you," he went for his son's ribs.

Harry shook his head at them, "Okay getting back to the first subject, do you think your mother would be willing to help redecorate an old Black property while the two of you stay there? None of the overwrought dark gothic stuff though."

Draco pursed his lips as he tried to think over Orion's shrieks, giggles and vows of vengeance. He tried to recall if his father had ever tickled him and the answer was a resounding no! That would be far beneath a pureblood such as Lucius Malfoy. In his eyes Draco was only another object he owned, something used as a bargaining chip. Draco had always known that and it had never particularly bothered him before, he didn't know why it did now. "I don't think Mother would mind helping. She's got excellent taste of course and a good eye for what's fitting." He looked a little offended at the overwrought dark gothic comment. "I'll have you know Potter that since Mother redecorated Malfoy Manor it is considered one of the most beautiful homes in England."

"Have I ever been in your house Malfoy?" Harry lifted a brow, "I don't pay attention to that sort of thing anyway. I just saw the photographs of how the house I've got in mind looks now, which is overwrought, dark and gothic, and let me tell you, it's depressing."

"And how there cub!" Sirius pouted as Remus 'saved' Orion from him.

Orion stuck his tongue out at his father, amber eyes promising retribution as he snuggled into Remus' side happily.

Draco closed his eyes briefly, he did not want to get into anything with Potter this evening. "All I was trying to say is that no, I don't think Mother would mind helping and no it won't be dark and depressive when she's done with it." No matter his personal feelings, Harry was Draco's best bet and he couldn't afford to completely alienate the other, not when both his mother and his own bloody lives were at stake. He was tired and though Draco hated to admit it he was also scared. Voldemort had always been a looming shadow in their home but now he was real and Lucius had never made it a secret that he meant to give his son away to the crazy, halfblood loon.

Harry nodded, "Okay then. I just don't think your mother is the type to be idle and I'd hate for her to go spare while hiding with you." He met the sharply shocked gray eyes that connected with his calmly, "I don't like you much Malfoy, that may or may not change one day, I don't know, but I'm not the sort who'd let another be at that batshite crazy bastard's mercy just because I don't like them. You need sanctuary for yourself and your mother, you've got it and we'll call the 'debts' I owe you paid in full. I'll be paying your mother for the work on the house since I think it'd be only fair though."

"She won't accept any kind of payment." Draco knew his mother well enough to know that. "You offer us sanctuary, we work on your house as to not go insane. The debts will still be paid in full but if you pay her then she'll suddenly be in your debt and she won't have that." He crossed his feet at his ankles as he looked at Harry calmly. "I don't like you much either Potter but I have a feeling I will like Riddle even less."
"Well so long as we understand each other," Harry lifted a shoulder.

Fred cleared his throat, "Now that that's cleared up, how will you be avoiding your father to get to Harry's safehouse? And how will your Mum get out?"

"I've been conversing with Mother via owls all through the term, we have a code of sorts and when I write her next she will know what to do." Draco looked down at his neatly cut and perfectly manicured nails. "As for avoiding Father, I don't really know. Stick to the shadows until the end of term and hope he won't come for me before then I suppose."

George furrowed his brow, that didn't sound like an exactly stellar plan but it did say much more about their dragon than he believed. For his mother he had invented codes and come up with a plan to truly get her out but not for himself. No matter what Draco liked to pretend he cared more about his loved ones than himself.

Harry lifted a shoulder, "I kind of think he won't be. He'll be too busy nursing his injuries I would imagine."

Gray eyes snapped up and locked on green ones. "Injuries? What sort of injuries would that be then?" Draco couldn't even pretend that he cared about the bastard that was his father but he was still curious.

"Well to start, Voldemort," he rolled his eyes at the three Slytherins' flinches, "is none too happy with him, backhanded him hard enough that I wouldn't be surprised if something broke, and then, well I had to defend myself. He caught a...we'll call it a specialized cutting curse, across the face. Regular magic won't be able to do anything more than stop the bleeding."

Sirius sat up, eyes wide, "Wait, you cut open Lucius 'vain bastard' Malfoy's face? and he can't fix it?"

"Yup," Harry popped the p and shook his head when Sirius whined.

"Oh come on put it in a pensieve for me please? I've always wanted to clock that giant twat, no offense kiddo," he spoke off-handedly to Draco, "let me live vicariously through your actions?"

"No offense taken, I would like to see Daddy-dearest get cut as much as you do." Draco's tone of voice was cool and unemotional.

Remus' long fingers came up to run over the scars running across his own face, he knew how painful it was with scars that magic couldn't heal. Still if anyone deserved that pain it was Lucius Malfoy.

Harry sighed and rubbed at his temple, "Well I wasn't aiming at his face, I was just trying to get to the cup with...well anyway, I cast it, saw his face slice open cheek to jaw at an angle. I'm not sorry but I didn't aim for it to happen either Snuffles."

"Well Father won't be sticking his nose out of the Manor until he's forced to now. I'm betting he's bedbound moaning to the heavens about dying. Draco managed to refrain from rolling his eyes. "It buys me some time and I thank you for it Potter, whether it was intentional or not. Knowing Father he definitely had it coming."

Pansy hummed in indulgence around the chocolate in her mouth, "It's about two weeks til end of term and facial wounds tend to take a good month to close depending on how deep they are. I'd say well done Potter but methinks you're not too keen on being praised for it." She was a bitch, and proud of it, but she didn't get off on making others walk through their own nightmares and Potter
had the look of someone who was doing so. "So Dray, you and Aunt Cissy will go on as things are normal then meet up at the station and just slip into the fog."

"Sounds about right yes." Draco nodded. "Mystical disappearance, I think Mother and I can pull that off with flair." He grinned at his friend. "A whole summer though without poolboys, whatever shall I do?"

She blinked innocently back at him and pointed to the clingy redheads on either side, "Call them. I'm sure they'd be pleased as punch to look after all your needs darling." She laughed at the rude gesture he gave her as that set the twins off purring things that were likely crude and borderline obscene. "So the two terrors brought marvelous food," she set about levitating the food out of the bag and onto floating trays that would roam the library well away from the books, "Dray's future is settled quite well, and we're all here in comfort and well away from the rest of the school's insanity. I say we relax. I do have to ask though, what ever do you all do down here. You can't possibly be reading all the time."

Harry grinned and grabbed a pair of butterbeers, "Well Ron's gotten good at frisbee."

"Oi! I thought we said we'd not be teasing about that!"

"Blame yourself for teasing Hermione about her patronus Mr. Fluffy."

"Mr. Fluffy?" Hermione grinned and leaned against Harry, tangling their fingers together. "Really Harry, that's almost as bad as Snuffles."

He kissed her temple, "That was the point besides have you seen his tail? It looks like a big fluffy duster."

"Patronuses and fluffy men, somehow it sounds as if we've been missing out." Blaise stretched leisurely in Charlie's lap. "I mostly like my men hard but fluff can be nice too I suppose."

Bill almost choked on his drink. Oh his brother had landed himself with a lethal boy. He did not envy Charlie at all.

Charlie turned red and slugged down some whiskey before gripping the back of Blaise's neck and growling into his ear, "I'm keeping a record naughty boy, and I intend to collect payment on every tease when I can, starting with biting you, all over."

Blaise smiled, slow and wicked as he turned as much as he could with Charlie's grip on neck. "Not exactly something that tempts me to stop teasing, I like biting...If you're good I'll even return the favor. I'm very skilled with my mouth."

"Merlin, please show me a spell that makes me temporarily deaf and blind. I do not need to see or hear this." Bill groaned and moved further away from Charlie and his sex kitten incubus.

Pansy flicked her wand at Blaise and had a stinger popping on his behind, "Darling please, either remember the privacy charms or stick to less obvious teasing." She wasn't about to tell him to move off Charlie's lap. She finally had her Blaise back and she'd gut anyone who tried to separate him from that big redhead who was the reason he wasn't dying any more.

"Ouch!" Blaise rubbed his smarting behind against Charlie's thighs. "That hurt you bint, don't go and ruin all my fun now." He pouted and turned dark, soulful eyes on his friend.

Draco snorted. "Blaise that look stopped working when we were about eight, you haven't been able to pull off innocent after that."
Blaise grinned again. "Not much of a loss when being bad is so much more fun."

Luna didn't bother to attempt to hide her smile, the snakes were very amusing.

"Now that that's been taken care of, what do you mean Weasley has a tail?" Pansy narrowed her eyes in demand for an answer.

Fred grinned and chuckled and winked at George, "Shall we show her Georgie?"

"Why not Freddie-boy? After all we're gorgeous in any form and all of them deserve to be admired." George winked back to his brother before leaning in kissing Draco's cheek before quickly jumping out of the way for retaliation. "Just for luck little dragon." He chuckled before he shifted and a red fox yipped in his place, waiting for his brother to change as well.

And in a flash there was an arctic fox in summer coat where Fred had been and it was jumping into Draco's lap with an adorable whine rearing up to nuzzle his chin and looking up at him with big innocent canine eyes.

Charlie nearly choked on his own saliva. He'd not gotten that far into the journal yet, his little distraction making it hard to focus. "You've mastered animagi magic?!" His head whipped over to Ron, "And you as well?"

Ron grinned and nuzzled Luna's cheek, "Let's go for broke shall we?"

"Absolutely." Luna chuckled and kissed Ron lightly before shifting in sync with Ron, showing an ermine and a dole in their place.

Draco's eyes narrowed as he looked down at the fox in his lap. "Don't give me that innocent look, I know what's underneath the surface." His cheeks were a pale pink though and he reached out to scratch behind a fluffy ear almost despite himself.

Ginny laughed and shifted as well, the tiny hummingbird buzzing around the room.

Pansy nearly fell over when Neville shifted, into a huge bear that looked as if it could topple trees with a yawn, "Merlin's shriveled scrotum." She looked to where Harry and Hermione were still sitting curled against each other, "I presume the two of you have," she waved at the assortment of animals in the room eloquently, "as well."

Harry nodded, arms around Hermione, "Mmmhmm." He was content to remain human at the moment though.

Hermione was in no particular mood to shift either right now, she was perfectly happy where she was, snuggled against Harry. After all that had happened that evening she needed that closeness and she wanted it in human form.

"It's super cool, Harry's a lion and Hermione is a tiger. You should see their teeth." Orion looked excited as he spoke to Pansy.

Pansy's brows went up in intrigue even as she heard Draco making a remark about Gryffindor's golden boy being a lion, "I would imagine that by the time I'd see their teeth it would be far too late for me." Her lips twitched in amusement, "And will you be following the crowd then?"

He shook his head. "Nope, I'm already too much of a beast."

Remus pinned Pansy with a warning glare as his hand went to rub his son's neck. He wouldn't let
anyone say anything bad about Orion because of who his Dad was. That was partly why a made up name had been necessary.

She ignored the glare and tilted her head, "You would have to be not quite thirteen, I can't take that and run with it in my flirty way," she pouted and ignored Draco's choke. He knew exactly where her mind had gone.

Sirius' own mind didn't take long and his eyes went wide, "Dear Merlin Slytherin's full of horndogs!"

"Of course." Blaise nodded. "We're not worse than any other house though, there was this Hufflepuff...You wouldn't believe what he was into. I swear I still have burnmarks from the hot wax." He shook his head and palmed his side underneath his shirt.

"Filter Blaise, we're in mixed company." Draco looked at his friend while still petting the now two foxes in his lap.

"So? We're all family or going to be family here, I've got nothing to hide." Blaise blinked long lashes at the people and animals gathered in the room.

Harry snorted, "Oh he's good but that one there," he pointed at Sirius, "he's better at the lash fluttering innocence, talk about false advertizing."

A chuff came from the bear in the room who was laying down now with the tiny hummingbird perched on his nose as usual.

Charlie's hand smoothed over the spot Blaise had indicated on top of the shirt absently, "Hufflepuffs are the wild house. Almost as if they make up for their bad outside reputation of being duffers with their erm...in bed manner."

Blaise purred at Charlies touch and he leaned harder against the man he was sitting on. "True, but just wild and inventive doesn't mean that it's good. I like going crazy just as much as the next guy but no wildness in the world can make up for not knowing where to put things."

"Oh by Morgana's hidden warts. Boy over there, not quite thirteen, can we please shelf the bedroom talk for now." Bill looked pained.

Pansy pursed her lips and studied Orion, "I find it amusing that the adults in this room are more uncomfortable with the bedroom talk than the almost thirteen year old," she tossed a lollipop to Blaise, "there occupy your mouth with something else. Now, Orion dear tell me. What was that darling hex you first laid on Draco after being sorted?"

"Now, now I can't reveal that now can I?" Orion's grin was wicked. "A prankster need to keep his secrets close, otherwise I won't be able to catch anyone by surprise any longer. I may tell you sometime, in a less crowded room."

Hermione knew that Orion wasn't flirting but damn that boy would be dangerous to a girl's heart in a few years time.

Pansy smiled, "Well I shall have to endeavor to get you alone sometime then." She rolled her eyes at Draco's scolding call of her name, "Really Draco I'm not that much of a she wolf," she beamed him in the forehead with a chocolate.

"Yes darling, you really are. Don't forget that I know you." Draco rubbed his forehead. "If you have smeared me with chocolate I swear I will withhold my biscotti from you in vengance."
Draco's nose almost twitched in dislike at the thought of being chocolate stained in the face.

George solved it by standing on his hind paws and licking all over Draco's face.

"Yes, because animal saliva is so much better." Draco's voice was dry and dripped of sarcasm.

Fred whined and nuded Draco's hand, missing the petting.

Pansy grinned as Draco gave in and pet the fox again. Her friend was so suckered already and he didn't even know it. She looked at the remaining chocolates in the box, her sweet tooth more than appeased, then closed the box, "Orion, catch," she tossed the box at him before summoning a book down and cracking it open, already more than ready to begin settling in for the night.

Orion caught the box happily and held it close to his chest when he noticed the greedy looks his Dad threw it. Then he relented and held it out for both his parents, he couldn't be selfish and hoard it all to himself. It was late and as much as Orion hated to admit it he was getting tired, not even chocolate would be enough to keep him going for long.

Hermione yawned and grew heavy and boneless against Harry. It had been an eventful, horrid day to say the least but right now she was right next to Harry and he was warm and safe and there. It was enough to make her relax.

Harry just brought her in close and a flick of his wand had several fluffy blankets flying into the library, one with which he drew up over the two of them. He knew he wouldn't be sleeping tonight, not really but it was fine. Instead he could be here and look over his pride and their chosen as they all settled in and slept.
Chapter 29

Narcissa eyed the man pouting in bed like he was about to keel over and die. The house elves sent in here with the pain potions and food had all been sent scrambling out in fear and she was quite done with it. "Lucius."

He didn't answer with words but turned to look at his wife, keeping his scarred side firmly hidden against his pillows. Lucius considered a moan but he knew that his wife wouldn't exactly be sympathetic so he kept his pain to himself and simply gave her a questioning look.

"I do realize that you are in pain and it is most distressing however if you send one more elf running out of this room with a wasted potion that I've spent my time and energy on to assuage the pain somewhat and minimize the scarring, I will give you a matching one on your other cheek do you hear me." Her temper was chomping at the bit from the way he'd laid down and offered her son up to the most vile and evil man she knew of and she was not in the mood to be tactful or cold.

"I hear you and I will behave then. Wouldn't want to upset you dear." Lucius was perfectly aware that Narcissa was cross with him and that she didn't agree on the path he had chosen for their son. He wasn't really the buffoon his wife thought him to be. He was vain and he absolutely hated Potter for the scar he would have now but there was still more to him than that. Lucius really wouldn't crawl for a halfblood if he didn't think it would get him places. Lucius had ambition. "Sorry for wasting your potions, I will strive to better myself."

"Hm," she nodded sharply, set another potion on the bedside table, and stalked out, hiding her smirk from even the elves as she went to her suite to begin settling the few things she would take with her. Draco's letter could not have been more welcome. Potter had arranged a safehouse for them and she was more than happy and willing to redecorate it in exchange. It was such a small price for her baby boy's safety. Now what few things she would take belonged to her and her alone. She had no intention of taking petty vengeance by stealing some of Lucius' prized artifacts. A clean break was what she wanted and what she would have.

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Harry gave Mrs. Weasley a hug, "I promise. I'll meet you in Diagon Alley outside the ice cream shop in two hours as soon as my errands are finished."

Molly hugged him tightly and looked at him closely. "Okay, two hours. If you're not outside Fortescue's then, I'm coming to find you and I will succeed. I am a mother and I have my ways." She petted his hair, trying to smooth it down and as usual failing. "Be careful Harry."

"I will and I don't doubt you'll find me. Oof!" He looked over at Ron.

"See you in a few then mate, give a roar if you need us."

"Ha. Ha." He elbowed Ron away and looked over at where Charlie was talking with Livia Zabini while Blaise stood brushing against the dragon keeper. Apparently Blaise and his mother would be spending the summer at the Romanian reserve with Charlie so he could 'feed' Blaise every day and Pansy would be holed up in Zabini House hiding from her parents. He did not, in the least little bit, envy Charlie.

Blaise couldn't stop touching Charlie, it was a need inside him, a need that felt almost as important as breathing. He knew his mother would understand that need, he'd inherited everything he had
from her after all. He was also very grateful that both he and his mother were allowed to join Charlie in Romania. He did feel bad for Pansy though, hating the thought of her having to be alone.

Molly clucked her tongue, she didn't know what to think of her son with the incubus boy. She had wished for Charlie to find someone but a fifteen year old Slytherin wasn't exactly what she’d had in mind.

Arthur slid his arm around Molly's waist, "Now Molly love remember, it'll be getting Charlie in England during the school year at least until Mr. Zabini graduates so, silver lining yes?"

"A large shining silver lining." Molly agreed and leaned against her husband. "I just want my babies to be happy. If this boy makes Charlie happy then I will welcome him with open arms."

Harry chuckled and said goodbye to Ron and Ginny before catching up to Hermione. He wanted to reintroduce himself to her parents and see how things went.

Hermione smiled at Harry and took his hand as she lead him toward her parents. She had done what she told Harry she would and written them to tell them about Harry and her getting together but she still wanted them to meet.

"Mum, Dad, you remember Harry don't you?" She smiled and didn't let go of Harry's hand.

Hermione's parents looked at Harry, who had a sheepish and slightly nervous smile though he held tight to their daughter's hand and Herbert sighed and exchanged a look with his wife. "Of course we do princess," he caught his daughter in a hug and kissed her temple before offering Harry his hand to shake, "I still don't bite young man and truthfully...I was expecting my little girl's letter."

Harry blinked and took his hand, "Er you were?"

He nodded, "A father sees a great deal Harry just know," he gave Harry a stern look, "that if you hurt my baby girl magic won't save you from me."

Hermione's mother laughed, "Oh Herbert."

Harry had to keep from laughing himself since that look did make Hermione's dad's eyebrow look like fuzzy caterpillars, just as she'd said. "If I ever hurt her Mr. Granger I'll throw myself off a cliff."

"Don't say that Harry, you won't hurt me." Hermione squeezed his hand and shared a secret smile with him about the caterpillar eyebrows. "And Dad, I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself but I appreciate it all the same." She leaned in and kissed her Daddy's cheek, once again filling with absolute love as she saw her parents. They really were the best in the world. So accepting of her being different and of a world they never could have imagined being real. She loved them.

"I did tell you that Harry lives with the Weasleys now right? He won't have to go back to that horrible place we visited last summer." Hermione couldn't really remember if she had written to her parents about that.

Mrs. Granger blinked, "Why no that wasn't in your letter oh but that's wonderful! Er," she coughed, "I uh know they're your relatives but-"

"It's just fine ma'am, I don't like them much either," Harry's eyes gleamed with humor, "I'm seriously trading up."

"Oh you darling," Hermione's mother gave him a hug and fussed with his hair a bit, much to Harry
shock and her husband's amusement. "If my baby has to have beau I do believe I am very happy it's you young man."

"I'm very happy it's him too." Hermione beamed. "There's no one else I would want." She found it amusing that every woman over a certain age couldn't keep their fingers out of Harry's hair, trying their best to fuss and tame the impossible, untamable hair. Hermione had never been worried but it did feel nice to have her parents approval, Harry was amazing and she was glad that her parents saw that, saw that he made her happy.

Harry blushed and pat Mrs. Granger on the back and murmured, "Thank you. I'm glad you're okay with it since you're so important to Hermione." He felt a bit relieved when he was released. He just didn't know how to handle hugs from anyone but his current 'family' so it made things...weird.

Hermione smiled and moved in to hug both her parents before turning to Harry again, grasping his hand. She'd missed her parents so much but it still felt strange and wrong to know that she would have to leave Harry. She didn't want to, even though she knew Harry would be safe with the Weasleys.

Harry squeezed her hand and leaned in to give her a long hug, "I'll see you again soon. Plus Hedwig will be happy to be able to deliver lots of letters this year."

"I know," Hermione nodded and buried her nose in Harry's neck as she hugged him back. "Believe me, my pen will go warm, you'll get sick of my letters before the summer is over. And I'll come visit, we need to celebrate your birthday properly." She sniffed and moved away from his neck so that she could kiss him, even with her parents right there.

Harry was aware of her father giving him the beady eye but he kissed her back nonetheless. He'd never let a kiss from her go unanswered. When it broke he kissed the tip of her nose, "I love you Hermione and I will never, ever get sick of your letters." He tugged a bit of her hair gently with a smile.

"I love you too and you can't say that about my letters until you get an essay a day." She smiled at him before pulling away slowly, knowing her mum and dad were waiting. "Be careful Harry, no adventures without me."

"No plans on it besides, summer's usually calm...usually." He rolled his eyes and grinned, "Have a safe ride home love."

"You too, don't let Arthur drive if he's managed a car somehow." She smiled and leaned in to kiss him quickly again. "Take care and I'll be in touch soon, expect a letter tomorrow."

"I'll be looking forward to it," he waved goodbye to her one more time then she and her parents were slipping back into the muggle world. He rolled his shoulders then did much the same so he could catch the Tube to Grimmauld Place. He'd told Malfoy to meet him there with his mother outside number 10 since they couldn't get into number 12 as he'd not shared the secret yet. It didn't take very long until he was striding into the courtyard and spotting Lady Malfoy and her son standing by a lamppost, looking as posh as could be yet still managing to blend in. A charm perhaps?

Draco, stood talking to his mother outside the muggle houses when he saw Potter closing in on them. He placed his hand on his mother's arm, feeling the silk of her light summer robes underneath his fingers as he nodded toward Potter. He couldn't help but feeling a little protective toward her mother. Draco didn't think that Potter would say anything about or to her but he was still wary. Draco was a Slytherin and placing his trust in someone else did not come naturally. "Potter,
good day." He nodded his head to the other boy.

The corner of his mouth kicked up, "Malfoy," he inclined his head to Draco's mother, "Lady Malfoy. I hope you made it here okay."

Narcissa nodded, "We did Mr. Potter thank you. I vaguely recall having been here before visiting my aunt yet it is quite fuzzy. Fidelus?"

Harry grinned, "Yes, ma'am. With myself as secret keeper. Would you mind raising a shielded privacy charm please? I don't want to share the secret with any passers by."

"Of course," Narcissa reached into her purse, making it look as if she was just rummaging for something and cast the charm while her hand was concealed.

"Alright then you'll be staying at Number 12 Grimmauld Place."

Draco relaxed his grip on his wand, concealed by the folds of his own robes when he was sure neither his mother nor Potter would say something undesirable. He'd raised a slender eyebrow in surprise when he heard that his mother recognized the place even a little and that eyebrow stayed raised when the adjoining houses moved to the side to reveal a slender, tall townhouse.

Harry walked forward as Narcissa dropped the charm, followed by the two Malfoys, 'I've not actually been inside myself. My godfather, for some ungodly reason, gave it to me during the school year. I still think he's off his rocker for it."

"Siri has always been a few biscuits short of a full plate," Narcissa's tone was cool and the words had Harry freezing midstep.

Looking from his mother to Potter, Draco didn't know what to say. He had never known his mother to even mention his cousin before but from the short time he'd met the other wizard he couldn't say his mother was wrong. Besides Narcissa's tone had been cool but not freezing and not dripping the special brand of disdain only his mother could pull off. "Mother?" He looked at her questioningly.

She shook her head, letting him know it was, in a way, a test to see how easily Potter took to the defense or how easily he took insult.

Harry's shoulders shook and he laughed before turning around, "Oh that's a good one Lady Malfoy. I'll have to share it with Moony." He opened the door and stepped in first, holding his wand out even though he, technically, wasn't allowed to use it.

Narcissa lifted a brow, relaxing just a bit, and watched Potter inspect the foyer for danger before waving them in.

"Welcome to your temporary home," he grimaced, "very gloomy."

"Dear Merlin, that's the understatement of the year." Draco looked around with a curled lip. It was a rundown, gray and very gloomy house. Empty spaces glared at them from the walls like unblinking eyes from where paintings had hung. "You'll have your work cut out for you here Mother." He turned to look at Harry. "I don't think you have to worry about it becoming worse than it already is."

"No I don't imagine that's possible" he blinked at a large hole in the wall with a note floating in the empty space, his name scrawled across the front, "what in the world?" He walked closer and growled in irritation, "I really, really hate the no magic outside of school rule."
Narcissa came up behind him and spoke a diagnostic spell aloud, "If memory serves Aunt Walburga's portrait used to be here."

Seeing no warning colors on the envelope Harry plucked it out of the air, thanking Narcissa for casting the spell, and opened it, jumping when it started talking, similar to a Howler but without the screaming. 'Mr. Potter the Auror Department apologizes for the damage to the wall. It appears there was a painting stuck to it with a dark sticking charm that one of our Aurors felt needed to be investigated behind to-

'Tell the truth Shack! I blasted that bloody bitch off the wall when she wouldn't shut up and- mmph!'

'Ahem, as I was saying, Auror Tonks felt there might be something hidden behind the portrait and an attempt to investigate caused structural damage. Your account has been reimbursed for the damage. Again we apologize.' The deep voice dropped as the letter began to tear itself up. 'Honestly Nymphadora would you learn a little self-cont-

Draco's lips twitched, he couldn't help himself. The pride of the Aurors at work, still he could sympathize with the unknown Auror with the unfortunate name. They had a few of those paintings back at the Manor too and if he could get away with blasting them off the walls he would do it in a heartbeat. "Charming." He stated dryly and looked at the large, ragged hole in the wall. It wasn't that bad, Draco was sure his mother could get it up and shining again.

Narcissa remembered her aunt quite well and if the portrait was at all similar...she had to turn to examine a tarnished silver wall sconce to avoid indecorous laughter.

Harry blinked and shook his head, "Must have been a very loud portrait."

A soft sound close to a snicker came from Narcissa's direction.

Silver gray eyes widened in absolute shock. Narcissa Malfoy never snickered, it just didn't happen! He threw Potter an almost startled look. That settled it, Potter's insanity was contagious, it had even spread to his mother...The absolute ice queen. "Sounded like a very loud Auror as well."

Narcissa hummed, "Tonks, Nymphadora. I wonder if that would be Rommie's girl?" She straightened, "Are there elves Mr. Potter?"

"Er, according to the report there's one but they said he was a little...odd." Harry shifted and scratched the back of his head.

"All house elves are odd Potter, I have yet to meet a 'normal one." Draco pursed his lips and looked around the almost rubble that covered the the ground floor. "You're the Master of this house, why don't you call on the elf, he's conditioned to respond to you when you call."

"Oh and won't Hermione just love that?" He sighed and spoke quietly, "Kreacher?"

There was a pop and an ancient looking, small, gnarly and ragged house elf looked up at Harry with beady and watery eyes. "Master called for Kreacher, what can Kreacher do for his halfblood Master?"

Draco didn't even try to hide his grin.

Well wasn't that charming? Harry looked down at the elf with an intense desire to rub his temples to clear the headache coming on, "Kreacher this is Lady Narcissa Malfoy and her son Draco."
They'll be staying here for an indefinite period of time." Remembering Dobby, Harry narrowed his 
eyes and met Kreacher's, "Nothing, absolutely nothing about their presence is to be said, implied, or in any way, shape or form hinted at to anyone outside this house."

"Kreacher understands, Kreacher is not a gossip." The elf sniffed and turned toward Narcissa, his 
watery eyes softening a little. "Kreacher remembers little Miss Black and Kreacher will do his best 
to care for her and her youngling. Is there anything that little Miss Black wants for at the moment?"

"Yes Kreacher I would like you to catalogue all the damage, soiling, and infestation in the house 
please. I have agreed to redecorate the house and I need to know what needs to be done," she 
looked over at Harry, "Mr. Potter is there any directive as to possible heirlooms?"

He blinked, "Um well they'd be yours or should be anyway, I don't think Sirius wants any of them. 
So unless something's so astoundingly evil it's on par with Voldemort," he paused at the flinch, 
"Sorry."

"It is quite alright Mr. Potter. Please do continue."

"Right well unless something's so evil it's on par with the Dark Lord, do as you see fit."

"Very well, Kreacher will see that it is done." The elf bowed to Narcissa and Draco before turning 
and doing the same to Harry. "If Master need Kreacher, Master only has to call." There was another 
pop and the elf was gone again.

Draco had to readjust his thoughts about Potter once again, no matter how he tried the berk refused 
to be categorized, it was infuriating. "Thank you Potter, for letting us stay here." It was said rather 
stiffly but Draco had to say it.

Narcissa smiled proudly at her son while Harry's jaw dropped. Nothing in this world could have 
shocked him further than Draco bloody Malfoy thanking him.

"Er you're welcome Malfoy. I wish it was a bit cleaner and nicer for you two tonight."

"We will handle it well enough Mr. Potter though your concern is appreciated."

Harry nodded, "Right then. Well," he pulled a Gringotts key from his pocket and handed it to 
Narcissa, "That's to a vault that'll pay for the materials and whatever is used for the redecorating 
stuff."

She took the key with vague surprise, "And you trust me with this?"

He smiled, "Yeah. I figure you've probably got your own private vault filled to the brim so you're 
not likely to cheat me since it wouldn't get you anything significant."

Her lips twitched, "But if it would you might reconsider?"

"Well you were a Slytherin, you look out for yourself and your son. Anyone else can take the short 
bus to hell right?"

"Of course, that's how it should be." Draco smirked at his schoolmate. "Don't worry though Potter, 
if we're going to skin you it will be in an infinitely sneakier way than to clean out your renovation 
vault. Give us some time and we'll get you to give us anything we want with a smile on your face 
and a song in your heart."

Harry snorted, "Yeah you work on that Malfoy. I've got to get going and meet the Weasleys in
Diagon. I'll leave the house in your very capable hands Lady Malfoy."

She inclined her head, "Thank you Mr. Potter."

He grinned and waved goodbye before leaving the house and heading to meet the Weasleys. He did not want to make Molly hunt him down.

Sirius' eye twitched as he looked at the head of the old bastard in the fireplace. As he'd thought Albus was trying to schmooze his way into the use of his townhouse for the Order. He really wanted to jab the poker through the floating head but knew he couldn't give the depth of his loathing for Dumbledore away. "I'm sorry Albus but I'm not the owner of the townhouse any longer."

Dumbledore blinked, feeling a creeping dread. He'd been counting on that house so he'd not have to use one of his own. "I beg your pardon my boy?"

"I needed money to survive while on the run Albus and if I'd drawn it from my existing vaults that are watched, I'd have given myself away. So I sold the townhouse." It was a glorious, glorious lie and it felt good to see Albus' face fall. Take that you old bastard.

"I see. Well then my boy I shall simply have to figure something else out. Do take care of yourself. You're so very important to Harry." With that Albus cut the connection off, rather rudely truth be told.

Sirius just growled and flipped the now empty fireplace off. "Kiss my furry-

Remus cleared his throat, cutting Sirius' rant off. It wasn't that he didn't agree but Orion was listening with wide eyes and figuratively pointed ears.

"He's an old blowhard, we all know that." Remus' lips quirked upward though. "Did you see his face though? It looked as if someone shaved his beard, it was rather glorious to tell the truth."

Orion chuckled as he watched his parents. It was clear to him that they both loved and wanted each other, he just couldn't understand why they weren't together. It didn't make sense to him.

"You've got that bloody right Moony." Sirius rose from his crouch and stretched, arching his spine, "I'd better warn Harry though. If the old man goes digging he might discover that Harry owns the place now and I don't want the cub being unprepared."

Remus nodded. "Good thinking, Dumbledore is not above digging and you're right, Harry should be prepared for that. There's not much the Bee can do about it but he can pester Harry about being allowed to use the house and he can begin to question why you didn't tell him it was Harry's now in the first place."

"And I can't just tell him that I know what a lying, corrupted, evil, manipulative f-" he glanced at Orion, "-uriously hate inducing old rotter he is now." He tilted his head to get a crick out of his neck.

Orion rolled his eyes. "I'm not a baby you know, even though you change your words I still know what you intended to say in the first place and I can guarantee I've heard worse. I'm a Slytherin." He stretched out in the chair he had occupied. "What should we give Scar for his birthday? It should be something special."
"I've got an idea about that actually. If my son and heir," he winked at Orion, "doesn't mind a trip to Gringotts under his dad's watchful eye."

"The son and heir supposes he can be persuaded...Especially if the trips to Gringotts is followed by a trip to the Quidditch store." Orion grinned at Sirius making Remus snort.

"Definitely Slytherin, no wrongful sorting there." He looked at Sirius. "What exactly do you have in mind Pads."

"One of my more prolific ancestors had twelve children, all of whom had a talent for trouble. He commissioned thirteen communication hand mirrors in case they ever needed to call him for help. Those mirrors are in the vault. I'm thinking Harry would appreciate them to hand out to whoever he wants to keep in touch with." Sirius reached out and ruffled Orion's hair.

"That's wicked, I bet he'll love that. I know I would. Just think of the things you could get up to, having such a way to communicate." Orion sighed happily, thinking of all the ways he could rule the school with mirrors like that, he knew that Harry would probably use them better but he could take a few minutes and indulge in prankster fantasies.

"I think that's an excellent gift and Harry will appreciate it very much." Remus smiled both at Sirius and their easily over excited son.

Sirius grinned back and lunged to wrestle with his son, "Brilliant, then Orion, being the heir and with a little written permission, can get them out and we can wrap them up so Harry can talk to his besties whenever his little heart desires. Ow!" He growled at the bite mark on his hand, "Oh you are going down pup!"

"You wish, I'm younger and prettier...Of course I'll win." Orion giggled and used every ticklish spot and dirty trick he could think of to get the best of his father.

Remus rolled his eyes and watched the two of them roll around on the carpet with shrieks, growls and laughter. He couldn't help but smile though and he wouldn't want it any other way. Having both Sirius and Orion there, it was perfect. Remus felt like he was truly home.
Ron stared wide eyed at what had woken him. Harry. Tossing and turning and making noises in his sleep, obviously having a nightmare and a bad one from the look of it. He swung his legs out of bed and got up, intending to go and shake Harry out of it when his best friend sat bolt upright with a short scream, green eyes wild and his hand groping for a wand.

Footsteps sounded, came closer and closer and it wasn't long at all before the door to Ron and Harry's room burst open and two pyjama clad twins and a very rumpled Ginny burst inside, hair askew and wands raised. "What happened? Is something wrong?" George blinked owlishly, looking around for any sort of threat.

Harry shuddered and shook his head, "No, just a bad dream. I'm sorry for waking you."

Ron just went over and plonked his butt next to Harry, "Just a bad dream my freckled ginger arse, that was a full blown nightmare."

"Mate, I'm siding with Ronnie on this one." George gave Harry a worried look. "It sounded as if you were being under the cruciatus or worse. What was the dream about?" He followed Ron's suit and walked further into the orange room and sat down at Harry's feet on his bed.

Even though she was worried and shook up, Ginny had to hide a smile at her brothers. George's pyjama trousers were inside out and Fred was missing his shirt. She had a feeling Harry hadn't exactly woken them up. "Why don't our newly of age brothers put up a silence spell around this room before Mum and Dad come running?" She gave the twins a pointed look. "Go ahead Harry, tell us what the dream was about, it's always easier to share your hardships with others."

Fred just settled his bum on the other side of Harry's feet, not bothering with the charm. Nightmares were no secret in this house, they were shared so that everyone in the family could help. He poked Harry's foot under the covers, "Give over little brother. What nightmare did you have?"

Harry shook his head, "It doesn't matter, really. It's over now and there's nothing to be done about it."

Ron narrowed his eyes, "I think I know. It was Voldemort coming back and Viktor's death wasn't it?" Off Harry shocked look Ron shook his head, "I know you mate and you might say you've accepted it but here," he poked Harry in the chest, over the heart, "you're eaten up with guilt. Plus you've not told anyone what happened, not really. Leaves it all stewing about in your brain."

Fred budged over so Ginny could join their puppy pile on the bed and squeezed Harry's ankle, "Come on Harry, tell us get some of it out at least."

Outside the door, Arthur caught his wife's arm and shook his head, bringing a finger to his lips. He had a feeling that if they went in now Harry wouldn't say anything and would just keep brooding over what had happened to him. He leaned in to murmur softly, "Our other babies have this at the moment Mollywobbles, let's just listen for the moment."

Molly nodded even though her urge to rush in there, gather Harry up and soothe all his pain and worries away. She knew Arthur was right and she felt a wave of immense pride for her other children, they must have done something right when they raised them. Molly snuggled into Arthur's side quietly and settled in to listen to what was being said on the other side of the door.
Afterward she could soothe with midnight tea and cake. For now her babies had it under control.

"You don't have to share everything if you don't want to." George's voice was serious. "Just get some of it out, keep it from festering. We're here for you little brother, in any way, shape or form that you need us to be."

"Come on mate, don't make me send Pig to Hermione so she comes here all frizzled to shake the nightmares out of your head." Ron laid a steady hand on Harry's shoulder.

Harry lifted a knee to wrap his arms around it, "That's blackmail," he sighed and rested his cheek on his raised knee, "The dreams change, sometimes I manage to knock Viktor out of the way and everything's alright and then I wake up and...it's not, others I see myself casting the Killing Curse at him. I know I didn't kill him but sometimes...it feels like I did. If I'd just made it to that Cup a fraction of a second faster, ran for it right away instead of accept that little silent challenge from him then I'd have been the only one there. Tonight though...it was mostly exactly how it happened."

He rubbed the scar on his arm from where Pettigrew had sliced it open, "You know I actually managed not to land flat on my face with that portkey travel? I landed in a crouch, I had my wand out, so did Viktor but...too slow. I was too slow to see Wormtail there, too slow to stop him from casting the curse." He closed his eyes and hugged his knee tighter, "that light flashed and then he was just...falling to the ground in that graveyard, like a doll some spoiled child had tossed away."

Fred inhaled slowly and lifted a hand to rest on Harry's head, the pain in his voice made his own heart hurt.

Ginny made a distressed sound and reached out to pet Harry's leg, it was the part of him that she could reach. She wanted to find the right thing to say but she wasn't sure of what that might be. "I can't even begin to imagine the horror of witnessing that Harry, of being there in that graveyard. I know though that despite you being captured, bound and sliced open you still stood your ground. You managed to come back to us and you managed to bring Viktor's body back with you. Return him to his parents for a proper funeral, so that he could get the respect he deserves."

She pushed a lock of red hair behind her ear and continued to pet Harry's leg. "I wish I could say or do something to make this right but I can't...What happened isn't right, it's so, so very wrong but by you coming back to us...By you still fighting, you have made sure that Viktor's death wasn't for nothing. We will all keep fighting, we'll bring both Voldemort and Wormtail down...Dumbledore too. It wasn't your fault Harry, that is the thing you have to remember, it was never your fault."

"I just want this mess over with." Harry closed his eyes, "I want people to finally see Dumbledore for what he is, an evil manipulative old man who's after getting his name remembered for eternity, to see what he's done. I want that bloody ritual he used on Orion to get reversed so he can't jerk Remus around by a leash anymore and I so bloody badly want him to lose the power he abuses to pull the wool over people's eyes. Do you know when I told him that Voldemort had used my blood to come back he looked so pleased before he masked it with that false grandfather look? It was like that's exactly what he was after. That's what I saw in my nightmare, he was there, watching the whole thing with that pleased twinkle in his eye."

Ron growled and scooted closer to give his best friend, brother in all but blood, a hug, "He'll go down Harry. Bloody hell if Mum knew the truth about him and everything he's done that's stripped you of your childhood she'd turn him inside out herself."

Fred nodded, "Yeah, Dad would get in on the action too. He's all calm and gentle and whatnot but if he ever loses his temper," he shuddered, "well Ronnieskins comes by his honest is all I can say."
Outside the door Arthur's eyes were wide and he looked down into Molly's. What were their children talking about? Dumbledore? Evil? What ritual?

Molly was as white as a sheet as she looked back at her husband, she had no idea what the children was talking about but she knew her babies would never lie. Not about something like this. Both she and Arthur had found Dumbledore's actions regarding Harry and now the Tournament strange but she couldn't have imagined this in her nightmares. Stripping Harry of a childhood? Performing some sort of ritual on Orion? Keeping Remus under control? What was this? She grasped for Arthur's hand, feeling as if one of the most sturdy foundations of her life had been ripped out from beneath her.

Her hand moved toward the door knob, this was something they had to talk about.

Harry's head whipped up as the door opened again and he saw Mr. and Mrs. Weasley there. "Er Fred, George, you didn't put up a silencing charm did you?"

Fred turned and grimaced at his parents' expressions, "Well I'd say we're busted."

"The term busted means that you've done something wrong. You haven't have you?" Sharp, blue eyes bore into her sons'. Molly brought out her wand and suddenly Harry's bed was twice as big, then she and Arthur joined the pile on the bed. "Harry, is this true? About Dumbledore? Has he done these things? What is this ritual you spoke of and what did Ron mean about depriving you of a childhood? Did Dumbledore know about what your relatives did to you?"

Harry shifted and met Molly's eyes, "Oh he knew, Madam Pomfrey kept begging, and occasionally yelling at him, to stop sending me back. I'm sorry. I know how much you hold him in esteem but he's just not worth your goodwill." He was sorry, sorry that he had to shatter the good illusions Molly and Arthur held but he knew they'd be hurt worse if they continued to hold on to a false image. "You know how you met Sirius just after the Tournament, er well...met him again?"

Arthur nodded, "Dumbledore mentioned that he was innocent and that Peter was the one who...well."

"That's the bare bones truth but there's a bit more to the story," Harry explained about his third year in Hogwarts, "when I was back in Privet Drive I just kept thinking about it and things just...didn't add up. Sirius never got a trial the first time nor this time but who's been the head of the Wizengamot for the last several years? Dumbledore could have easily made them give him a fair trial and exposed the truth but he never did because then Sirius would be free and he'd have me away from the Dursleys faster than you can say Bob's your uncle, Fanny's your aunt. I researched, Hermione researched and I even wrote a couple of experts on warding about sacrificial blood wards and the ones at Privet drive don't do anything to protect me. They'd only have the flimsiest protection if Petunia cared about me and...she really doesn't. There are active blood wards but they don't protect me. They protect the Dursleys."

Ron saw his mother slowly working things through in her own head and saw her jaw tightening little by little and picked it up, "Harry and Hermione really thought about it, examined all the inconsistencies and slips and noticed a pattern. Nothing bad happened inside Hogwarts until Harry started and then every year after he begins something happens. Something Dumbledore supposedly doesn't realize but a trio of ickle students do? It's always Harry who winds up stepping in the messes and taking on things that adult Aurors would cringe at."

Molly was livid, absolutely furious. That old fart of a smarmy bastard. "Don't be sorry Harry and don't you dare apologize for telling us the truth. I rather hurt a moment and wake up to reality than to waste my life singing that man's praise." Her hands shook and she wanted to get them on
Dumbledore right now. Put him through all the hurt he'd put Harry through, knowingly and cold-blooded.

"There were things that didn't add up, both Arthur and I have seen that but I couldn't imagine that it was this bad. Don't keep things like this to yourself to protect us, we love you Harry, we're on your side and will do everything we can to help you...Thank Morgana that we did go behind his back and get custody of you and no wonder that he looked like someone had cut wind in his face when he found out."

George knew his mother was angry and that he shouldn't laugh but he couldn't help himself, not when she said things like that.

Fred grinned, "Mum, we adore you."

Harry gave a soft laugh. Yeah that expression had been priceless. "I'm afraid it gets worse. The ritual you heard about...it's one that ties Orion's life to Dumbledore's whim. He tricked Remus into letting him hold Orion when he was a few weeks old and did it. If Remus steps out of line then all Dumbledore has to do is just tug on that bond and he can kill Orion." Harry would forever remember the look that came over Arthur's face right then as the second most frightening thing he'd ever seen in his life.

"He used a dark ritual, on a baby?" If looks could kill and Dumbledore had been in the room, Orion and Remus' troubles would have been over because the usually soft and perhaps a bit fuzzy brown eyes had iced over, hardened and grown sharp enough to cut.

Harry nodded, "Yeah."

Molly was so upset that she had trouble getting any words out. To do something that evil and unconscionable to a small and absolutely defenseless baby...She couldn't comprehend the kind of man who would do that. "That sweet, lovely boy." Her throat closed up as her anger and resentment grew. "And poor Remus, knowing that someone has that kind of control over his child. A parent does anything for their children and for someone to use that as Dumbledore has...He should be turned inside out and strung up by his toenails. I would suggest him being fed to the trolls but as rotten as he is, Dumbledore would probably just give them a stomach ache."

She fell silent for a while before looking at Harry again. "Have you talked to Bill about this? As childish as he seems at times he really is a top grade curse breaker. I know rituals are a little different but their magic stems from the same origin. Maybe Bill could help."

Harry nodded, "Bill's collaborating with Professor Snape when he can. Snape's got so much on his plate though. We have found a way to soften the effect, we just need a vial of freely given dragon blood." He leaned his head on her shoulder, "We've all been searching and looking and working on this, as well as other things over the last year. As good as stringing Dumbledore up by his toenails sounds, and it does sound good, we've all been working so that we take away what he wants most and make his worst fears come true. He's already lost the IWC position, we're working on booting him out of Hogwarts and the Wizengamot next, slowly taking away the power he's got and leaving him as nothing more than a fleeting memory, easily forgotten."

Arthur pat Harry on the back, "He's likely to lose the Wizengamot seat soon actually. None of them are pleased with how he handled the Tournament."

"Don't forget that Rita Skeeter's book is coming out this summer, I hear she's actually put down some research into this one. Some research and a wagonload of shite," George gave Harry a crooked smile. "Ronniekins did good there, steering Skeeter in Dumbles direction back at the
Second Task. She hasn't let up on him since then and even though the book may not be taken seriously by everyone it will wake questions and leave the Bee with a lot of explaining to do."

Molly had her arms wrapped around Harry, trying her best to force her anger back down and convert it into something useful instead.

Harry's lips twitched, "Not just research, she actually spoke to Bathilda Bagshot herself according to Snuffles and Moony. Apparently Ms. Bagshot knew the buzzing annoyance as a boy and young man."

Ron whistled low, "That will lend serious weight to the book."

Arthur nodded, "Bagshot is not known for tolerating much in the way of falsifications in writing."

"That's good, that means that Skeeter will have to have controlled herself a little and that in turn means that Dumbledore will have even more to answer for and explain." Molly patted Harry's hair, smoothing down some of the worst cowlicks. "More people will see Dumbledore for who he is, just like Arthur and I just did and he will get what's coming to him. We'll see to that."

"Can't you send him another Howler when the book comes out Mum? They are always hilarious."

Ginny grinned. "They are not supposed to be funny." Molly huffed. "They are a punishment that are supposed to make you think twice...Arthur when did we fail? Our children are a wild bunch, no respect for rules."

Harry grinned. "You have no idea just how 'wild'." Animagi magic was one of only a few undetectable by the Trace.

"I'm not sure I want to know. Don't break any important laws, don't hurt anyone unless they are evil gits and don't get hurt yourselves...I think we'll leave it like that and leave your poor Mother with a few of her illusions about angelic children, who smile politely at their parents and don't have their pyjama trousers on inside out."

George flushed deep red and looked down at his lap.

Ron hooted with laughter, "Oh she got you there George! But Mum er...define 'important' laws, and does it count if we plan to rectify the issue as soon as the two great evil meanies are taken down?"

"Important laws are the ones that will land you in Azkaban or with a broken wand. I am not giving you carte blanche here but I do understand that there are things that needs to be done. Be careful, stay whole and safe and I will be happy." Molly looked around at his babies, their happiness and health meant everything to her.

Ron peered at Harry, "Er I don't suppose you know the penalty for-"

"Five hundred Galleon fine Ron," Harry shook his head, "but as minors we'd we charged two hundred. Fred and George however, poor lads, aren't minors anymore," he smiled at them.

Fred stuck his tongue out and razzed Harry before turning to his mother, "Mum did you know that we can all pull a patronus now?"

"No I didn't know that but that's wonderful. I'm so proud of you all." Her arms tightened around Harry and she smiled at those around them on the widened bed.
Harry chuckled and mouthed 'good job' to Fred, "They've all done well at it. Ron was the one who managed it first though. It was pretty impressive."

Ron blushed, "Second you mean, you got it down third year."

Harry poked Ron with his foot, "Hey don't diminish your feat. It took me nearly a year, you had it down in what, a month and a half?"

"Even I have to admit that's rather brilliantly done." Ginny poked Ron in the side. "I suppose it's comforting to know that you're not quite as blockheaded as you both look and sound." She stuck her tongue out at him.

"I am very proud of you all regardless and I would love to see them all but we are not breaking that particular law...Especially not to show off. I'll get to see them later." Molly smiled.

Fred and George exchanged a look and Fred fluttered his lashes at her, "Well seeing as we can use magic without breaking the law—"

"-We would love to show you our Patronus forms, spread some light and joy on this dark and dreary night." George joined his twin in the lash fluttering, he threw in a slight pout just to seal the deal.

"Oh really...You two." Molly rolled her eyes and sighed. "Go ahead then, show us."

"Ready Georgie?" Fred cast the charm in tandem with his brother and in a flash two silvery foxes were gamboling around the room playfully.

Arthur chuckled, "That's excellent boys."

Molly beamed and shifted so she could give both of them loud, smooching kisses on their cheeks.

Ginny noticed that George's patronus fox was slightly smaller with larger ears and recognized it as the arctic fox her other brother was in animagus form. That they were both each other's safety both amused her and warmed her heart. It wasn't really a surprise.

Harry smiled and just absorbed the better mood of the room, grateful to have been given the gift of being considered a part of this family. It was something he'd never imagined he'd ever have and he hoped Dumbledore's arse was burning knowing he was happy for once.

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Dumbledore's arse was certainly chapped as he stared at the cover of the book Rita Skeeter had sent him, his 'own personal copy' and he badly wanted to toss it across the room. How could things in one short year get so twisted and warped? He'd lost his positions on both the IWC and the Wizengamot, both bodies having cited his reckless disregard for laws in effect as the reason, his tenure at Hogwarts was coming under scrutiny, and worse Fudge was sending an Inquisitor here to investigate his choices of professors.

Harry was slowly slipping from his grasp as well but he could somewhat remedy that this year when he returned to the school. With a little careful handling he should be able to bring Harry back into the line he needed. Perhaps he should tell Harry about the Horcruxes? It would certainly make for a good way to get the boy to seek his more knowledgeable presence. Yes, that is what he'd do. Tell Harry about the Horcruxes and plant the seed that he might be one with subtle guiding.
Harry staggered just a bit under the sudden weight but soon had his arms around her in a tight embrace, "I missed you. How has your summer been?"

"It's been good but I've missed you so much." Hermione was still wrapped around Harry like a vine. The Harry she'd said goodbye to at the beginning of summer had been a boy but this Harry was closer to a man. Both taller and broader over the shoulders. He looked great. Mostly though, it was wonderful to just hold him again, feel him close.

Harry buried his nose against her neck, "Completely mutual. Letters just aren't enough," he had no problem with her staying wrapped around him as he was still holding tight to her as well. She looked fantastic, even more like a lady than the last time he'd seen her but then she could be covered in blood, mud, and unspeakable stuff and he'd think her the most beautiful girl in the world.

"How's your summer been then? Survived being a guinea pig for the twins merchandise and pranks? The poltergeist in the attic hasn't been unpleasant? I hope Errol and Pig have been kind to Hedwig, not driving her spare." Hermione couldn't keep the smile off her face as she hugged Harry. It really was marvelous being with him again.

"It's been good. I usually manage to dodge the twins' merchandise and Ron winds up turning colors or growing horns or what have you. The poltergeist is loud but I've invested in earplugs. Hedwig is fine with Errol as he sleeps most of the time but Pig still drives her spare, he's just so hyper. I expect a few more wing whacks though and he'll start learning. We've been going a bit Quidditch mad as well."

Hermione laughed, it was such a relief and joy hearing that Harry'd had a good summer, filled with Quidditch, family and good times. Every summer should be like that for him. "Sounds wonderful, I'm not too sad to have missed the Quidditch though." Running out of reasons to hold on to him much longer, Hermione started pull away, keeping her hands on Harry's shoulders. Stroking her fingers over their width.

He chuckled and squeezed his hands on her waist, "I know, flying is not your mode of transportation or recreation." Taking his hands from her waist he caught her hand and kissed her knuckles, "How about you? What have you been up to all summer?"

"I've done what I do best, studying, reading...I've mostly done it outside since the weather's been so hot." She looked into his vividly green eyes. "Other than that I've mostly spent time with Mum and Dad, trying to fit a year of companionship into a summer."

He smiled, "I'm glad it's been a good summer, for the both of us."

Ron, being Ron, had to sort of ruin it by popping his head out the window and yelling, "Well aside from himself still stewing and giving himself nightmares! Fix him Hermione!"

Harry turned and gave Ron an evil glare.

"Nightmares?" Hermione reached up and cupped a slightly stubbled cheek, making Harry look back at her. "What sort of nightmares is Ron talking about?" She could guess and it made her heart hurt. "Why didn't you mention it in one of your letters? I could have come sooner you know." She rubbed her thumb over his cheek, looking at him with worried brown eyes.
He leaned into her hand and silently swore to tear Ron a new one, "I know but I didn't want you to cut your time with your parents short. They're just about what happened and everyone here is helping I just...I keep thinking on it and the more I think about it the less I can push it all back behind my mind shields so...it leaks."

"Oh Harry." Hermione leaned in to embrace him again, rubbing her lips gently against his neck. "Of course it leaks, I would be more worried if it didn't. It's not good to bottle it up either, that's when the dreams come I think. You must know I would always come if you need me. Mum and Dad would understand that. Please don't lock me out, I'm always willing to listen at least, even if I can't do much more."

"I know love," he ran a hand down her hair, "I'm not locking you out. I'd have brought it up, later on. It's not something I wanted to bring up soon as we got back together is all."

"Okay, I can understand that. I don't mean to nag you this soon either." Hermione stood on her toes and kissed him, amazed at how tall Harry had gotten in a few short months. "I just want you to be alright and happy. I have nightmares about that night too, about you and about...Viktor. We'll get through them together."

"Oh Mione," he gave her a gentle loving kiss back not at all liking that she had nightmares over it too, "Together then. Now, you wanna come in and help me hit Ron with a pillow?"

"How can I say no to a chance to smack Ron around with a pillow?" Hermione smiled at him and kissed him again before stepping away. "I'll do it for the fun...He shouldn't be punished for worrying about you though. He cares about you." Twining their hands together she pulled him toward the house.

"I know. I'm just a little irritated that he shouted it out the bloody window." Harry laced their fingers together, "I mean come on, I already woke the whole house once earlier this summer, does he have to share it with the whole neighborhood? I have my pride and I haven't shared his night time mumblings with the entire world."

"Okay, that he does deserve a few extra whacks for but he means well and this neighborhood isn't exactly crowded." She could understand Harry though, he was a very private person so of course he wouldn't like to have his sleeping problems shouted out a window like that. "I'll box his ears for you, after I've hugged him hello." She squeezed his hand lovingly as they walked inside the homey, lopsided house.

"Works for me," he squeezed her hand back, "Mr. and Mrs. Weasley know about the Bee now by the way. I think I forgot to put that in my last letter. We can talk about that freely around them now."

"That's good, it will help not to have to watch our tongues constantly and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley deserved to know." Hermione breathed in the scents of fresh baked bread, wildflowers and freshly laundered clothes that always permeated the Burrow. There was something about this imperfect, rambling old house that relaxed her. It was a home and in Hermione's mind it was perfect.

"Did Mrs. Weasley fly through the roof?" She looked out the window and smiled when she noticed that Crookshanks had already claimed his spot in the garden, driving the gnomes on the run under small shaking fists and vile hisses.

"Not round us but I have a feeling Mr. Weasley's ears got a workout in private. He looked positively scary though, when I told them about the ritual used on Orion. If anyone ever says he can't get angry, oh they are so very, very wrong." He looked up as Ron came in the kitchen rubbing
the back of his head.

"One of you want to smack me don't you?"

"Now what could possibly give you an idea like that?" Hermione's brows rose as she let go of Harry's hand and walked to Ron, noticing how he flinched when she raised her arms before she wrapped them around him in a hug. "It's good to see you Ron, I've missed you too." She hugged him tightly before bringing her hand up and twisting his ear. "Now, what were you thinking? Shouting out the window...Thank you for telling me though."

"Ow, ow, ow, ow. I don't suppose telling you Mum caught me on the way down and boxed my ears would make you let, ow, up?" He looked over at Harry, "I am sorry mate but I've been getting worried, 'specially since your magic is doing a weird independent silencing charm when you're asleep."

Harry's brows shot up and his jaw dropped, "My magic is what?"

Hermione instantly let go of Ron's reddened ear and looked at him in surprise before shifting her gaze to Harry, worry painted over her features. "If your magic acts independently when you are asleep or unaware then things are worse then you told me they were. That's serious Harry."

Harry looked seriously confused, "What? But I...they're really not that bad, not nearly as bad as the ones I was having last year before I started the occlumency lessons. I don't get it."

Ron frowned and snatch a biscuit from a tin on one of the counters and thought it over. "Hmm, what happened when you had nightmares at the Dursleys? When you woke them up?" Hermione stepped close to Harry again, running her hand down his arm. "Maybe your magic does it to unconsciously protect you."

He tilted his head, "I don't think I've woken the Dursleys with a nightmare since..." his brows furrowed, "I honestly can't remember when." He'd never had a problem with that, knowing exactly what would have happened if he had woken them. "But I'm safe here, I feel safe here, why would my magic try and protect me when I don't need to be protected?"

Ron studied his friend then threw a bit of biscuit at him, it hitting right in the middle of his forehead, "You little...you're trying to keep from disturbing us. We don't mind being woken!" He scowled at his best friend in exasperation, "I'd rather be woken up than let you suffer silently."

"You did deserve that biscuit attack, Ron is right." Hermione looked at Harry and brushed a few stray crumbs away from his forehead. "You are with family here and I can guarantee that no one here would mind you waking them up if you have a nightmare or worried sleep in any way. Don't protect us from you Harry, we're here for you and we'll gladly help. Unfortunately we can't take the nightmares away from you but we can listen when they wake you." Hermione hated the thought of Harry in pain and she hated that he thought he had to protect them from it.

He was still confused, "But...I mean, I don't do it on purpose! I mean it's not like I lay down thinking 'I hope I don't wake anyone up tonight.' Yeah I do hate waking you but I'm not dwelling on it or anything."

Ron shook his head, "Mate you scare me sometimes with how unaware you are of the power you have. I don't mean scare me as in I'm afraid you'll blow something up but more...how can you use it if you're unaware of it?"

"I'm not really that powerful...am I?" Harry's brows knit.
Ron sighed, "I think Mum would explain better than me, lemme go get her." He pat Harry on the shoulder with a smile as he walked past.

Hermione curled around Harry as they waited. "You really are powerful, even I can sense that despite not knowing that much of magical reserves. It's a good thing though and nothing you should worry about. I'm sure Mrs. Weasley will be able to explain it to you." She had her arm around his waist and her head resting on his shoulder. Hermione really had missed him, it was almost scary how much she loved him.

Molly came into the room, Ron walking behind her. She smiled and kissed Hermione on the cheek, welcoming her to the Burrow before placing her hands on her hips. "What's all this about then?"

Harry explained about his magic bringing up a silencing barrier, "I'm not doing it on purpose, I swear. I mean I don't like waking you all up but I'm not trying to bring up the barrier, I don't even really think on it that much. Ron said something about how powerful he says I am and well, I'm not *that* powerful am I? How does that work anyway?"

Molly straightened her apron and took Harry's hands, leading him to the kitchen table and sitting down with him. "I'm not sure how to explain this but yes you are very powerful Harry. Usually magic demands an action, a conscious thought followed by an action. Sort of like when you reach out to open a door. An impulse travels from your brain and your hand reaches out to open the door. Most wizard and witches have to reach for their magic. You have what is almost a limitless reserve of it. Your magic listens directly to the impulse from your brain but bypasses the arm reaching out. It's not necessary. Am I making sense?"

"Um I think, my magic opens the door because I thought about it before I really make up my mind to reach for the handle or not?" Harry plucked at a loose thread unraveling from his sleeve.

"Precisely." Molly smiled gently at him. "Where the rest of us need to think the thought through, decide to open the door and reach out to do it, you only have to have the first impulse, the one you don't even notice. Your magic responds that well to you, wants to please you and you have so much of it that it practically leaks out around your edges."

Ron nodded, "You're really powerful mate. Usually it's only full grown wizards who've been round the block a few hundred times that give that...thrum off. When you hit your inheritance you'll probably blow the roof off." He dodged his mother's swat.

Harry frowned, "But then..." he didn't really want to get his magic to respond slower to him because he understood that in a battle situation the faster wand and magic was the one that won, "I mean I don't feel it so how can I know when my magic is doing something unconsciously or not?"

"You don't feel it now because you're not a hundred percent connected with your magic just yet. That usually comes after your inheritance but you're already so strong in your magic that you should fuse together now." Molly clucked her tongue. "Normally it's your parents, the one you inherit your magical line from that helps you connect with your magic. I know Arthur would be happy to help you or if you choose Sirius then I'm sure he's willing to help as well. It's a soul journey more than anything else. You and your guide will walk to a place where wild magic is strong, meditate and connect with the magic that flows inside you."

Harry kept tugging on the thread, unraveling it further, "What do you mean inherit my magical line? Don't I get my magic from both my parents?" He tilted his head, this new information sort of swirling round in his head.
"Yes you do get your magic from both parents, of course you do. Magic behaves differently with men and women though and when you are to connect and fuse with your magical core tradition has it that it passes from father to son and from mother to daughter. It's the old ways and strangely enough it works." Molly reached out and ruffled his hair. "I know it's confusing and a lot to take in but this is nothing you have to decide on right this minute. Your magic won't hurt anyone."

"It's definitely confusing alright." He fiddled with the string. He did love Sirius and Molly and Arthur but really when he thought about it, if he was going to be going through any sort of transition or fusing, he really could only think of one adult he'd really want guiding him. He looked up at her, "It wouldn't make anything go off kilter if a werewolf erm guides, if that's the right word, me through it would it?"

Molly's blue eyes softened as she looked at her youngest boy. "No, a werewolf guide won't throw anything off kilter, as long as he's not wolfed out when you do it." She smiled. "Remus is an excellent teacher with an ocean of patience, I suppose he needs it dealing with Sirius Black on a daily basis. I'm sure he'll be able to help you Harry."

Ron snickered at the crack his mother had made about Sirius and had to duck his head from Hermione's aimed head slap, "Not to mention raising Orion. I love the kid but he's definitely a Marauder of the new generation."

Harry smiled, "Not that I don't think you or Mr. Weasley wouldn't do a good job I just...Remus taught me the patronus charm and he's...well...You're all family but Remus is...sort of more family? I don't know how to explain it."

"I understand and you don't have to explain yourself luv." She leaned in to hug him. "We all love you Harry and we don't care who helps you as long as you get help when you need it."

Hermione thought she understood where Harry came from with Remus and she was sure Remus would be honored and help her Harry any way he could.

He returned the hug, "I love you all too."

"Oh we know that mate," Ron's voice was calm and assured. That was one thing no one could ever doubt when it came to Harry. His best friend was the most emotional bloke he'd ever met and the one most willing to share and show his positive emotions. When Harry cared you knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Just like Harry's magic it was a feeling that wrapped round you and comforted. "Course you love Mione most of all," he grinned and waggled his brows and waited for the two ladies to whack him for it.

"Of course, that's just as it should be and you should play nice Ronald. Remember that your lovely Luna is joining us for supper. If I were you, I'd be careful of who I teased." Molly turned sharp eyes on her sun and hugged Harry again before rising from her seat. She petted Hermione's blushing cheek with an understanding smile.

Ron just grinned at his mother, "Hey I've, what did Hermione call it, ebulbled? I'm not a caveman anymore, bring it on."

Harry laughed, "It's evolved Ron and I'll keep that in mind." He stood up, "You don't mind if I use the floo do you Mrs. Weasley? To call Remus?"

Molly who was laughing loudly at her son ebulbling shook her head. "Of course not, go right ahead. Feel free the use the one in Arthur's study if you want some privacy."
"Do you really want me to bring it on Ron." Hermione had narrowed her eyes at her friend as she stepped closer. "Because I can do it you know, maybe I should wait until Luna got here though, so we both can see how much you've really ebulbed." If Ron wanted to be challenged then Hermione was more than happy to do just that.

Ron smiled at her, "Do your worst Hermione. I'm mad over Luna and not afraid to let it be known."

Harry shook his head as he went to go make the floo call. If nothing else dinner would be interesting.

Hermione suddenly made a cooing noise, all teasing forgotten for the moment as she flung herself at Ron, hugging him tightly. "I really do love you Ron. I think it's wonderful that you're mad about Luna, I know she feels the same about you and the two of you make a lovely couple. She brings out the best in you." She hugged him tighter yet. Hermione had missed Ron too, he was her best friend alongside Harry. Ron had taken her and Harry getting together wonderfully well and she was happy about that. She couldn't even imagine what she would have done if it had fractured their friendship in any way. Luckily it hadn't.

"Er thanks Hermione but I need to breathe."

Harry chuckled as the sound of Ron and Hermione getting into one of their 'discussions' faded as he reached Arthur's empty study and went to the fireplace to floo Remus.

Sirius was laying on the floor, bored out of his skull while Remus and Orion were out getting groceries. Harry's present was already wrapped, the house sparkling clean, the laundry all done, Buckbeak groomed, and he'd read every last one of the books about. He was going spare with nothing to do in the house though it was not nearly as bad as it would have been had he been in a house he didn't like but it still drove him up the wall. He just wasn't built to be idle.

He wished he could have been out doing the shopping with his son and Remus and then pulling them both to a park or the beach for a little fun. It honestly made him sad that he couldn't join them as a man and as a dog he could only go so many places. He hated missing out and being separated from Remus and their son. The sound of Harry's voice calling out from the fireplace had him up and rushing for it, "Cub! Hey what brings you to call?"

"Hey Sirius. Um I wanted to talk to Remus actually."

"Well I like that, here I am all eager to hear your voice and it's Moony you want," his tone was playful, making sure Harry knew he wasn't actually upset, "Remus and the pup are out getting groceries but they should be back soon if you want to wait."

"Sure, Hermione and Ron are having one of their verbal sparring matches so I've got time," he started talking with his godfather, exchanging insults and tales and telling him about the twins' campaign for the affections of Draco.

Orion toed the door open and dropped his load of groceries on the floor in the hallway the moment he was inside. This was what he always did so Remus had learnt the hard way not to let his son carry anything breakable like eggs, milk bottles and the like. "We're home!" The young teen bellowed as if it was a grand manor instead of a small cottage they stayed in.

Hearing voices from the living room and recognizing both of them he kicked of his sneakers quicke and hurried towards the sound, socks gliding on the old, polished wooden floors. "Scar!" Orion's smile was wide enough to split his face in half as he dropped to his knees in front of the fire place, next to Sirius. "How are you? How's your summer been? Do you remember that we're going flying
once we visit?" Bright amber eyes sparkled.

Remus sighed and shook his head as he entered the cottage and saw the abandoned grocery bags. He might have turned thirteen but Orion was still very much a child and Remus couldn't be happier about that. Adulthood with its burdens and responsibilities would come soon enough anyway. He brought all the shopping into the kitchen and put it away quickly before he walked to join the rest of his family.

Harry was laughing at Orion's tumble of questions, "I'm okay, the summer's been good, and of course how could I possibly forget a fly? Did you get the gift packages for your birthday?"

"I did, thank you so very much. I love the Quidditch care kit, I think I have the most neatly trimmed and best polished broom in the country...Not a word from you," He sent a glare to his father. "I don't mean anything like the dirty and perverting things undoubtedly running through your head."

Sirius blinked innocently, "I didn't say a thing! I didn't even think it! Yeesh pup if my mind's dirty and I didn't think it what's that say about yours?"

Orion grinned at him. "It says that I'm my father's son. I know you and your dirty mind because I'm the same."

Sirius lunged and began to wrestle with his son.

Remus rolled his eyes and hid his grin. He was surrounded by dogs, both grown and pups. "Hello Harry, it's wonderful to hear from you. Sorry you have to listen to my little pervs here."

"Oi! Ow!" Sirius growled at Orion for biting him.

Harry laughed, "I'm living in a house with Fred, George, and Ron, I've heard worse. How've you been Moony?"

"I've been good, thank you for asking. I hope you are well too." He ignored the grows and giggles from his two housemates while vaguely wondering if they had to address Orion's biting tendencies soon. "It really is great to hear from you, is there something we can help you with?"

"Um well yeah...sorta...I think." Harry chewed his bottom lip wondering how to go about asking this.

Sirius continued to wrestle with Orion while he spoke, "The cub, ow, called to talk to you Moony so-hugnh!" He curled into a ball, holding his bits from where his son had accidentally racked him.

"Right..." Remus eyes his men. "Out you two, go into the kitchen and ice Pads bollocks. If you are good boys there will be something chocolate-y for dessert. Supper is steak so just hobble out of here and let me speak with Harry in peace." He watched a madly giggling Orion help a grimacing Sirius off the floor and see them make their way to the kitchen.

"Okay, so somehow I can't imagine even the twins being worse than this." Remus sat down cross-legged in front of the green tinted fire. "Now we can talk in private, what can I do for you cub?"

Harry snorted at the first remark, "Yeah well you don't have them hounding you to deliver their presents and letters to Draco Malfoy and proceeding to tell you what the letters contain." He shifted so that he was sitting on the floor cross-legged. "Well, I found out today that my magic is throwing up a silence barrier when I'm sleeping without me really concentrating on not wanting to wake anyone up. I mean it crosses my mind once in a while but I don't dwell on it. Mrs. Weasley
explained it as me being really close to my magic, so close it follows my unconscious thoughts as well as the conscious ones."

Remus nodded and scratched at his graying hair. "That sounds very plausible. I think Molly's right in what she's told you. When you think about it you have always been very close to your magic, even when you didn't even know what it was. Like with your cousin and the snake at zoo and let's not forget the adventure with that muggle woman, your aunt was it?" Remus smiled at him through the flames. "Your magic wants to please you, wants to be one. All you need is just to learn how to steer it your way a little bit better. You're so bright so I don't think that will be a problem."

Harry was fiddling with the loose thread on his shirt again, "Mrs. Weasley said that I need to go ahead and fuse with my magic instead of waiting for my inheritance and I'm going to need a guide for that. She offered her or Mr. Weasley to do it but I...well I'd rather it was you."

Amber eyes widened before growing soft, almost like molten gold. "Oh Harry, I would be honored to be your guide, honored and happy." Remus smiled gently and felt his heart warmed. He loved the boy on the other side of that fire, loved him just as his own and being asked to be Harry's guide like this was a gift and something that Remus treasured.

Harry's smile was brilliant and he relaxed, no longer plucking at his sleeve, "Thanks. Will you guys mind coming the day before the birthday party Mrs. Weasley has probably gone overboard planning then?"

Remus returned Harry's smile happily. "I don't think that should be a problem at all. Pads will probably overjoyed to get out of here and see some other people. As long as the Weasleys don't mind putting us up for an extra night then we'll be there."

A warm chuckle came from behind Harry and he looked over his shoulder at Arthur, who'd come quietly into the study, unaware Harry was in there but getting the gist of the conversation from a few sentences, "You know Molly Remus, we'll be happy to have you for an extra night and 'Snuffles' can even come in full human form."

A brief moment passed then from the kitchen of the cottage Sirius nearly screamed out a, "Whoo-hoo!" making Harry and Arthur laugh.

"See, what did I tell you...Overjoyed." Remus grinned. "We'll be happy to come, thank you for asking me and we'll see you all soon then." He turned and called toward the kitchen. "I gather the nads are safe then?"

"They probably still work!" Sirius hollered back, "I'll keep you updated if you really want."

"I think I'll survive without in depth updates, just wanted to know if you were well enough to walk, which means you're well enough to get the potatoes peeled and on the stove." Remus snorted and turned back to the fireplace. "I'll go make sure my doggies behave, give my love to everyone at the Burrow, take care until we see each other."

"Will do, give the two flea bags," Harry snickered at the two insulted exclamations, "my best. See you soon and you're a brave, brave man to risk Padfoot working with the food."

"Not even he can manage to muck up peeling potatoes. He's banned from anything more complicated than that." Remus chuckled as the flames turned normal as Harry ended the floo call. He got up from the floor and had to laugh at Sirius and Orion who wore identical looks of excitement at the thought of getting to the Burrow earlier. He didn't know whether to be happy or insulted that the two of them couldn't wait to get away from alone time with him but he went with
happy, understanding how hard it was for Sirius to be locked up inside this house day in and day out with just the two of them to speak with.

Sirius had already scrubbed and was casting the potato peeling charm on the tubers then making the skins put on a silent play for Orion. "So Scar's magic has advanced enough that he needs to fuse with it huh?"

Remus nodded. "No wonder that the Bee wants him under his thumb but I doubt even that old coot realizes just how powerful Harry really is." Remus checked the temperature on the stove before bringing out a pan and setting it on the stove for heating. "I'm glad he's so calm and level headed, magic this strong could cause havoc in anyone else."

Sirius nodded, "He almost hemorrhages magic and still has plenty left to cast advanced, powerful spells. The buzzing bastard doesn't recognize that, at all. We're lucky that power found a home in Harry, it's not just that he's calm and level headed, he wasn't always after all. It's that he feels so deeply for his...well as he's a lion, his pride." He reached out and ruffled Orion's hair, "He'd rip himself to pieces before doing anything to hurt his pride and he's never had that childhood freedom to be a spoiled selfish brat so he takes every decision as life or death."

"I know, Harry is purely good, fiercely protective and compassionate. That's something Dumbledore will never ever understand since it's feelings he doesn't have." Remus brought out the butter and flicked a click of it into the hot pan with his wand, feeling too lazy to do it by hand. "Just look at what he's doing for the Malfoys even though he and the little Malfoy have never got along. I'm so proud of him."

Orion listened to his parents in silence, he was proud of Harry too, there was no one he wanted to be like more than Harry...though he wanted to be his own person too. He was Orion, no one else.

Sirius nodded, "I honestly don't know how Harry turned out so good. Our very adorable little sprog here," he smiled at Orion, "had you and Snape to show him how to get it right, course he had to listen to learn it," his voice leaked pride in Orion, "but Harry...I don't know where he gets it but I'm so glad he wasn't warped by the Dursleys. Damn Dumbledore," it was a bad tempered growl.

"It's a bloody miracle he didn't turn out warped after what those people put him through." Remus' eyes flashed. "Thank Merlin he didn't though and thank Merlin he found true friends quickly, people who love him for him and not for the name he carries." Remus reached out and pulled on Orion's shiny, black hair. It looked as if his son was intent on growing it out, becoming even more of an mirror image of his father as young.

Sirius propped his chin on his hand and watched Remus with a soft little smile. He probably should have been somewhat jealous Harry had called on Remus for guiding him but he wasn't. On the contrary it made him happy to know that Harry had chosen Remus over him. He didn't quite understand why as before he'd always been...jealous whenever he wasn't the center of attention. Even as Remus' lover he'd wanted all the attention and given so little back. Something had changed though and it wasn't just the spell he'd asked for. He actually sort of liked the change. He'd never realized just how exhausting constantly trying to get the attention could be but now he was content to sit and watch more often than not.

Remus felt Sirius' eyes on him and gave the other a confused little smile as his scarred cheeks turned pink before he turned to the icebox and pulled out the steaks. The butter had silenced in the pan so Remus put in the steaks and listened to the sizzle of the meat. "Would you please set the table Ry?"

Orion nodded and jumped down from the counter he'd been sitting on to bring out the china and
cutlery needed. He paused to give both his parents a hug. "I'm so happy you are both here."

Sirius returned the hug and ruffled the dark hair so like his own, "Believe me I'm happy to be here son." And he was. It wasn't so much the place and people that had him stir crazy as it was him not having a choice. Given the choice he could easily spend all day, every day with Remus and Orion in the house. It was just knowing that he couldn't walk out with them that bothered him. He went back to watching Remus, hit by a familiar desire to just curl up with him. No sex or anything just comfortable snuggling.

Remus was glad Sirius was there with them too, that he and Orion got to know each other and that Sirius wasn't rotting away, innocent at Azkaban. Despite the slight awkwardness between them Remus still wanted Sirius there with him. He'd not realized how utterly lonely he'd been until he wasn't alone anymore. He turned the steaks in the pan, making sure they were cooked just right. They were a family of canines and none of them really wanted their meat well done. This was nice, having a family meal with those he loved.

"I still don't know how you do that so well. You make it look easy and as someone who burns water I know it's not. You were always good at cooking, pants at potions but aces at cooking."

Remus chuckled. "I think everyone is good at cooking if you compare them to yourself. I am average at best, still it's good to know my cooking doesn't make you toss your cookies." He smiled at Sirius over his shoulder. "Cooking is easy, potions... Not so much. I could never get it right. I'm glad our son inherited your skills in that subject." Remus loaded the steaks onto a plate and carried them to the table.

"I'm doubly awesome because I'm aces as both cooking and potions." Orion grinned.

"Eh I don't know if I can claim the credit for Orion's potion skills." He picked up the other serving dishes full of vegetables and carried them to the table after Remus without a second thought, setting them in the places he'd noticed Remus tended to assign for them.

"Yes please don't," the cool drawl came from the doorway and had Sirius stiffening and half turning even as his son gave a happy shout.

"Sev!" Orion ran around the table and threw his arms around his uncle, squeezing him tightly. "What've you been up to this summer? Missing me of course." He grinned at the tall man.

"Good to see you Severus, will you join us for dinner? We have plenty of food." Remus smiled at his friend.

Black eyes took in Sirius' presence as he pat Orion's head, "Perhaps."

Biting back a few thousand insults and less than polite things to say, Sirius went to the dish cupboard to get another place setting, "Snape don't make Orion pull out the sad puppy eyes."

Severus looked down to see the precursor to said eyes already crossing Orion's face and a brow twitched, "Very well."

Instantly the sad shine in Orion's eyes vanished and he grinned again, pulling Severus toward the table as he sent his father a grateful smile. He knew that his uncle and his father weren't best friends but he appreciated the fact that they were both trying and that they were at least civil to one and other.

Remus pulled out another plate, glass and silverware and set an extra seat at the table before bringing the potatoes. "There, I think we have everything. Please sit down and dig in while it's still..."
Severus sat down, aware of the way Orion maneuvered it so that he was across from Remus but Black was sitting right next to the flea bitten bastard. He rather had the feeling that Orion was the one who always sat beside Remus, allowing the werewolf to keep his distance from Sirius. The little brat was playing matchmaker, "Not to speak of, especially with the noises about a Ministry appointed Defense teacher as well as an Inquisitor coming to Hogwarts this year. The old man is far from pleased."

Sirius settled in his chair and began cutting up his steak into bite sized bits and snorted just a bit, "Understatement."

"Not sure I like the Inquisitor bit but anything that rubs the Bee's fur the wrong way is a good thing with me." Remus pushed the vegetable plate toward his son and gave him a pointed glare until Orion sighed and heaped some greens onto his plate. "Do you have any idea who the Ministry will be sending?"

"Not as of yet though there are noises about it being someone close to Fudge." Snape speared a potato and ate it.

"Oh well Orion make sure you wear body armor." Sirius nibbled on an asparagus spear, noticing that Orion was soon doing the same thing, "No one close to Fudge will be good for doing anything but spouting manure."

"A surprisingly intelligent comment from your mouth Black, I'm shocked."

Sirius twitched but kept a neutral smile on his face, "I strive to be unpredictable."

"Whoever comes is bound to be a tool, especially if they're close to Fudge. Just keep your head down and stick close to Severus and Harry." Remus told his son, ignoring the slight sniping going on between the two older men. He loved both of them and would not be stuck in the middle.

Remus didn't trust anyone from the Ministry except for Arthur Weasley and maybe Kingsley Shacklesbolt, the Ministry was filled with corruption and ambition. Most of the ones working there, far worse than those they sent away to Azkaban. He did not want Orion close to this Inquisitor.

Sirius sent his son a knowing smile, "Or to the young lady you've been getting letters from all summer, Parkinson is it?"

Orion squirmed in his seat and fiddled with his fork as he blushed. "She's just lonely, being alone in that big house all summer. A few letters can relieve the boredom for a little while at least. She's fun to talk to, even through owls." Orion had taken to waiting for the owls every day, to see if there would be a letter from Pansy there, filled with jokes and a none so gentle coaxing to finally wiggle the spell Orion had used on Draco out of him.

"Be careful, Miss Parkinson is a breed unto herself and likes to play people," Severus sipped at his water. He didn't delude himself about his snakes. He cared for each and every one of them but he also knew they were prone to using people. "I would not like to find a broken hearted puppy in my office after she reveals her reasons for writing, whatever they may be."

Sirius did not like the sound of that, but not for the reason he might once have, "I think Miss Parkinson is intelligent enough not to try and play Orion," he couldn't believe he was sitting here defending a snake's moral fiber to her head of house but he'd really not liked the look on Orion's face and remembering the girl from the evening in the Chamber he was certain she wasn't the kind to use people she liked and he rather thought she liked his son, the way a girl liked a puppy.
"It's okay, I know Pansy Parkinson and what she's capable of. I'm a snake too after all and you never move forward without at least two separate backup plans. No need for any of you to worry about me." Orion cut into his steak with gusto, biting it with sharp little teeth. "She's fun and I like writing her and talking to her, I promise I don't suffer from a terrible, unrequited crush." He smiled. "Thank you for looking out for me though. Speaking of crushes...When will you ever bring a nice girl with you for me to meet and judge?" He blinked long lashes at Severus, making Remus snicker. As long as it was Severus' love life and not his, Remus was happy.

"You, young man, are beating a dead horse. I would suggest you not hold your breath awaiting such an occurrence."

"I shall never give up beating that horse, one day a miracle will happen and it will rise again...Hallelujah!" Orion's grin was wicked. "How about Malfoy's mother then? You know her, you're already godfather to her spawn...Tadaa, ready made family right there."

Sirius shuddered, "Orion the thought you just made me think will give me nightmares for a very long time."

Severus lifted a brow, "Related to you, you mean?"

"No. You and Cissy? The Queen might as well just hand over the crown and scepter," he paused, "Though the being related is a creepy thought too."

"I still don't think it's such a bad idea. I mean it's not likely that lady Malfoy will go back to her husband now that she has left now is it? Swoop in Sev and claim her before it's too late." Orion had grantedly never actually met Malfoy's Mum but she was the only woman he could think of that would fit his uncle. He didn't know too many single women of the right age and with the smarts required to take on Severus Snape.

"Swoop in and claim her? Have you been reading romance novels again Ry?" Remus raised a sandy eyebrow questioningly.

"Oh ha ha...put down the child just for wanting to help his precious ones find love." Orion pouted. "Oh so maligned," Snape's tone was dry, "Really you are getting entirely too sappy child. I think dealing with the flea bitten mongrel has infected you with a logic block."

Sirius' hand tightened around his fork but he remained silent as he had nothing, absolutely nothing less than bitterly caustic and out right savage to say to that jab. In this case silence was a better choice.

"I like dealing with the flea bitten mongrel thank you very much. I am one too as you very well know." There was a slight and very unusual edge to Orion's voice. As much as he loved his uncle and he really, really did, he wouldn't let even Sev continue to take stabs at his father.

Severus' eyes went wide. He honestly could not recall Orion having ever...snapped at him like that before. Ever. He really didn't know how to respond, an odd reaction for him.

Sirius leaned across the table and put a hand on Orion's head, voice gentle but holding a very slight reprimand. He was warmed by his son's defense but Orion was still just thirteen, still a pup and Snape was an old grizzled adult worthy of respect. "Hey, appreciated but no need okay? Cut your uncle some slack about the getting a girl a bit too. His romantic life is his business pup and not something to poke, prod or push him about."

"I'm sorry Sev, I was out of line." Orion turned regretful eyes on his uncle. "I just love you and I
don't want you to be alone." He bit his lip. "I know what you have to do, the role you play and I
know it's not easy to open yourself up to a relationship in that position but that is why I push.
Voldemort has risen again, even with Harry being amazing we are going toward a new war...I think
the most important thing is to take love where we can find it and cling to it with everything we got.
Love, live and show all the bastards that try to stop us that they won't be able to. I know I'm young
but I'm not an idiot. I can see what's going on around me." He sent his parents a pointed look.

Severus reached over and pat Orion on the shoulder even as he saw Remus pretending great
interest in his potatoes, "I have my reasons for living as I do brat as others have their reasons for
how they are and trying to force the issue will not make me or others more likely to walk in the
direction you'd like us to. Concentrate on what you can affect, like your grades and skills, and leave
the rest to work itself out."

"I am a Slytherin, I will always try to manipulate things to work out the way I want them to. It's
practically in my genetic make up. I hear what you're saying though and I will be a good boy for
the moment and back off." Orion returned his attention to the food on his plate. He glanced around
the table from beneath his long bangs, taking in his parents expressions, yeah he could be a good
boy now. He'd made his point.

Sirius didn't say anything to that. What could he say? 'I'd love to kiddo but it's not up to me.'? He
was not about to risk what he'd managed to rebuild with Remus thus far because their son thought
he knew everything.

Snape shifted his hand and gripped the back of Orion's neck in a way that made him draw up his
shoulders with a very slight whine, "Brat, leave it be, not just for now but period." He leaned in to
hiss into his 'nephew's' ear, low enough that not even Remus heard him, "unless you want to wind
up doing the exact opposite of your goal in regards to your parents. You know how obstinate your
mother can be."

Orion tensed at the grip to his neck before going slightly limp like the puppy he still was no matter
how grown up he thought himself to be. "Yes sir." He murmured quietly, having no intention of
disagreeing with his uncle. He didn't want to ruin things between his parents. He just wanted them
to be together since he saw how much they loved one and other. Orion couldn't understand what it
was that kept them apart.

Remus' insides squirmed and he suddenly wasn't very hungry. If only it was as easy as Orion made
it out to be. Yes he loved Sirius, wholly and completely and forever but it took more than love to
make a relationship work. What he had now with Sirius...It was something he'd never had before
and as cowardly as it was, Remus was afraid that if they became lovers again he would lose that.
Maybe Sirius would revert to what he'd been the last time they tried. Remus would rather be just
friends than risk that. Besides, as long as he was on Dumbledore's leash he had no right to even try
and pursue a romantic relationship. He wasn't his own man.

Remus poked at his food before plastering a smile on his face. "I hope you're not too full, there will
be chocolate eclairs for dessert."

"I'm afraid I can't stay for dessert Remus, I apologize." Severus set his fork down having finished
eating. "I simply wanted to come by and catch up."

"No please stay." Remus turned pleading eyes on his best friend. "We haven't really gotten a
chance to talk yet and I miss you. Stay for dessert and let us truly catch up." He didn't want the
awkward dinner conversation to chase Severus away, he really did miss his friend, snark and
everything. Now that Orion was older and Sirius was there for the full moons he rarely got to see
the other.
Severus shook his head, "I'm sorry Remus I am. I'd like to stay but I have to," he glanced down at his arm, the one with the Dark Mark on it, "take care of something. I'd stay if I didn't however." He wanted to make sure Remus understood it wasn't the dinner conversation that had him leaving but the responsibilities of his position as a spy.

"Okay, I won't keep you from your responsibilities." Remus got up from his seat and went to fetch a small plastic container from a cupboard before loading two eclairs into it and putting the lid on. "Here, you might need some chocolate goodness later on tonight." He handed the container to Severus. "Please come visit again, don't be a stranger, you're family after all." Remus smiled at his friend.

The potion master accepted the container with a half smile, "Mother hen. I will try but I cannot make any promises at present." He looked over at a pouting Orion and pat the boy on the head, "You, behave. I will see you at start of term at the very latest."

Orion nodded and twisted in his seat so he could hug his uncle goodbye. "I hope it's sooner but if it's not then take care until then." He let the older man go and smiled at him, glad that he hadn't ruined everything and that they weren't parting on bad terms.

Snape returned the hug and gathered himself, nodding shortly at Orion's father, "Black. Do avoid the dog catchers."

Sirius inclined his head in return, "Snape. Remain in one piece, I don't want to see my son and Remus upset if you don't."

"Hm," with that final exchange he pat Remus on the shoulder and swept out.

Remus watched his friend go and really hoped he would remain safe and sound and in one piece. With Voldemort back, Severus' job had grown much more dangerous. He turned and watched the two men still seated at the table. "Why don't we take dessert in the living room? I'll just put away the dishes and I'll be right there."

Sirius nudged his son, "No, I'll put away the dishes. Ah! Don't argue," he wagged his finger, "You cooked, I'll clean. Shoo."

"Okay, if you're sure. Just put the dishes in the sink and get a cleaning charm going." Remus smiled at Sirius and walked with Orion into the living room, ruffling his son's hair lovingly.

"I'm sure," Sirius then called after them, "Just don't eat all the eclairs!" He set about clearing the table and starting the cleaning charm then made some chocolate milk to go with the eclairs, one of the few culinary pursuits he wasn't pants at. He carried the three mugs of milk into the living room, sneaking up behind Remus and dangling one in front of the werewolf's face.

"Mmm, the Padfoot patented chocolate milk. Whatever have we done to deserve such a treat?" Remus reached up and snagged the cup greedily, sending Sirius a bright smile. Chocolate was his weakness along with the man just handing him the chocolate milk.

Orion smiled and took his own mug, eyeing the eclairs with clear hunger, his fingers itching to grab a hold of one.

Sirius moved around to sit at Remus and Orion's feet comfortably as he answered Remus' question, "You just be you and that's reason enough."

Remus continued to smile and hoped that his blush wasn't as obvious as it felt. He was a middle aged werewolf and Sirius Black could still make him blush with only a few words. He looked away
and noticed his son practically drooling onto the coffee table. "Go ahead, have your eclairs."

With a whoop Orion did as told and stuffed his face quickly.

Sirius shook his head and claimed an eclair before his son devoured them all, nibbling at the pastry lazily. "I think Ron's having too strong an influence on you pup." He licked up a dribble of chocolate that had fallen onto his hand.

"What?" It was muffled since his mouth was so full. "It's chocolate."

Remus chuckled and took an eclair of his own, forcing his eyes away from Sirius' tongue licking up that chocolate dribble. It was embarrassing that something so simple could cause such havoc inside him. He bit into the pastry and tried to concentrate on the rich, creamy flavour.

Sirius just shook his head, finishing his dessert before leaning his head back, nestled perfectly against Remus' knee, eyes closing and just soaking up the presence of the others. He always felt so drained and tired after several hours alone. He was simply not built for solitude. In Azkaban the loneliness and solitude had been worse than even the dementors. He hated feeling alone, always had and always would.

Putting down his half drunk mug of chocolate on the coffee table Remus reached out and ran his fingers through Sirius' hair soothingly, letting the silky strands fall through his fingers.

Orion watched his parents in silence, he wouldn't interfere, he'd promised Severus but he really hoped that they would get there act together and just be together soon. In Orion's opinion that was something they both needed.
Narcissa eyed the heavy, ornate locket in front of her that she'd found while cleaning out Regulus' room and tapped her foot. She realized that Potter had been joking about the artifacts that equaled the dark lord in evil but this thing...felt exactly like that.

Draco came in, a half amused, half annoyed smile on his face. "There's a very annoyed house elf outside, muttering something about little Miss. Black removing Master Regulus’ memory by cleaning out his house." He came to stand next to her. The house was large but Draco still felt trapped, even the letters and outrageous gifts the stalker twins sent him were a bright spot in the endless boredom of being hidden away.

"Hmm," she tapped her chin, prodding the locket in suspicion, "Kreacher you may come in you know. I am not removing Regulus' memory, merely reallocating it to a more proper area." She looked over at her son, running a hand gently over his hair, "Draco darling, what do you make of this?"

He looked down at the locket, reaching to pick it up. "Besides the fact that it makes my skin crawl?" He sat it down again and felt the urge to rub his palm against his trousers, feeling dirty even after that short contact. Looking at the locket closer Draco furrowed his brows. "Old obviously...Wait a second, I think I recognize it from something I saw in Potter's secret lair, I would have to speak with him to be sure though."

"Well I'm certain the Weasley Twins will be nagging him into delivering something again soon dear." She conjured a box to block out the negative energy and magic seeping from the locket and levitated it into the box, shivering just a bit in relief as she locked the lid.

Draco gave his mother a look. "I'm sure they will." His tone dry but inside he was almost giddy with expectation. "Whatever that locket is though, it's not something good. By Morgana's hairy chin, I still feel cold from touching it."

She nodded, "Indeed. Shall we have some tea to chase the chill away?" She sent the box to the room she'd claimed and walked toward the sitting room, "Kreacher! Some tea please, Jasmine I do believe."

"Very well little Miss. Black. Kreacher will make sure it is done." Kreacher looked up at her with a hopeful gleam in his beady little eyes. "Will the Miss and Master leave Master Regulus room and take their tea in the parlor?"

Draco snorted softly. That barmy elf really was one of a kind.

Narcissa lifted a brow, "For now but I do intend to continue here later." She walked with her son to the parlor. Kreacher didn't bother her. Her aunt had always had elves that were a tad bit off normal even for an elf and being here on his own for so long couldn't have done Kreacher any favors in the mentality department. "Draco dear, as it is approaching time for the school term to begin anew I was thinking we might go on an outing to get all your supplies."

"You mean I can return to school?" Draco raised an eyebrow, he'd been unsure about that. "Won't Father look for me there? And you, will you be here all on your own then?" Draco did not like the thought of that at all, his mother on her own in this rambling house.

"Your Father will be unable to get to you in Hogwarts as he is an accused Death Eater. The scar
Potter left him with is proof of that and he'll not be willing to risk apprehension simply to get at you. So yes not only can you return to school I insist that you do. I will not have you forgoing your education because your father is an idiot sycophant."

Draco couldn't stop the slither of excitement that ran down his back at that, he couldn't believe that he was actually keen on going back to school but he was. Couldn't wait to see Pansy, Blaise and yes even a certain couple of redheads again. "But what about you Mother? What will you do? You shouldn't be here alone with only Kreacher as company, you deserve so much more than that."

Narcissa settled into a wingback chair in the parlor, "Oh darling I've plans a plenty to keep me occupied. In addition Livia will be keeping me company on a few outings when she returns with Blaise."

Relaxing slightly, Draco sent his mother a smile. That was good, Livia was strong and rather ruthless, she would be good company and good protection for Narcissa. "Just make sure you don't let her pull you into any trouble. We both know how Livia is. I wonder how Blaise's summer in Romania is going, if he's driven his mate spare yet."

She laughed lightly, "You know him better darling, what do you think?" Her ice blue eyes gleamed with knowing humor. If Blaise was anything like his mother then the dragon keeper Weasley was likely diving into glacier pools to keep from simply pouncing on the incubus.

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Narcissa was very, very close. There weren't any glaciers in the reserve but there was the cave of a male ice dragon that was nice enough to allow Charlie to flop into the snow drifts it created. He had the distinct feeling the dragon found his attempts to control himself amusing. Of course the female dragons around who were in heat did not help. Blaise apparently was not the type to remain idle and had charmed his way into working with the keeper trainees. Dragons in heat were much like female dogs, their tempers were sweeter and gentler until they conceived so the safest job on the reserve was to change the bedding of the dragons in estrus. Unfortunately for Charlie the queens were very fond of his incubus and liked to lick him. The drool of a female dragon in heat had a curious property on men. When a fertile witch or wizard had drool on them it became an intense scent aphrodisiac. The drooled on people didn't notice but by Merlin did the men around them notice and as Charlie was sharing a hut with Blaise he definitely noticed and cold showers and snow drifts had become his best friend.

He was still trying to wrap his mind around being an incubus' mate too. He admitted to coming to like Blaise's sharp tongue and clever mind but he still knew so little about his incubus and he wanted to fall in love, not just lust. It was a bit complicated and frustrating and had him working himself to exhaustion just so he wouldn't think about it.

Blaise stood in front of the mirror in the hut he shared with his mate. He wasn't particularly vain no matter what people believed, Blaise knew he looked good but he wasn't obsessed with his looks. Now he was wearing only trousers, admiring the new muscles the work with the dragons had given him. He was still slender and suspected he always would be on the lithe side but now he had sinewy, sleek muscles moving under his mocha skin. Blaise liked it, he couldn't help but wonder why Charlie didn't want him. He also liked working with the dragons, he wasn't afraid of hard work and this was something he could actually see himself doing in the future as well.

Things were going well, Blaise was fed well and feeling much better than he'd ever felt before. Work was nice and so were the people in the reservation. He only felt sad that he didn't get to see Charlie that much, sure the redhead always made sure that he could feed properly but other than that it was almost as if he avoided Blaise. It hurt a little both the incubus and the man felt it. He
knew that Charlie hadn't chosen him, that he had been thrust upon the other but if his mate allowed it Blaise would make him the center of his world. From observing Charlie, hearing him talk when they were together and from what every other worker had to say about him, Blaise was already half in love with the older man. Love that had nothing to do with the fact that he wanted to tackle Charlie down and ride him until they both popped.

He wondered what would happen when school started back up, if Charlie would resent him for making him leave this wonderful place. If Blaise felt this distance between them when they were living together, how would it be when he would only see the other for feeding?

Letting out a sigh he pulled on a dragon hide vest, not caring about a shirt beneath it since the weather was so warm and walked out of the hut to see to today's work.

Charlie glared at his supervisor, "I hate you."

The Romanian man laughed and ruffled his hair, "No you don't lad and besides you need to deal with it and I know you don't want old Icy to be alone for the rest of his scaly life now do you?"

"I still hate you. Can't you at least move Blaise to a different task? Patching roofs, mucking stalls, anything where he's not getting licked by dragons in heat if I can't snow dive anymore?"

"Lad what's the problem? You practically bleed hunger around him, even the dragons have noticed."

"He's fifteen Yuri. Fifteen, does the term statutory rape ring any bells?"

"And in a year? When that's no longer a proper excuse for you, then what will it be?"

"That will be then and I'll re-evaluate. Damn it old man I don't want it to be just sex. I like him but I'm wanting to fall in love with him, is that a bad thing?"

"Of course not. Do you not think you can fall in love with him?"

"I can't think at all around him when he's been drooled on. All my blood volume goes below my belt."

Yuri laughed, "Ah yes that can interfere with making good decisions. Just as well you'll be working with Gavin until your young man graduates then isn't it?"

Charlie flipped his supervisor off.

Blaise walked up to them, having to report to Charlie's superior before he was allowed anywhere near the dragons, as he walked he pulled his sleek black hair into a short tail at the nape of his neck. Even when friendly the dragons had a tendency to sneeze fireballs and Blaise didn't want his hair scorched off thank you very much. He gave Charlie and the older dragon handler a blinding smile, having to forcefully stop himself from plastering himself against Charlie's strong body. "Good morning, here I am willing and able to get started with today's work. Where do you want me?"

Yuri looked at Charlie then back at Blaise, "I think Charlie should take you out today to help move Icy. He's one of our 'safer' dragons and he'll be happy to be moved to the transfer crate since we're sending him to Norway to get himself a girl."

Charlie gave Yuri a light glare, "I am telling your wife about poker night."
Yuri tsked and shooed them out, "Get to work you two, go on."

"Icy's getting a lady? Good for him." Blaise smiled and ignored Charlie's glare and the slight sting he felt inside at the thought of Charlie not even wanting to work with him. Blaise considered himself a hard worker, he would make sure Charlie had nothing to complain about in that aspect. "How do you go about moving him?" Blaise looked up at his mate as they walked toward the cave where the ice dragon lived. "Won't he get too warm during transport? Especially since it's summer?"

Charlie shook his head, "No. He makes his own ice and snow and cold temperatures. Not sure exactly how it works but he draws in moisture from the air and then breathes it out, sort of like a big muggle fire extinguisher." He walked with Blaise up to the cave, giving a low and melodic whistle so the dragon would know he was there. A welcoming rumble preceded the pale blue and white dragon shuffling from the cave to look down at them.

Icy lowered his snout and sniffed at Blaise before making a chuffing noise similar to laughter. "Yeah, yeah laugh it up buster." Charlie pat the ice dragon's snout, "you're not so smart you know. Completely lacking solutions."

"May I touch him?" Blaise asked, having learnt never to reach out for a dragon unless being told it was okay. Most dragons were extremely picky about who they let touch them, often they only had trust for a single handler, trying to roast anyone else getting near. Sure Yuri had said that Icy was gentle but he was still a dragon, the power they packed were incredible. "You are beautiful." Blaise crooned at the dragon, admiring the shiftings of pale blue and greens in his white scales.

Charlie gently took Blaise's wrist and brought his hand to Icy's snout, showing him the way the dragon liked his scales stroked. "He's the big puppy of the reserve, never says no to attention or a good pat."

Icy made a pleased rumble and leaned into Blaise's touch, his tail coming to curl round the feet of Charlie and Blaise.

"Gorgeous, kind and cuddly, my type of man." Blaise chuckled and stroked and scratched the shiny scales of the dragon's snout. "Any lady will be lucky to have you pretty one."

Suddenly the dragon's tail wrapped around the both of them and the next thing Charlie knew he and Blaise were stuffed in an alcove of the cave with the tough scaled backside of a dragon blocking them in. "The bloody hell?"

Blaise made a sound of surprise as he was pressed against Charlie in the small alcove, Icy's scaly bum plugging the entrance like a huge cork. "What's going on?" He didn't know if he was startled or amused, he supposed it was a mixture of the two.

"That's what I'd like to know," Charlie shoved at the scales blocking them in with one should, knowing he couldn't actually move Icy but sometimes a nudge would get a dragon to choose to move on its own. His reply was a calm rumble that had him glaring at pale scales, "Well nothing to do then except wait for another handler to come by."

"Okay." Blaise didn't know what else to say, he'd been at the reserve long enough to know that it could take some time for another handler to show up. Everyone there had their own work to do and it would take time before anyone grew suspicious why Charlie hadn't gotten Icy to the transport. "We need to figure out a way to pass the time then." Blaise was about to say something dirty, of course he was but he swallowed the innuendo down and even though it was difficult for the
creature he was he took a step back so that there was a sliver of air between them. "Tell me about yourself, your childhood and dreams. Did you always knew you wanted to work with dragons?"

Charlie moved so that he was sitting down, back against the stone wall, "I knew I always wanted to work with animals or creatures. Mum tells everyone now that I never gave her a jot of trouble but that wasn't the case growing up. Every injured, abandoned, or starving creature found itself smuggled into my room, even lawn gnomes. Mum tore my hide up for that one but the worst time was when I rescued a Runespoor. I swear my bum hasn't been the same since," he had laughter in his voice, "Course when I started going to Hogwarts and discovered Quidditch I soon found myself torn between two loves. Flying? Or Creatures? It drove me and everyone around me mad."

Blaise listened with honest interest as he slid down the rock wall until he was sitting down opposite his mate. "I can understand that your Mama got a few gray hairs during your childhood but having a kind heart and wanting to take care of the weak and wounded ones are never wrong." He chuckled. "Dray is a Quidditch loon, probably happier on a broom than on his own two feet. I don't dislike flying but it's never been a passion. Probably for the best since I'm not allowed to play Quidditch anyway...Like a veela those with incubus blood are banned from playing. Apparently we have an unlawful advantage since we can turn the heads of the opposing teams." Blaise scoffed.

Charlie snorted, "Idiocy. It's not like the rest of the team couldn't turn a head or two. I remember one game against Slytherin when we wound up with our uniforms charmed off. It backfired since we were all apparently very distracting. I think a few people were confronted with their sexuality that day too."

"Oh I wish I could have seen that, it must have been brilliance." Blaise laughed throatily. "If that happened now it would be an uproar, would still be amusing though." He continued to snicker as he imagined the Hogwarts Quidditch teams in the buff. "How is it growing up in a large family? It's always been just me and Mama, we are very close but it must be different growing up in a house full of people."

"It was...insane. You are never, ever alone, always have someone annoying the hell out of you, the hot water runs out too fast, you never get the biscuits you want, you have to share a room, clothes, and you have absolutely no privacy and I wouldn't trade how I grew up for anything. I might never have had privacy but I knew I had a small army at my back if I needed it." Charlie grinned, "Plus I gave as good as I got. Mum's a firecracker and dad's the steady solid ground. It was a good way to grow up even if we didn't have much money."

Blaise nodded a little longingly, his mother was incredible and Blaise loved her like no other but she struggled with her own creature blood and it had been a lonely way to grow up. Her being with a different man every week. "I get that, I made my own family with Dray and Pans, would have been lost without them." His smile softened as he thought of his best friends, his chosen family.

Charlie chuckled, "Well if the Twins have their way you'll be literally related to Draco eventually. It's good that you found such solid friends, I'm glad you had them there for you."

"Me too, they're amazing and I'll let you in on a little secret. Draco is not as against your brothers courting as he pretends to be, if he was then I can guarantee they wouldn't be able to even get close to him. Draco didn't grow up with Lucius Malfoy without learning a thing or two. I believe your brothers would be good for him. Draco needs someone who can match him and who can take care of him. He needs it whether he admits it or not."

"Well Fred and George will certainly provide that. They're jokers certainly but they're also fiercely protective and will happily spoil the people they care about. It's a little funny but I think Draco will be just what they need too, not just someone to take care of but also someone who will call them on
their shite without making them feel badly about being who they are or trying to get them to be something else. That's the big problem with Mum, she loves them but she doesn't really see that a Ministry job would kill them from the inside out." Charlie lifted a shoulder, "The joke shop feeds the creative wild part of their spirits, your Draco I think will feed the other part of them and give them their balance."

"The most creative ones need an outlet for their creativity, a Ministry job would make them wilt. You mother will realize that when she sees what they can do, what they will accomplish with their joke shop." Blaise placed a hand on Charlie's heavy boot. "She's a Mum, they always want the best for their children, sometimes they just don't realize what the best is."

"Very true that." Charlie rolled his shoulders in a casual stretch, "What is it you like to do in your free time Blaise? Your hobbies and passions?"

Blaise shrugged and followed the movements of Charlie's body with heated eyes. "Hobbies, this is going to sound incredibly bookish and geeky but I like to construct and deconstruct spells, boost them up and make them stronger. So far I'm not allowed to use any of the ones I think up but just you wait...In ten years my spells will be the ones taught to the new students. As for passions, you know what those are. I can't pretend to be something, someone I'm not, not even for you."

"I was actually asking about your other passions," Charlie gently nudged Blaise's foot with his, "I wouldn't ask you to be something you're not Blaise but I know there's also more to you than the incubus nature. That's what I was asking about, the causes and fights that you're passionate about. I want to get to know you Blaise, your likes, dislikes, what you believe in, what you fight for."

"In the house I am in at school you are sort of careful what causes you burn for. Duck your head and hope a certain maniac won't notice you. I am crazy about water, if I could I would spend my time underneath the surface of any type of body of water. I am willing to do anything for just ripe cherries and I have a guilty pleasure when it comes to the cheesiest romance novels I can find. Graciella Glitter is one of my favorite authors in that genre because she's not afraid to use creature blooded as her romantic heroes. I support other creature blooded without wanting to be a spokesperson or any kind of martyr. I would walk through fire for my loved ones and I want a cat more than anything but I am allergic." Blaise met Charlie's eyes calmly.

Charlie smiled, "Starting points there. You could actually have a cat, not kneazle but a regular cat as there are a few cats specially bred to be hypoallergenic. So water hm? Would you feel like spending a day with me at the reserve main lake then? I could find some gillyweed if you want to spend a long time under."

Blaise's smile was blinding as he nodded eagerly. "I would love that." The chance to be in water was tempting and lovely and Blaise looked forward to it but he looked forward to spending time with Charlie more. "Also I have to look into those hypoallergenic cats, it almost sounds to good to be true." Blaise had tried everything but so far even the slightest cat hair made his eyes water and nose and mouth itch and swell.

"I've got a friend with one nearby. If Icy ever lets us out we can see if the little furball doesn't set your allergies off. Of course they're not prolific since they're specially bred." He nudged Blaise's foot with his again. He was more than glad to be in here with the incubus boy. Yes he still felt the familiar tingle of lust but without the queen drool it was bearable.

"If your friend doesn't mind then I would very much like to meet your friend and his or hers cat." Blaise smiled again, feeling calm and relaxed, his blood soothing when his mate didn't seem to avoid him even if it was because they were locked in together.
"Nah she won't mind. She's the village healer and is always happy to have people dropping in."
Charlie leaned an arm over his knee, "I think I'm going to bully or blackmail Yuri into not putting you anywhere near the queens from now on, just so you know." He was relieved to finally be able to relax in Blaise's presence and not be painfully hard. "Not that you're not doing an excellent job with them but I just can't take the queens drooling on you anymore." He didn't want to make Blaise think he was disapproving of the work he'd been doing when the opposite was true.

"Drooling? You mean the licking thing?" Blaise looked terribly confused. "I thought that was a sign of friendliness, that they liked you...Is there something wrong with their drool?" He resisted the urge to tilt his head down and sniff himself, even though he had showered since he'd worked with the queens the last time.

Charlie muttered, "Depends on your definition of wrong." He scratched the back of his head, "Queen saliva is an aphrodisiac to those who smell it on the skin of a fertile witch or wizard." He coughed a bit, "A very strong aphrodisiac. They do like you but I've been losing my mind. I can't touch you like that yet and well," his cheeks went red, "it gets a bit painful."

"Oh." Blaise was sympathetic to Charlie's plight, he didn't want his mate to be in pain but deep, deep down he was secretly pleased as well. He didn't want to be the only one aching and longing. "In that case I won't come that close to them from now on." He'd miss the queens friendly preening and nuzzling but the relationship he hoped to build with Charlie was much more important to him.

"Thank you, I appreciate that. So this weekend, lake and then meeting the cat the next day?"

"Sounds like a plan." Blaise nodded, already looking forward to the weekend and hoping the weather would be on their side, making the trip to the lake worth wile.

Charlie's head tilted as he heard a draconic mutter and then the scaly bum was shifting from the alcove's entrance and they were free to leave. He raised a brow, "Looks like our captor decided to let us go free."

"Somehow I wouldn't be surprised if he and Icy engineered this together." He stepped out of the alcove and pat Icy's hide, "Alright you nuisance let's get you ready to go meet a girl hm?"

The dragon rumbled happily and the job was underway.

Blaise shot the ice dragon an amused look and patted him in silent thanks as he and Charlie worked together to load the friendly dragon into the transport. He would miss Icy. "Will he ever come back or will he and his lady settle in Norway?"

"It will depend on the lady, some prefer to stay right where they are while others choose to find another roost. The time before laying is the most dangerous time for them and us because they have to be allowed freedom to fly across borders on their own or it doesn't work. We simply accompany them on our brooms."

"I understand how that can be dangerous but I also understand the need to give them that freedom, to choose where they want to roost." Blaise had a feeling he would read up on dragons when he got back to school and that he would pay much more attention in the Care of Magical Creatures
lessons, he was serious about this being something he could see himself working with and for that to happened he had to study, to learn everything he possibly could. Blaise never did something half way, when he committed to something he did it with his entire being.

Charlie closed the crate door on a mournful looking Icy and nodded, "I wish reserves weren't even necessary but muggles wouldn't take well to dragons in the back yard."

"Sadly I don't think that's just a muggle issue. Wizards aren't too welcoming sharing their space with other magical beings either. Dragons are even more vulnerable due to their magical potency, they would be hunted wherever they tried to go." Blaise looked sad when he thought about it. Reaching in through the bars in the crate to give Icy one last petting and scratch. "Good luck with your lady Icy, have a safe trip."

The dragon gave another friendly rumble and settled down to nap, understanding that nothing bad would happen to him.

Charlie smiled and gave the reins over to the other keepers when they came to start the transport then he reached down and took Blaise's hand, "Come on, let's get to the mess hall before the horde descends and we're out of dinner."

"That would be a tragedy indeed." Blaise smiled and closed his fingers around Charlie's wide palm, silently thinking that he would follow Charlie anywhere.

The redhead just led Blaise down the path, content with this easy companionship for now.
Harry flung a gnome over the fence, chuckling at the way Crookshanks chased others off, while most of the Weasley brood set up tables for tomorrow at Molly's urging. It was early morning and he knew that Orion, Remus, and Sirius would be arriving as soon as they'd finished breakfast. Tomorrow was his birthday and it was already shaping up to be the best he'd ever had. He looked over at a squelch and laughed when he saw George ankle deep in a gnome hole.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up Scar, you'll get yours." George grumbled and made a face of disgust as he clambered out of the gnome hole, spelling it closed the moment he was out completely. "Great, I will smell of gnome all day. They wouldn't like it here so much if Dad wasn't such a softie...He feels sorry for them and feeds them when Mum doesn't see." He looked around at all the tables, flowers and even wizarding balloons their Mum was insisting should be there, George knew she wanted to give Harry the party of a lifetime, to make up for all the bad birthdays. He couldn't blame her, Harry deserved every bit of fun he could have. "Oh, did our little dragon say anything when you gave him our latest gift?" George looked hopeful.

"You mean aside from comments on insanity and mentally deficient redheads?" Harry lifted a brow.

Fred, over by the fence, rigging something up, sighed, "Such a stubborn little dragon. We really must get near him soon to remind him of just what he's missing out on."

Harry snorted and punted a gnome over the back fence, "I wouldn't be worried. He's not told the two of you to bugger off or stop sending the presents. If he didn't enjoy the attention he would let you know."

"You've got a point there Scar, still a little encouragement would go a long way." George grin was dirty, showing just what kind of encouragement he wished for. "Looking forward to getting to see his pointy, grumpy face again."

Harry shook his head, "You're an incorrigible pervert. Fred what are you- Bloody hell!" Harry ducked as several gnome holes suddenly went up with fireworks and the little potato faced creatures ran like hell to get away from them. Being intelligent, Harry immediately ran for it as well, scooping up Crookshanks on the way. He was not going to be caught in Mrs. Weasley's crossfire over this one.

"Woohoo!!! Nicely done Freddie!" George hollered before crumpling to the ground in helpless laughter, seeing his brother covered in dirt that had rained down on him from the explosion. The look on the gnomes and Harry's face was priceless. Tears of laughter were streaming down his face and George could not stop them.

"WHAT IN MERLIN'S BEARD IS GOING ON HERE? LOOK AT MY LINEN TABLECLOTHS!" Molly's voice could be heard all the way to the Lovegood house from the way she was hollering.

Harry had escaped into the kitchen and was slumped against a counter, holding a purring Crookshanks as he heard Molly start in on Fred and George. "I don't know about you Crooks but I think those two need to get back to Hogwarts soon, they're going madder than usual not being able to see Malfoy."

"What's this about madness?" A dark, shaggy head poked around from the living room and Sirius
grinned as he heard a redheaded woman bellowing, "Hullo cub, what did the twin terrors do?"

Harry looked up quickly and grinned at Sirius, "Snuffles! Hey. Fred blew up the garden."

"What? And I missed it...Aww." Orion's face was a study in disappointment as he emerged from behind his father, still he smiled when he saw Harry and ran forward to almost jump on top of the older boy. "Missed you Harry, you've grown." Amber eyes shone as he hugged his brother.

"Oof! So have you pup," Harry ruffled Orion's hair as Crookshanks leaped down to wind around Sirius' ankles, "Missed you too kiddo and really be glad you missed the explosion. Mrs. Weasley sounds like she's about to turn Fred into a newt."

"She is?" Orion got a gleam in his eyes and jumped down from where he'd wound both arms and legs around Harry. "Well I'm not going to miss that, it's bound to be amusing. Catch up later Scar, it's great to see you."

Sirius peered out the window and barked a laugh at the sight of a switch charmed to swat the twins' legs, "Good decision there cub. Ouch that has to hurt."

Remus chuckled, his arm coming to rest around Harry's shoulders. "Incorrigible, that's what he is." He smiled and walked to Harry, ruffling his hair. "It really is lovely to see you cub."

Harry gave Remus a hug, "Same and Orion has more guts than I do if he's willing to sneak about to watch Molly castigate Fred and George. As soon as those fireworks went off I was gone."

Sirius peered out the window and barked a laugh at the sight of a switch charmed to swat the twins' legs, "Good decision there cub. Ouch that has to hurt."

Remus shook his head as he entered to room after putting their bags away. "Incorrigible, that's what he is." He smiled and walked to Harry, ruffling his hair. "It really is lovely to see you cub."

Remus chuckled, his arm coming to rest around Harry's shoulders. Harry was almost as tall as he was now and he reminded Remus so much of James at the same time as he was all his own person. "From the state of the garden the boy deserves a swat or two, it looks like a meteor shower has crashed there."

"No kidding Moony, why'd Fred blow up the garden?"

Harry shook his head at the twins doing the switch dance, "De-gnoming."

Sirius' shoulders shook, "Well," his voice was strained with laughter, "I doubt Molly will be having them de-gnome the gardens from now on."

"Yeah, somehow though I don't put it past them to have that as their main goal all along." Remus pursed his lips as he watched the debacle going on outside and seeing his son peer up from behind the rose bushes. "If you want to get out of doing something, do it so badly than no one will ever ask you to do it again...Wasn't that yours and James' motto in school?"

"No that was just good sense. Our motto was to cause mischief wherever we went."

Harry rolled his eyes, "I think they're just going a bit stir-crazy not being able to stalk their dragon is what it is. They may not have said it yet but Fred and George are completely in love. Poor sods."

"What's wrong with them being in love?" Sirius tilted his head.

"Nothing. Just they're possibility of a happy ending is still up in the air as Malfoy hasn't said yea or nay really. Still they're trying so maybe it'll turn out right."

"Maybe the little Malfoy doesn't think he's in a position to say yes or no just now. Being in hiding over the summer, knowing his father has sold him out to the darkest wizard of all time and not knowing what will happen next. Deciding on love can be difficult then, especially if he really does
care about the twins." Remus could sympathize with that. Still he didn't know if that was how it was, maybe the Malfoy boy was just indecisive or maybe he liked stringing them along. "There is only a month until school starts, if Malfoy returns, they will see him then."

Harry snickered, "Oh he's coming back alright. Lady Malfoy asked if I'd pick up a package containing hairs so they could polyjuice and do his supply shopping. He's not happy about it as his hair is from a girl. I think he does like Fred and George though so it's probably that he is scared about saying yes with everything up in the air. The idiot." Harry shook his head as Molly spotted Orion and immediately dropped her spell on the twins and went to hug Orion to death.

Remus chuckled at his son's startled flailing before a wide grin split his face and he hugged her back tightly. Remus could see his lips moving as he started to talk a mile a minute, telling Molly everything that had happened over the summer. "Where is the rest of the brood then? Ron and your girlfriend?"

"Ron and the rest of the Weasley brood are setting up the tables and decorations and all. Hermione though, she and Luna went...somewhere. I don't know where yet just that they said they had to pick something up." He shrugged.

Sirius shook his head. He'd bet a galleon that the two ladies went to get something for Harry for his birthday and Harry was oblivious as to that, "Well I think I'll go help the brood set things up. You two discuss tonight's fusing ritual." He bounded out the door and was heading to toward the redheads before Harry or Remus could reply.

"I wonder how long it takes before Molly is chasing him with that bespelled switch." Remus stated dryly but with amusement lacing his voice. He led Harry over to the couch and sat down with him. "I've brought everything we'll need, like the candles for the circle and such. Well be leaving and go a bit away from any house as it can be quite a magic rush as we go. Is there something you're wondering about regarding this?"

Harry lifted his shoulders, "Yes, no, maybe, sort of," he laughed at himself, "I understand that I have to connect all the way with my magic and mostly why. I've mostly got silly questions running round my head that don't have much to do with the fusing ritual itself. Like, why is there a disconnect in the first place? Why do most people connect after their inheritance? And what really is a magical inheritance? Silly questions that most wizards and witches younger than me already know."

"They're not silly questions at all Harry, besides I don't think all the wizards and witches know either. Mostly it's just tradition that they follow without questioning it." Remus settled in the couch and smiled at Harry. "What you have is not so much a disconnect as it is that younger witches and witches haven't really grown into their magic at fifteen. Just as you grow, so does your magic and this will continue throughout your life. Magic is a living, pulsing entity and it chooses you, much like your wand does. Of course you are born with magic but the magic senses your core in a way and chooses if it's worthy...I don't know how well I'm explaining it."

He scratched his hair. "You connect after your inheritance because most people can't access their magical core before then. A magical inheritance is like floodgates opening inside you. Before then most of your magic has been locked away for your own protection. As a child you can't handle all that magic, people can get hurt by mistake. What we are going to do tonight, is open your floodgates early, so that you and your magic can become one. Right now it's as if it's locked in a chamber inside you, there but still separate, that is why it acts on it's own, it can't reach you but wants to please you the same."

Harry thought about it. He understood Remus' explanation but it brought up another question.
"So...what I can do, right now with the patronus charm, if my magic can do all that when it's locked inside...what's going to happen after the gates are opened?"

"That we will see tonight." Remus smiled gently. "It's not the same for everyone you see. You will be able to access your magic much easier, some spells will be easier to cast and some may be more difficult. You've learned one way to cast them and with your magic unleashed that way may not work anymore. It's an adjustment. You will not go around with blazing magic all the time even after this. You will still need to control it, lock it up but this time by choice, you will work together with it."

Harry relaxed, "That works for me. From the way Ron talks I've been worried something's going to explode."

Remus chuckled. "No, I don't think that will happen. That's why I'm going to be there, to guide you so that won't happen, to let you grow comfortable with your magic."

"Good," Harry smiled, "I knew you were the right man for the job."

Remus' return smile was warm even as his cheeks turned red. "Thank you Harry, it really is an honor being your guide, I consider you my cub you know and being allowed to share this with you means a lot."

He gave Remus a hug, "I am your cub. In all the ways that matter. Come on though and let's see if we can help restore the garden or if it's a lost cause."

"It's never a lost cause, if all else fail we can always remove the rest of the lawn and turn it into a Japanese rock garden, claim it was meant to be that way." Remus hugged Harry back before getting up from the couch and moving toward the garden.

"I don't think that'll convince Mrs. Weasley," Harry's voice was dry as they stepped out into the disaster zone where Fred and George had apparently been ordered to comb the ground over smooth again. "Fred what were you thinking?"

"That it'd be the easiest way to get rid of the gnomes," Fred pat some earth down into place. "And to destroy your mother's garden."

"Eh it needed a facelift anyway," Fred looked around and nodded before pulling a bunch of seeds from his pocket, "Ready Greddy?"

Harry started backing up, "Oh dear Merlin what are you doing now?!"

"I was born ready Forgester." George grinned and levitated a huge basin filled with water over his head. "You plant, I water...Let it rip."

Harry grabbed Remus' arm and pulled him out of the way just as Fred tossed the seeds around and George covered the former garden plots with water and they both pulled out their wands and cast a wordless charm. The next thing Harry knew there was a new garden there, perfectly groomed and organized, complete with cobblestone paths, a bird bath and a pretty koi pond with a waterfall. "What the..."

George laughed and slung his arm around his brother. "Come on little brother, have a little faith in us. Did you really think we'd ruin all of Mum's hard work for your party tomorrow?"

Remus' amber eyes were wide as he looked around the now picture perfect garden. "That's a nifty
little thing you have there, I am highly impressed." The Marauders had been top of the line when it came to pulling pranks but Remus had to admit that when it came to inventing and creating things the twins had them beat.

Fred grinned and took a bow, "Why thank you! We do try. Mum's been going on about wanting a new garden forever well," he waved his hand, "voila. Insta-garden a WWW product."

Harry's shoulders shook with laughter, "I don't know if your Mum is going to hex you or hug you to death. It's permanent right?"

Fred nodded, "We used the permanent version yes. There's a temporary one too."

"It would be a bit of a downer if it deflated like a balloon in the middle of tomorrow's festivities...Then she'd probably really strangle us." George looked around the garden in pride.

Molly came stalking around the corner to see that the twins weren't slacking off when she stopped dead in her tracks and just stared before promptly bursting into tears.

Fred looked over at George, "Er do you think we should run?"

Harry rolled his eyes and went over to Mrs. Weasley to give her a hug and a handkerchief.

She took the handkerchief and wiped at her eyes, hugging Harry before moving toward the twins who still hadn't run for it. "You wretched, impossible, disobedient, lovely creatures." She gave them a strong hug in turn before pulling both of them into an embrace. "No pudding for you tonight for scaring me and making me angry...Thank you for this though, it is beautiful. I've always wanted a koi pond."

Fred made phew sound and pat his mother's back, "We are who we are Mum. We wouldn't be Fred and George if we weren't driving you spare but we love you," he kissed her cheek. "We really do, don't cry Mum." George hugged her and kissed her other cheek.

"Yes, well you still don't get any pudding and it's your favorite too, pie with lemon curd." She sniffed. "Now go shower, you look like a pair of gnomes yourself. No tracking dirt onto my clean floors though."

"Aye, aye Mum!" Fred saluted her and pulled George with him into the house to clean up.

Harry watched them go, "They're crazy but brilliant."

Molly huffed but smiled before walking back around the house to see how the tables were coming along.

Remus nodded. "Strange as it sounds I think Malfoy would be good for them, a buffer for those brilliant minds of theirs and something else for them to concentrate on. Being that inventive and brilliant can be difficult, the brain can never really rest."

"No wonder they drive their Mum spare. There's not much they have to work around here. At Hogwarts they have to sneak around the patrol schedules, Filch and his cat, the teachers and prefects and all sort of other things. Keeps them calmer but still crazy enough to make prefects hit their heads against the walls."

"I think it's safe to say they've surpassed us don't you Moony?" Sirius came sauntering over, much more relaxed and easy having gotten a dose of people.
"I was just thinking the same just now." Remus agreed, smiling at the expression on Sirius' face. It was clear that he was happy to be outside in human form, talking and interacting with people he didn't see every single day. He looked happy and Remus so wanted that for him. "The crown has passed and a new generation has surely taken over." He looked up at the clear blue sky, very unusual for a British summer but Remus was glad that the weather would be nice when he and Harry ventured out that evening. It would make everything easier.

"Well that's the way it goes, or is supposed to be the way it goes." Sirius grinned around at the garden, "I'm almost scared to see what they wind up teaching Orion."

"Oh Mordred, I shiver in my boots just thinking about it." Despite his words, Remus was smiling, Orion would always have him wrapped around his finger. "Doubtlessly Orion will soak up every word though and then put his own spin on it...That could possibly be even more terrifying."

Harry looked at Remus incredulously, "Possibly? You feeling alright Remus because Orion putting his own spin on Fred and George's creations and brain storms is positively, utterly, and completely terrifying."

Remus turned amused eyes on Harry. "I guess I'm just repressing my horror, hoping some of my older cub's good sense might rub off on him." He ruffled Harry's hair again affectionately.

Sirius chuckled at the blush that stretched over Harry's cheeks, "Good sense and a good brain now who does that remind me of," he tapped his chin before shooting Remus a bright smile, "Oh yeah, you."

This time it was Remus' cheeks that turned a darker color of pink, he couldn't believe that Sirius still had the ability to make him blush so easily after all these years. "Ah you know what they say, great minds think alike." He smiled back at Sirius and winked at Harry.

Before Harry or Sirius could respond, Ron's voice hollered, "Padfoot! Moony! Quit flirting over Harry's head and get over here to help us out!"

Sirius half turned to glare savagely in the direction of the shout while Harry facepalmed and shook his head. He counted down from five and then.

"OW! Bloody hell Ry why'd you do that?!

"Because you're a gigantic pillock, that's why." Orion hissed at him and pulled his foot back to kick Ron's shin again for good measure. "Do you have any idea what you just did? What kind of moment you ruined? Just you wait, any time you want some alone time with Luna this year I will be there, you're own living, breathing, determined cock block." He glared at Ron venomously.

Arthur shook his head and went over to place a hand on both Ronald's and Orion's head, "None of that you two. This is supposed to be a good time."

"Sorry." Orion muttered, still a little bit upset but he respected Arthur and he really loved Ron. Hopefully even though Ron had interrupted, this was a sign that things were moving in the right direction. He had obeyed his uncle and left it alone, hoping and wishing that his parents would come to their senses on their own.

Ron sat next to Hermione, poking her knee and getting her to look away from the window where she was staring worriedly out into the dark of the evening, "He'll be fine. It's pretty normal, just a little early is all."
Turning away from the window, Hermione gave Ron a wan smile. "I know, Remus will look after him. It's just...I don't know, it seems there's always something Harry has to do. Even though this isn't something dangerous or so it's still another must. He never gets to just be and I hurt for him."

"I know. I wish he could just be Harry and not have to worry about any of the madness too." Ron fiddled with a marble he'd hand in his pocket, "but every step that must be taken now brings him closer to finally getting away from the madness."

"You're right, I know you are. I'm just a worrier." Hermione reached out and pulled on a red strand of hair on her best friend's head, thankful that Ron was sitting with her so she didn't have to worry on her own.

"Part of your charm and one reason you fit so well with himself out there. He worries too. Just not so much about himself as he does for us."

"He worries more about others than himself so I worry for him instead." Hermione smiled a small smile. "We're lucky to have you to shake us out of worrying mode when it gets too bad." She threw a look out the window again but saw nothing except dark shadows behind the glass planes.

"Well I do consider it my sacred and solemn duty to keep the two of you from wal-Bloody hell!" He gripped the arms of his chair as an intense wave of magic rattled the windows and his head whipped to the Weasley clock, where an arm with Harry's name had been added and was teetering between 'Mortal Peril' and 'Home'.

Arthur ran into the room to look at the clock, going pale. Something was very much not right.

Hermione's ears were ringing from the magic wave and her eyes were glued to the clock, her face white as death. "Okay Ron...I have passed worrying and I'm well on my way to freaking out right now." Her voice trembled.

Ron reached over and gripped her hand, "You're not the only one." His face was the color of milk, the freckles standing out in sharp relief, "Dad?"

Arthur paused in throwing on his wellies, "I don't know but I'll need to be there. A wave of magic that powerful will be noticed even here and the Ministry will send someone to investigate. I already got a license for Harry to unseal his magic so he won't get in trouble for something unexpected happening during it."

"But something's gone wrong, not just unexpected but wrong." Sirius had come in, his hand keeping a hold on Orion's shoulder as he met Arthur's eyes, "Get going and bring Remus and Harry back here safe and sound Arthur."

He nodded and looked at Molly wringing her hands just behind Sirius, "We'll be back soon love. Brew us a cuppa, we're probably going to need it." He stepped out the door and was running toward where he knew Harry and Remus had gone.

Molly watched her husband disappear into the darkness of the woods bordering their house and walked to put on the kettle and bring out things needed for a good sandwich. She glanced at the clock as she went and felt steady prickles of fear at what she saw there. She was so worried but the best way she could handle it was to keep her hands busy.

Orion kept close to his father, amber eyes wide and dark with concern. Both his brother and his Dad were out there and something had definitely gone wrong. Harry's birthday was tomorrow, this was not what should happen, Harry was supposed to be happy and relaxed for once.
Out in the clearing they had chosen, Remus was struggling within the circle of candles. He'd lost his connection with Harry a while ago and no matter what he did, he couldn't reconnect. Harry's magic was fluctuating madly and the boy was even paler than usual, sweat matted his dark hair against his temples and forehead. At first things had gone as planned and then all of a sudden, everything had gone to hell.

Eyes closed Harry was deep inside himself, actually looking at his magical core and nearly snarling at what he saw. His magic wasn't just locked inside him by natural means but chained down by someone else's magic. That magic chaining his down was all too familiar too. Dumbledore had chained his magic down somehow and it looked like it was meant to last even through what would have been his normal inheritance. But he wasn't just naturally going through a release of his magic, he'd been doing it deliberately and now the chains were trying to suck his magic away, to take it away from him. 'Like hell.' He pulled his own magic back into himself and spent a bit of time finding the end of a chain. He started unwinding and poking at it and nudging it then had to pause to pull his own magic back to himself again. He could feel his body and feel the absolute agony it was in each time the chains tried to suck his magic away, like someone was trying to tear him in half, but he couldn't afford to focus on that.

He loosened a bit of chain, pulled his magic back to him, loosened more then pulled his magic back. It kept going, a constant cycle a bit like the ebb and flow of the tides, on and on until it felt like he'd been working at this for days though he knew it couldn't have been longer than an hour or so. He was tired and aching but he couldn't give up, couldn't let the old bastard win. He reached the end of the chain and growled when he saw it locked into his own magic. He tried picking the lock and had to immediately pull even more of his magic back to himself than previously.

He poked and prodded until he realized that going gently would just make the locked chain try to steal more of his magic away. He took a bracing breath, mentally and magically gripped the chain and pulled. He pulled not only on his own magic but the magic of the chain, pulling as hard as he could, with everything he was. He couldn't give up, if he did then his friends, his family, they'd been in danger from Dumbledore and from Voldemort. Hermione would be in danger. He tightened his grip and gave one last wrenching effort and felt the lock break. He flew back in his mind, the chain slipping from his grasp to be surrounded and absorbed by his magic until the chain that had kept it down wasn't of Dumbledore anymore. The magic the old man had used no longer belonged to him; it was Harry's now.

He opened his eyes and saw Remus and Arthur there, watching him in concern and he also saw a pink haired woman and a dark skinned bald man a few paces away and he slumped, "Why can't anything with me be simple?"

"I have no idea Harry." Remus sagged in relief when he saw those brilliantly green eyes open and heard that Harry was conscious and made sense. He fished his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped at Harry's face, the strain the boy had been through had given him a nosebleed and Remus had no doubt that Harry would be feeling the aftermath of this for quite some time. "These are Aurors Harry." Remus motioned to the two strangers. "Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt." Remus was tense, he knew that most Aurors were good and decent but it had been Aurors who came after him that day so long ago and who'd kept him locked up and let him be experimented on. He couldn't help it, he didn't trust any of them anymore. "How are you feeling?"

"Like Dudley and his baboons caught me after a game of Harry Hunting so....little achy, a lot tired but I've had worse. Except for the headache from hell."

The female Auror gave a light laugh drawing the dark man's exasperated gaze, "Tonks could you be serious? We do have questions to ask Mr. Potter."
Harry groaned, "Lovely. Well let's get this over with. I really want tea, a comfortable chair, and my girlfriend and not necessarily in that order."

"Could we possibly go to Mr. Weasley's home before you ask any questions? I don't think that Harry should have to be outside any longer than necessary." Remus knew his tone was short but frankly he didn't really care. His concern was for Harry and Harry alone.

"I think that should be alright, don't you King?" Tonks sent her Auror partner a pleading look.

"Wait a minute," Harry straightened, "I'm fine answering questions here. I don't want Snuffles stressed out," he looked at Remus, "You know how he is with strangers."

"I know but I also know that he usually leaves to roam the grounds when strangers come. In fact, I'm almost sure he's outside already, guarding the garden." Remus answered in a soothing manner. He would never risk Sirius or put him in danger, he did feel a wave of affection for Harry though. That even after what had just happened he still worried about Siri.

Tonks sank down on the ground next to Harry, sitting cross legged. "It's fine, we can do it here if Potter here is up to it." She grinned at Harry.

He lifted his chin and met the other Auror's eyes, "I'm up to it."

Shacklebolt shook his head and pulled a crystal out of his robes, "Alright then Mr. Potter. This is a projection crystal, essentially it works like a muggle camcorder, er..."

"I grew up with muggles no need to worry about having to explain common muggle terms. So it'll record this conversation?" Harry shifted, wrapping his arms around one leg to get comfortable, aware of an odd burning of his palms but writing it off for now.

"Yes, as you're a minor we can't record this without both your consent and that of Mr. Weasley," Kingsley looked at the thin balding man.

"Of course Shack, so long as it's okay with Harry and I know you already recorded what we saw before Harry opened his eyes."

"Erm...what you saw?"

"It looked a little like the scene from the Exorcist mate, I was half expecting your head to turn all the way around and for you to start puking peasoup." Tonks reached out and patted Harry's knee before pulling at her short pink spikes.

Harry was aware of the other Auror covering his face with his hand and Arthur looking like he wanted to burst out laughing. As for himself he chuckled, "Well no one ever said I'm normal. It's fine, you can record this. I figure that'll make your job easier and my life simpler, hopefully."

Shacklebolt murmured a soft incantation that had the crystal floating and glowing blue, "Thank you for your cooperation Mr. Potter. Now we understand that you were here tonight performing an adult assisted ritual to fuse with your magic is that correct?"

"It is." Harry nodded.

"Approximately thirty minutes into the ritual something went wrong am I correct in that assumption?"

"That would be a big yes."
"There was a big outlet of Harry's magic, like a sonic boom. I lost the connection I had with Harry at that point and he disappeared into his own mind. His body was convulsing and his nose started bleeding." Remus added in a soft voice even though the fear he'd felt when that happened was still near and very much present.

"What happened Potter? Can I call you Harry by the way?" Tonks asked.

He lifted a shoulder, "I like it better than just Potter. Being called just Potter reminds me of Lucius Malfoy...you could say he and I are very much not fans of each other." He heard Mr. Weasley coughing and knew he'd managed to lighten the mood for him at least. "It's probably going to sound crazy, I don't even know if it's supposed to be possible, but I 'saw' my core, it was red and silver and gold all twisting around itself sort of like a big ball of different colored yarns only they moved. There was something else though, blue chains." He saw both the Aurors straighten up as if they were dogs who'd just caught a scent.

Arthur came closer to crouch beside Harry and put a hand on his shoulder, "Chains Harry?"

He nodded, "Yes. They were wrapped around my magic, keeping it all tied up but they were also pulling on it, sort of...sucking my magic in," he told them what he'd done step by step, watching as Arthur and Remus looked ill and green every time he spoke of having to pull his magic back to himself and as the Aurors slowly went from alert and businesslike to looking utterly gobsmacked by the end of his explanation, "and then I opened my eyes."

Not much actually managed to surprise Kingsley Shacklebolt, he'd seen a great deal as an Auror, but this? A not quite fifteen year old with binding wards on his magical core instinctively removing those wards when they threatened his life and magic? That was definitely a new one.

Remus turned away as his eyes flashed and a dark growl rose from his throat. He understood very well who had placed the bindings on Harry's magic and he hated the old man for it, hated the way he manipulated and played with lives. That he had been willing to kill Harry just to stop him from reaching his full magic. Remus had murdered a man in cold blood once but he knew that when it came to Dumbledore he would do it again and with a song in his heart if he ever got the chance. He was so angry, so full of loathing and hate that he was almost scared he would start sprouting fur despite that the moon was new.

Tonks looked at Remus with something that looked like concern before she turned her attention back to Harry. "And that's it then, everything you can recall?"

Harry reached over and squeezed Remus' shoulder comfortably and nodded, "Yes, that's everything."

Shacklebolt took out a small notepad and scribbled something in it, "Mr. Potter have you ever undergone a binding ritual to your knowledge?"

"No."

"Can you think of any time you might have been put through a binding ritual?"

"I don't really even know what a binding ritual is or what all it involves but I can say that while I lived with the Dursleys there was no way anyone could have done any kind of ritual."

Kingsley nodded and made another note, "What about within Hogwarts? I understand you have been unconscious a few times within the castle. A binding ritual would take anywhere from two to three hours to perform if that helps."
"I'm starting to lose count of the number of times I've wound up knocked unconscious and in the hospital wing," it was an irritable mutter, "but I don't think anyone could have. Not with Madam Pomfrey on watch. If it happens in her infirmary she knows about it."

Kingsley's lips twitched. He remembered the battle axe of a medi-witch well from his own time at Hogwarts.

"Can't get anything past that woman, believe me I've tried." Tonks muttered, remembering her stunts at Hogwarts.

"Is there a chance that the binding ritual happened before Harry came to the Dursleys? That it has been dormant for that long?" Remus' voice were raspy and still with an underlying growl to it. It was all he could think of though, that Dumbledore had performed it before leaving Harry with those monsters.

"If Mr. Potter is correct and no one in Hogwarts had access to him long enough to perform one and," he looked at Arthur, "I am sorry but I have to ask," he turned back to Harry, "could you have been put under a binding ritual during your stays with the Weasley Family?"

Harry had to nearly choke his temper back and even then he noticed Tonks shiver so he knew his magic must be reacting even after having been freed so he was pissed and rightly so. He saw Arthur's jaw tighten and answered Shacklebolt calmly though anyone looking at his eyes could see the heat of his anger, "Not only could I not have been put through a ritual here without my knowledge but if Mr. or Mrs. Weasley ever told me I needed a binding ritual for my or anyone else's safety I'd go through one willingly. I would trust them with my life and my magic in a split second. I have never been through any ritual here aside from the one performed tonight that went all to hell."

Now it was Remus' turn to reach over and place a soothing hand on Harry's shoulder, despite his own rampaging emotions. "Are we almost done here?" He was losing his patience. "It's late, it's getting cold. Harry's been through a terrible strain, he needs warmth and rest. Not to mention that there's a whole house with family and friends waiting in worry, not knowing what's happened to him. You've gotten your statement, anything else can wait until another day."

Tonks looked between Harry, Remus and Arthur and she could sense the tension in the air. It would only be a waste of time dragging this out right now, even if they didn't have all the answers. "It's up to Kings but I think we can do that."

Kingsley was well used to dirty looks though he knew irritating a werewolf was a bad idea and Arthur when he was protecting one of his kids was no slouch either. He ended the spell on the crystal and pocketed it. "I don't believe we'll need to follow up on this actually. Obviously Mr. Potter is no threat, he's broken no laws or rules," only if you listened very, very closely, or had werewolf hearing, would you have heard his soft, irritated mutter about Undersecretaries and Ministers with their heads up their arses, "and has in fact been a victim of a crime. As you said Mr. Lupin, we have his statement, the recording before he managed to save himself, and a timeline to start working on to discover who might have put the bind on his magic. I do believe we are done here yes."

Remus inclined his head. "Thank you Mr. Shacklebolt, Miss Tonks. I hope you make it back to London safely." He blew out the candles, shrunk everything down before placing it in the bag they had brought. Then he walked over and picked up Harry despite the younger man's protests that he could walk on his own. "Let's get you back to the Burrow, before a certain stubborn young lady comes out to look for you on her own." Remus and Arthur fell in line and walked the narrow forest back toward the Burrow.
"Oh and you carrying me isn't going to make her freak out worse at all. I'm already going to be cooed and fussed over, can't you just-"

Arthur chuckled as Harry's voice faded as Remus walked out of earshot. He nodded at Kingsley, "Thank you, for your efficiency."

"We try Arthur." Kingsley tucked his notepad away, "I'll keep you in the loop. Whoever bound Mr. Potter's magic is likely to have done it before he was left with his maternal aunt. Tonks and I will be looking into it and looking hard you can be assured of that."

"We will." Tonks agreed. "Binding a child's magic like that and not telling anyone is a horrible act. Only Harry's skill even though he didn't know what he was doing is the reason he is alive. Whoever did this...We're not going to let them get away with it."

Arthur nodded and said goodbye before they apparated away and then followed in Remus and Harry's wake.

Hermione let out a choked sound when she saw Remus come out from the trees, carrying Harry. She got up from her seat and rushed outside as fast as her legs could carry her.

The rest of the occupants weren't far behind and Harry gave Remus a glare before calling out to Hermione, "I'm fine! Papa Wolf's just over....whatevering. I can walk he just won't let me."

"You should rest and if I can carry you then I will." Remus said stubbornly, still not putting him down.

"Fine? You've got dried blood all over your cheek and shirt." Hermione's tone of voice was much higher than it normally was and she looked over Harry, making sure he had no more hidden injuries.

"Just a little nosebleed that's all. There's not a scratch on me, really Hermione I'm fine. Moony could you please put me down so I can hug my girlfriend before she pulls out any of her hair? I really like her hair."

Ron leaned against Fred and burbled a laugh at that, relief like fizzing whizbees in his stomach.

George was filled with relief too, a comment about Hermione's hair on the tip of his tongue but he managed to swallow it down. He didn't want a pissed off Harry on his back.

Remus sighed but did put Harry down on his feet and Hermione was in his arms in an instant, hugging him tightly and burying her face against his shoulder. She fisted her hands in his shirt and held on. "You don't do anything the easy way, do you Harry?"

Molly wiped away a tear of relief as she looked at her youngest boy. "Let's go inside where Harry can sit down. The tea's brewed and waiting."

Harry ran a hand down Hermione's hair and gently nudged her toward the Burrow, in the end just walking and letting her cling as he found his way to a squishy chair and sat down, happy to let Hermione settle on his lap. He glanced over his shoulder and grinned as he saw a startled Remus suddenly pounced on by Sirius and Orion.

Sirius held tight to Remus, he'd wanted to hug Harry too but Hermione had first claim and that was alright because he'd been mind-numbingly worried about Remus too. When magic rituals went wrong often times all the people participating in it died. The thought of Remus being caught in a ritual backlash had had him pacing the floor, his stomach in knots. But he was here, safe, whole,
and not even a slight magical burn on him.

Remus was wide eyed but hugged both Sirius and Orion back, running his hands through their dark hair.

Hermione still had her arms around Harry and her head on his shoulder. She needed the closeness, her heart still racing. "What did I tell you about getting into trouble without me?" She rubbed the tip of her nose against his neck.

Molly was setting the table and she handed Harry a large mug of hot tea so that he wouldn't have to get up. She straightened when Arthur walked through the door and went to hug her husband.

He kissed the tip of her nose, "It's alright. There won't be any backlash from the Ministry over this. No one could have possibly expected what happened."

Ron had come in and flopped down in the couch next to Harry's chosen seat, "So what did happen? Why was your hand looking like it was going to lodge at Mortal Peril mate?"

Harry blew out a breath, "Can we get everyone in here first, I'd sort of like to get all the explosions over with at one time really."

Fred exchanged a look with George then they moved to sit on either side of Ginny knowing that their baby sister was likely to try flying out to Bat Boegy someone.

Sirius didn't let go of Remus, much to Harry's amusement, and instead crab walked practically attached to the werewolf into the living room and sitting on the couch to be eyed by Ron before the redhead shrugged. "So we're going to blow our tops cub?" Sirius didn't pull Remus into his lap or crawl into Remus' though the temptation for it was very very strong. He stayed plastered to Remus' side as he waited for Harry's answer though.

Arthur sighed and spoke before Harry did, "Yes, I do believe so. I nearly did the same in front of Shacklebolt and Tonks."

"I was worried for a moment that I would go full Moony on them, moon be damned. I still have half a mind to do it." Remus was still upset but having Sirius on one side and Orion on the other helped to keep him anchored and focused. No matter how much he wanted to tear Dumbledore apart, there wasn't much he could do now. He had to think about Harry and Orion and do the best he could to keep them safe.

Hermione was tense, wondering and worrying about what she would be hearing now. She knew it wouldn't be good.

Fred pursed his lips, "Quick, someone confiscate the ladies' wands, don't forget Snuffles' too."

Sirius gave him the Italian salute at the implication that he was a woman but smiled when it made Harry laugh.

"Okay the reason my magic went boom, and my hand on the clock nearly stuck at Mortal Peril is because there was a bind on my magic...erm."

Arthur picked it up since he realized Harry didn't know enough about wards and what they could do yet to explain without telling the whole story over again, "Someone, I'm guessing Dumbledore, in the past used a binding ritual to create wards to keep Harry's magic suppressed, even through his inheritance. The wards, once the ritual tonight to fuse Harry and his magic together removed the natural barrier, tried to absorb Harry's magic."
Molly gasped and dropped her teacup so that it shattered on the floor. "Absorbing the magic...That kills you." Of course she'd known that Harry was in danger from the clock but to hear it like this...It was almost impossible to take in. "Oh Harry, thank goodness that you are you and that you don't know what's impossible or not."

Hermione had stiffened and was holding on to Harry even tighter than before, only letting up some when he grunted that he couldn't breathe. "That horrible excuse of a man, so scared of your power that he'd rather see you dead than achieve it. I want him hurt, his magic bound." Hermione felt bloodthirsty, she wanted Dumbledore to really know pain.

"Shh," Harry ran his hand over her hair and down her back, "I don't think he's actually scared of my power."

Ron spluttered, "Well why else would he have bound it up?!!"

Harry sighed, "I'm starting to think that his plan all along has been for me to die fighting Voldemort." He kissed Hermione's temple when she made a strangled noise. "He wants the recognition, the eternal glory and fame but if I destroy old Tommy boy then it'll be me the world fixates on," he pulled a grimace at that thought, "So what better way to get what he wants than to use me and Voldemort to whittle each other down, Voldemort killing me and then he swoops in and finishes him off? Not only is he hailed as an incredible hero who's defeated two Dark Lords in his lifetime but he'll be able to pull on the public's heartstrings and get plenty of sympathy to keep bad press to a minimum by pretending to grieve over my loss."

Fred made a growl like he wanted to get up and go after Dumbledore even though he was working with George to keep their tempest of a sister from doing just that. "Okay why can't we just kill him and him him out of our misery again? I mean come on, he'd never suspect Dad for example."

Harry shifted a bit, discomfort lingering from the effort of freeing his magic, "Too risky right now." He didn't elaborate, he didn't have to.

Noticing the shift beneath her, Hermione was ready to move out of his lap. As much as she wanted to be close to Harry she didn't want to hurt him or make him uncomfortable.

Remus was quiet, he knew that they couldn't kill Dumbledore but oh how he wanted to, he wanted to do it with his own hands, feeling bones crack and blood flow. Still killing him right now would achieve nothing. The ritual he'd placed on Orion was still there, who knew if the old coot had performed any magic seals on anyone other than Harry. Remus didn't really believe that he had but when it came to Albus Dumbledore you could never be sure.

"Harry's right, for now the best we can do is continue to whittle away at his reputation, make more and more people see him for the evil, delusional fraud that he is." Remus fingered one of the scars that wasn't caused by Moony but by the Ministry and their silver tools.

Ron made a grumble of assent then blinked at Harry, "Er mate...."

Harry still had his arms around Hermione, not too keen on letting her go despite the lingering pain in his body, "Yeah, what is it?"

"Your nose...."

Sirius looked up from where he'd been scowling at a scar that looked like someone had cut a circle out of Remus' arm and inhaled sharply, finally letting Remus go, "Cub you're bleeding!"

"Wha-?" Harry lifted a hand to his nose, eyeing the smear of red that came away on it. "Uh...."
"Oh dear." Molly went over to the kitchen counter and wet a soft cotton rag before going back to Harry and wiping his face carefully and handing him a dry handkerchief too. "Your body has been under a lot of strain Harry, I can only imagine the kind of force it took to pull your magic back inside your body. You should go rest." She ran her fingers through his hair.

Hermione had gotten off Harry's lap and was now kneeling next to his seat instead. "Molly is right, you should rest and give both your body and your magic time to recuperate." She looked at her wrist, the watch there and gave a crooked little smile. "Oh and happy birthday, it's past midnight."

He blinked again and gave a soft laugh, "So it is," He wiped at his nose and gave her a fast kiss in case it decided to start leaking again. He'd told her once that it'd become an odd tradition for him to stay up and wish himself a happy birthday at midnight. "You're right about the rest. I feel like I could sleep for years."

Sirius got to his feet and, much to Harry's displeasure and everyone else's amusement, picked his godson up, "Ah-ah no arguing. Let this old dog reassure himself and do something to help take care of you."

Harry gave an exasperated sigh, "Hermione promise me that this doesn't make me look like a nancy these two carrying me around like..." he waggled a hand. "You look adorable, nothing like a nancy at all." Hermione smiled, amusement dancing in her brown eyes.

"Between the wolf and the dog here, you'll never have to use your own two legs again." George snickered and finally dared to release his grip on Ginny a little. "You do look like a nancy but don't worry, we love you anyway. Now go sleep so you are fit for cake and prezzies in the morning."

Harry glared at him over Sirius' shoulder, "Just remember Mr. Tod, I don't get mad I get even, as your biggest brother can attest to and over the summer there's only one way for your letters to get to your blond obsession."

Fred gasped, "Harry! That's below the belt," he grinned at the brunet's fading snicker, "Well he'll live then." He let Ginny go even though she was still fuming, "Alright there Flicker?"

"No, I'm not alright, I will be when the Bee is de-throned and ridiculed like he should be. I am going to have a serious conversation with Luna later today when she comes for the party. She said something about wang worms once and I would love to find some and infect the bastard with them."

"Ginny!" Molly chastised her daughter.

"Oh come on Mum, he deserves it." Ginny crossed her arms over her chest with a stubborn pout. Ron cleared his throat, "As a lad I am instinctively against anything called a 'wang worm' but as someone exceptionally against the buzzing annoyance....I'll provide the containers to catch the things."

Arthur coughed and looked out the window, his lips twitching in amusement.

"Really, you're all impossible." Molly grumbled but she couldn't quite hide her own smile. "Now off to bed with you, I don't want a bunch of hollow eyed inferi at the party."

Remus stood and reached for his son. "We'll obey and head off to bed. Have a pleasant evening all of you and we'll see you later." Remus felt jittery, he'd been so scared when he lost the connection
with Harry and had seen him struggle like that. For now he wanted to lie down in the room he shared with Sirius and Orion and just process the whole event in his mind in the presence of his family.

Sirius deposited Harry next to his bed in Ron's room and gave him a squeeze, "You scared me kiddo."

"Sorry...I'd like to say I was scared too but I wasn't. I was just plain pissed off. Course I didn't know getting my magic sucked away could kill me."

Sirius chuckled and ruffled Harry's hair, "Losing all of it kills you. Even muggles have a teeny bit of magic. Not enough to manifest in any way but it's there, a glimmer that can be passed on to their children and strengthened. There's a long, boring explanation but you get the idea. Now into bed with you."

"Sir yes sir!" He saluted and wiggled under his sheets, "Goodnight Padfoot."

"Night Scar, see you in the morning." Sirius left, passing Ron in the hall and stepped into the room he shared with Remus, noticing that their son had already gone out like a light. "Too much stress for the pup."

"Yeah." Remus looked at Orion with a fond expression, when he slept like this he still looked so very young. "First the excitement of coming here and seeing everyone and then worrying about Harry...Merlin what a mess...I was so scared." Remus let out a deep breath and pulled on the hem of his worn t-shirt he wore to bed.

Sirius moved to sit down next to Remus, keeping a little distance in case he didn't feel comfortable with it, and reached out to squeeze his hand, "Tell me."

"Everything was fine, it was going according to plan and I had just guided Harry underneath the surface when this boom of magic came and tossed me out. To see him there bleeding, cramping and fighting for his life and not being able to do a single thing to help him. It's the worst feeling."

Remus held on tightly to Sirius' hand.

He lifted their joined hands up and closer to him and rubbed Remus' arm with his other, "I don't have any words, not for this. All I know that I almost lost my mind and not just because I knew Harry was in danger but because you were too. That boom...it could have killed you or another backlash of magic could have whipped out and taken both you and Harry down and I knew it. Rituals that go wrong...I've seen a few too many. Molly had to nearly hex me to keep me from jumping out of the house and going to find you immediately. She probably would have to if Orion hadn't been there clung to my side. I was terrified that when Arthur came back...it'd been to tell us you and Harry were gone. But you both came back and Harry's just a little worn out. He squeezed Remus' hand, "And you probably helped more than you think. You were there Moony and he knew he wasn't alone. That makes all the difference."

"I hope so but still, that helplessness, you know how I hate it." Remus shuffled closer to the other man and leaned his head on the other's shoulder. "I'm glad you stayed here with Orion, that you took care of him and I'm glad you weren't discovered by the Aurors." He began to fiddle with his scars again, it had become a nervous habit whenever he was upset. "That man has now put both our cubs in mortal danger. I don't really care what happens but somehow I am going to take payment out of his hide. I swear it."

"We are going to take it out of his hide," Sirius slid his arm around Remus, the closeness soothing something wild and pacing inside him, "When the Rat is captured and I'm free again, we'll get our
payment out of that twisted old bastard and we'll get it with magic's blessing." His eyes were almost silver in the low light of the room. He'd never been the proud son of dark magic his mother had wanted, choosing instead to seek out the long forgotten lighter magics the Black family had once known and once, just before leaving home for good, he'd found a chamber beneath Black Manor that held the solution to getting rid of Dumbledore once Orion was freed from his grip.

"Hopefully Wormtail will be caught quickly. Not because of vengeance but because you deserve to be free. To go where you want and do what you please." Remus closed his eyes as he leaned against Sirius, he was so tired. Partly because what had happened and partly because that no matter what they did it felt like trying to swim in syrup, instead of carrying you forward it weighed you down. "Oh before I forget, one of the Aurors was a relative of yours that little slip of a girl who can change her appearance...Nympho something. I don't think she recognized me."

Sirius made a strangled sound of amusement, "Oh Merlin never let her hear you call her that, she'd probably deck you. Even when I knew her she hated her name. Nymphadora, I still don't know what Rommie was thinking. She still prefer pink hair?" He shifted so they were both sitting against the headboard and brought Remus closer. He wished he could take away everything that weighted Remus down, take it on himself instead but he could only offer his presence.

"It was pink tonight." Remus nodded. "Pink and short and spiky. She seems nice enough, I'm not the right person to ask though, sadly I find that I can't see beyond the color of their robes these days." If Remus hadn't been so tired, so shaken then he would never have admitted to even that. He never ever spoke of his time in captivity, not even to Severus.

That hit him right in the heart. The article on Remus having been experimented on and held unlawfully had been painful and he knew it was his fault. He'd looked into it all further, as much as he was able, and the death of the Auror had been covered. He remembered how opposed to violence Remus had been and knew that having to kill in cold blood just to save himself and Orion had to have put a painful scar on Remus' heart.

He leaned his head on Remus'. "There were bad Aurors even when I was working there. They were the ones no one wanted to work with because they had no honor or compassion. Even if I was free I wouldn't trust one I don't know. It's a job that can kill your soul and trust in everything. Moody is an example of an Auror who came out of it all well. Even so he's..."

"Damaged?" Remus knew that Sirius was right, he also knew that for every bad Auror there were plenty of good ones. Sirius and James had been prime examples of that but unfortunately his head and his heart couldn't agree on this issue and Remus had lost his trust in all of them. "Moody turned hunting and catching dark witches and wizards into his whole life, it became all about quantity to him. I think that once you lose your compassion, once you see everything in strictly black or white then you're already lost. I know you're forced to see a lot of horror as an Auror but you can't allow yourself to forget about the good things either."

He nodded, "I didn't have much for Auror life left in me I don't think. James had a talent for it, for continuing to see the good through everything, but I didn't have that. I followed him into the corps because...well I was a little prat wasn't I? I couldn't stand the thought of The Marauders breaking up so I held on to the past and childhood with both hands when I should have been growing up. I'm shocked Lily didn't brain me with a cooking pan."

"You weren't the only one scared to let go of the past Pads. I think Jamie and Lils were the only one really ready for it, which is scary in its own right when I think of how boneheaded and utterly childish James was at school." Remus made an expression half way between a smile and a grimace. "You were a good Auror though, don't tell yourself differently." Remus didn't comment on the prat
thing, nothing he said about that would be helpful in the slightest and it was better to leave that in
the past where it belonged.

"Oh I know that, I just didn't have the right stuff for a long haul at that job. I should have done
what James told me to and gotten my Transfiguration and Rune masteries, given myself a little
more time to work out what else I wanted with the rest of my life."

"It's easy to see what you should have done when looking back on it. We were just kids, all of us,
trying to find our way. Of course there were mistakes...They were just made that much worse due
to outer circumstances. Once you're free you can still get your masteries in Transfiguration and
Runes. Bloody hell Sirius, you're still young."

"I think I'll be too busy at first for that. There's just not enough hours in the day to work at bringing
the Bee down, secure all the mess that is the Black Lordship, blech, finish a couple pet projects,
get my masteries, and get enough beauty sleep so I don't look like an inferi." He squeezed Remus'
shoulders, "But there's time enough."

"Even as an inferi you'd still be gorgeous, you could never be anything but." Remus shifted so his
head was in a more comfortable position on Sirius' shoulder, their hands still entwined. He'd
missed this, more than he'd known. The comfort and security of just being close to Sirius, talking
about the day gone by and anything else that was on their mind. In a way this was more intimate
than sex and Remus had been sure they would ever have this again. He could hear Orion's soft
snoring from the mattress he was sleeping on and Sirius was warm and real against his side. It
made Remus' tension drain out of him and he could finally relax.

"Well I'm not too sure about that but I'm glad you think so," he pulled a blanket up over them,
"You should get some sleep Remus. Tonight was hard on you as well as Harry. I'll even stir myself
to sing a lullaby if you need some sound to keep your mind from whirling."

"Please no." Remus chuckled softly. "We shouldn't scare the Weasleys out of their beds, thinking a
screeching ghoul has made its way inside the house." He turned his head and smiled at Sirius.
"Thank you for the offer though, I'll try to make it through without song...At least for tonight." Still
smiling, Remus closed his eyes and just listened to the soft sounds his loved ones were making.

"You're not funny," it was very softly spoken and ripe with affection as Sirius watched Remus drift
off. It felt like they'd taken another big step tonight but time would only tell how large that step had
been.
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Albus Dumbledore didn't know what was wrong. Something had obviously happened to tear him
from a sound sleep with a nosebleed but he couldn't put his finger on it. He walked toward his wash
room, cursing when he stubbed his toe in the darkness. He waved his hand to light a candle, one of
the most basic and easiest wandless spells, and gaped in shock when it didn't work. He
concentrated harder and waved his hand again feeling a chill when it still did not work. He reached
for his wand and flipped it, breathing easier when the candle flared to life. He sat down on his bed
and felt through his magical core and what he found made his stomach knot almost painfully. He
was missing power. Somehow a goodly amount of his power that he'd counted on had been taken
away.

This was very, very bad. He got to his feet and swept to his study to look into how this could have
happened.
Narcissa stepped into the parlor where her son was standing, cheeks flaming red, letter in hand, with Harry Potter a few meters away.

Harry eyed Malfoy warily, "I do not want to know, I really don't. Please, don't even curse them because I do not want to know."

Draco looked up at Potter, still blushing bright red and fingers clenching around the letter so hard it crinkled. "I would not repeat the utter filth in this letter to anyone. Your new brothers are some sort of sexual deviants...Besides, I think it's impossible to be that bendy."

Narcissa's lips twitched as Potter groaned and insisted on hating Draco. "Mr. Potter, welcome once again. I do hope there is more to this visit than delivering erotic love letters to my son." She lifted a brow in question.

"Good morning Lady Malfoy, and trust me if I'd known what the twins had written this time I wouldn't have delivered that thing. I'm going to have to make rules for next summer about letter content. You sent Artemis," he referred to Draco's eagle owl, "with a letter a little while ago about a locket you found?"

"Indeed. I am surprised it took you this long to respond." She gestured for the boys to follow her up to her room.

"I'm sorry. I had to take care of an issue with my magic and then Mrs. Weasley threw the whole big birthday party...I swear we all had to roll instead of walk after all that food."

"Oh yeah, you're finally fifteen Potter, congratulations I suppose." Draco was still clutching the letter as he walked behind Potter and his mother up the stairs to her room. "I hope the issue with your magic is resolved...I didn't turn turncoat just to end up on the losing side. That would be terribly inconvenient."

"If by resolved you mean I had to instinctively break and absorb an illegal bind on my magic that nearly killed me when I was fusing with it early, yes it was resolved," he held his hands up, showing slight red markings that looked like burn scars in the shape of chain links across the palms.

Narcissa froze in mid step and turned to stare at the marks, "You fused with your magic early?"

He lowered his hands, "I had to. It was following my subconscious thoughts in an attempt to please me before I really decided if I did or did not want what was going through my head. Probably why I blew up my Uncle's sister before third year," he gained a considering look on his face.

"Blew her up like making her explode?" Draco took a few steps away from Potter just to be sure. "Well anyway, I'm glad you're not dead then as for why I just refer to my previous statement. I would loathe having to have been in exile all summer and still end up Riddle's bumboy."

"Draco," his mother's voice held a soft scold, "language. Mr. Potter do enlighten us, did she explode?"

"Well she might have if it'd kept going but no. She inflated like a balloon and floated off down Privet Drive like a really ugly parade float." He looked more curious than disturbed at the thought of Marge having actually exploded. She hadn't and he really didn't like her so he could look at it
more academically than anything else. "Don't worry Malfoy, you're not going to wind up as Riddle's pet. So this locket?"

Narcissa stepped into her room and retrieved the box while her son eyed Potter.

"You're a strange one Potter, you really, really are." Draco didn't know what else to say. The more he learnt about Potter the less he understood him. "So this locket Mother found, I want you to look at it. I think I recognize it from your little hide away lair but we should make sure." He turned to his mother then. "I apologize for my language earlier Mother, would anal concubine make you feel more comfortable?"

She lifted a brow at her son, "Would you prefer your tongue to be permanently sealed to the roof of your mouth darling?" Not waiting for an answer she opened the box and handed it to Potter.

Harry took it and peered at the locket, "You're right about recognizing it. This is the locket Slytherin wears in his portrait in the library," he reached in and tapped it, a grimace of distaste crossing his features before he set his jaw and picked it up, studying it. This thing felt familiar. There was the feel of Slytherin's magic there of course, he recognized that from the magic in the doors of the Chamber, but it was buried under something slick, oily and foul that reminded him of - "The diary."

"Hm?" Draco looked from the locket Potter held to his face. "I'm sorry, do you need some time alone to write down your feelings and thoughts about this? Dear Diary, today I was again reminded of my own faults as I gazed upon the perfection that are the Malfoys."

"Little dense there? The diary your father slipped to Ginny, this locket feels like that with a bit of Salazar Slytherin tossed in," he laid it back into the box, mind working and brows drawn together as he closed the box and started to mutter to himself, "He said he put some of himself into the diary. Did he put some of himself into this too? Some of his magic? Like a portrait? Or something more? What else is there?"

Narcissa found herself slightly reminded of Severus when he was caught up in a potion. People around him faded and the potion was all that existed. She wondered how insulted Potter and Severus would be at her comparison between them. She was also disturbed. Memories of whispers involving the darkest of arts stirring at Potter's words.

"Sad really." Draco came to stand next to his mother, almost startled when he realized that he was taller than her now, she always seemed larger than life. "That right there, that little pixie of a boy muttering to himself is the shining hope of our salvation. Still pieces of someone in objects, where have I heard about that before?"

She jerked her gaze to her son and vowed that she was going to arrange some sort of bum rotting curse for Lucius. That was not something she'd ever wanted her baby to even hear implications about but damage once done cannot be undone. "It's a dark art that it's said only the most unstable, foulest, and evil attempt."

Harry paused in his muttering and looked at her, "Lady Malfoy?"

"I do not know much about them, even the largest library of dark books only barely mentions them, but there is something called a Horcrux. All I know is that it involves dark soul magic and truly cold blooded murder. Not the sort where you are working to escape something but where you plot and plan the death of an innocent for no other reason aside from wanting to steal the life away from them."
Harry swallowed, "That's..."

"Sickening?"

"That's horrid, even for Father's little club of masquerade enthusiasts." Draco shuddered, he wasn't a saint by any means. He wasn't even a particularly pleasant person but to do something like that, commit such a heinous act...It was something he already knew that he would never be able to do. "Sadly it does like something a person or...creature like Riddle would do. Compassion and mercy doesn't seem to ever have been big things on his agenda."

"No," Harry hefted the box, tapping it in thought, "I think I'll bring this back to the Chamber when this school year starts. Maybe there will be something in the Chamber library about it. I don't want to just start whacking at it until I know what we might be in for."

"There's no doubt in your mind that you do wish to destroy it then?" Narcissa asked.

"None. I don't think even Slytherin would want his prized locket to be turned into something like this."

"Of course he wouldn't. Salazar Slytherin was a great man, not the bigoted monster he's portrayed as today." Draco had done a lot of research about the founding wizard of his House, even more when Slytherin's library became available to him. "What has been done to that locket is an abomination, if I can help in any way to destroy it, all you have to do is ask Potter." Draco was almost shocked at himself for offering something like that, without getting anything in return even. Huh, it looked as if he had some sort of scruples after all, how very odd. Hurrying to change the subject from his altruistic slip Draco cleared his throat. "Have you heard anything about how Blaise is doing in Romania with his dragon keeper? Is he healthy and feeding alright?"

Draco worried about both Pansy and Blaise, they were family and in the past they had always looked out for one and other. It felt very strange to be cut off from them like this. He hoped that they were safe and sound and that Pansy wouldn't do something stupid due to boredom.

"I knew I was forgetting something," he rummaged in the wallet Hermione had given him, brilliant girl, with the undetectable expansion charm on it, "You'd think they'd know better than to send something weeks in advance, people bloody forget. Ah there it is," he pulled out a shiny gold wrapped gift with a heavy vellum envelope attached and passed it to Malfoy, "Healthy, feeding regularly, adored by the dragons, and romance is in the air if I'm reading between the lines of Charlie's letter correctly but from the thickness of that 'card' I'm thinking you'll be told yourself. Sorry for not giving that to you first. Fred and George tend to chase out other thoughts when they're annoying me about doing something for them."

Draco's eyes lit up with genuine delight at the present and the letter from Blaise, he looked forward to being able to read about how his friend was doing. "Thank you Potter and I sympathize regarding the terrible two, they can be...distracting." Blaise's letter was bound to be full of perverted things too but Draco could handle Blaise's brand of perviness, it wasn't directed at him for one reason. "You can tell them that before they can prove to me that it is in fact physically possible to bend that way without permanent damage, they don't have a chance in hell at coming near me with any of the...toys they mentioned in their letter."

".....I really didn't need to know that and just for putting that image in my brain I won't tell what I know of what Parkinson is getting up to, so there."

Narcissa's lips twitched, boys would be boys she supposed.
"Oh come on Potter, don't be like that." Draco wasn't whining, Malfoys don't whine. He was simply...less than perfectly content. "They are your brothers, it's not my fault they are creeps. As truly sad as it is, you're my only contact to the outside world. Please tell me what my Pants is up to."

"Just because they're my brothers doesn't mean I want to know what goes on in their perverted heads thank you very much. It's not like I come in here and start telling you what goes on in my dreams about my girlfriend or the complaints Charlie writes about dragon drool so I don't see why you think I want to hear about what Fred and George want to do with you once it's legal. I've got enough twisted things I have to deal with you know."

"Yeah, yeah, poor Potter and his sensitive, delicate mind. I apologize for scarring your virgin thoughts. Now would you pretty, please with treacle tart on top tell me what Pansy is doing all on her lonesome?"

Harry folded his arms over his chest and lifted a brow, "You know the distinct lack of sincerity in your tone is not what exactly convincing me to-"

"Mr. Potter," Narcissa's smooth voice broke in, amusement underneath, "Forgive me for interrupting and I do understand your reluctance to do my son the favor of informing him of Pansy's doings after showing his appalling lack of manners but I am rather concerned about her myself. She does not do well being idle. Would you please share at least a little of how her summer has gone?"

Harry gave Narcissa a smile, "Well without giving too much away I can tell you she has definitely not been idle. She's been begging, bribing, and badgering Orion for some of his more unique hexes but more, she's succeeded in attaining an animagus form."

"Really?" Gray eyes were wide in surprise. "That bitch of a witch." It was said with nothing but fondness. "Now I need to step up my game as well, can't let her beat me, that would not be acceptable." He smoothed his hair back, making sure not a single strand was out of place. "Tell me Potter, do you know what animal form she takes? Please tell me it's a badger."

Harry grinned, "Oh I know and all I'll say is that it is not a badger. Have a good day Malfoy," he gave a short bow to Draco's mother, "Lady Malfoy. Good luck with the shopping for supplies and," he looked around, "You're doing marvelously with this old place."

Narcissa watched the brunet scamper off and shook her head, "That boy should have been in Slytherin. Now," she half turned and lifted a brow, "Draco darling, do we need to have a refresher course on proper subjects of discussion in mixed company?"

"I have perfect manner in mixed company Mother, Potter on the other hand...Well he doesn't count. If I wasn't rude to him the world would end." He walked up to his mother and brushed his lips over her cheekbone. "Now on to something far more important. Whatever shall I wear when we go shopping? I may have to be a girl but I'm not going to look like some slouch."

His mother smiled brightly, "I've already got your outfit prepared darling, no need to worry."

He eyed her with some suspicion. "Okay then, nothing garish I hope. I'm well aware from which of my parents I've inherited the evil gene from." Draco folded up the horrid letter and placed it in his pocket to reread it later in private. "Now if you don't need me right now, I shall retire to the library and work on my own animagus form. I couldn't stand Pansy's smugness if I haven't achieved it before the start of term."
"Of course dear," she kissed his brow, "I shall see you at supper and tomorrow we'll do our shopping so you'd best rest plenty darling."

"Yes Mother." Draco replied with a fond smile. "Be sure you do the same as well, can't shop properly with bags beneath your eyes. Call me if you need me." He swept out of the room to head toward the library and plenty of studying.

Narcissa went back to the room she was currently working on anticipating her son's reaction when he had to don the frilly pink dress she'd arranged. It was perhaps a horrible thing to do but a mother had to glean her amusement from somewhere.

Harry wagged the spatula at Fred and George and hissed out a whisper, "If the two of you don't be quiet I'm going to spank you with the spatula and since it's metal it will not feel good!"

"Oh I don't know, sometimes even the sharp bite of metal can feel nice in its own way." George and Fred continued to hover around their brother. "Will there be waffles?"

"That does it, you can either stop hovering or you can help," he narrowed dangerous green eyes at them, "and if you even think about sabotaging any task I give you if you choose the latter you will regret it until the end of your days."

Fred didn't like that gleam in the hex green eyes so he tugged George with him out of Harry's way, "I think we'll just sit over here, nice a quiet as church mice and let you do your thing there Harry."

"Good," Harry continued cooking. Poor Molly had been worn to a frazzle after yesterday's shopping excursion, riding in the Gringotts cart, dealing with sneering vendors who'd acted like...well like the shop girls in the Pretty Woman movie Petunia liked so much, and riding herd on the twins, Orion, Ron, and an over-excited Ginny and she'd not yet woken up.

Remus and Sirius had stayed through the full moon at Molly's insistence since she knew Remus would be exceptionally tired afterward and had wanted to do him the favor of letting him rest while she took Orion to get his supplies, and of course now she was the one exhausted.

Harry had crept downstairs while all the adults slept and started making breakfast. It was the least he could do for Mrs. Weasley, she deserved an easy morning for once. Of course Fred and George had smelled the bacon and clambered downstairs and proceeded to gawp at him for five solid minutes before starting to pester him. Harry was honestly shocked that Orion hadn't come out yet to stick his little nose in.

He put the bacon and sausage in a big serving dish and covered it to keep warm then pulled out the waffle iron with a warning glare at the twins to stave off any celebratory cheers. The point of this was to let Molly sleep and maybe surprise her and Arthur with breakfast in bed if they managed to not wake them. He quickly mixed up a cinnamon waffle batter and poured it into the iron. He couldn't use magic for the cooking but that was no problem here. It was all wood stove and cast iron and he could muggle his way through it perfectly.

Hermione came down the stairs and covered her yawn behind her hand. She was still in pajama bottoms and tank top and she had fully expected it to be Molly standing at the stove. When she saw her boyfriend there she was filled with love for him, understanding instantly what he was up to. She walked across the wooden floor and kissed a sharp jawline. "Good Morning, what can I do to help?" She looked around for something she could do.
Orion came scurrying down as well, also in his pyjamas and with his long black hair in complete disarray, it looked as if he’d stuck his fingers in an electrical socket. "Do I smell sausage?" He raised his little nose and smelled the air like a dog would.

Harry kissed Hermione's brow, "If you could set the table and then do the toast after please? I don't trust the two terrors not to make a racket and Orion," he looked at his little brother, "according to Remus drops plates like no tomorrow. And kiddo yes you smell sausage, shh!" He interrupted the woohoo before it formed, "Don't wake Mrs. Weasley okay? This is supposed to be a surprise."

Orion clamped his jaw shut with such force that his teeth clattered. He was very much into surprises and he knew how hard Mrs. and Mr. Weasley worked every single day. He nodded to Harry that he would be silent before bouncing over to the twins and starting a whispered conversation with them.

Smiling, Hermione went about setting the table, making sure not to rustle the plates and glasses as she carried them over. This was a really sweet thing for Harry to think of, he was such a wonderful person.

It didn't take too long until the entire population of minors was in the kitchen, Ron had just blinked a couple times, shaken his head, then gotten the marmalade and butter out for the toast when everything was done. When the last few waffles were cooking Harry looked over at Orion, "Hey kiddo think you can peek in on your parents and Mr and Mrs Weasley and check to see if they're up without waking them if they aren't?"

"You can count on me." Orion jumped up and disappeared up the stairs on truly silent feet.

"That boy can sneak in silence, I'm almost impressed." Ginny was eyeing the tea and waffles hungrily. She was a sucker for anything cinnamon and the scent wafting up from the warm waffles was so tempting.

It didn't take a long time before Orion came toeing back down, followed by Sirius and Remus. "These two were awake but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are still sleeping."

Sirius blinked at the food around and at Harry dishing up everything and carrying serving trays to the table then smiled, "Cub sometimes you're just too much."

"Hey Mrs. Weasley deserves a lie in after yesterday's crazy," Harry fixed a tray with two servings of breakfast up, "Moony could you cast a charm to keep the food on the tray warm and fresh please?"

"Absolutely cub." Remus smiled at Harry and picked up his wand, casting a stasis charm on the tray. "You are right Harry, both Arthur and Molly deserve a lie in, it's very kind of you to organize this and cook such a wonderful meal. Everything smells delicious." Then he turned to his younger son. "After this you are definitely going to comb your hair, it looks as if you've never seen a hairbrush in your life. You're the one who wants your hair long, keep it neat or it comes off."

Orion groaned and placed his hands protectively of his ratnest hair. "Fine, geez, let a boy wake up properly before starting in on the demands."

"Oh yes, I force you to do so much." Remus' tone was dry.

Harry chuckled quietly and went upstairs silently, certain that Hermione would make sure there was enough breakfast left for him once he came back down. He crept into Molly and Arthur's room and silently placed the tray on the bedside table, smiling at the way Arthur held Molly close and
tight before sneaking back out and closing the door to let them rest.

He grinned in the doorway of the kitchen where everyone was sitting at the table and he could tell it was a raucous, loud event but someone had put up a silencing charm over the kitchen so he didn't hear Ron threatening to kill Fred until he stepped in further. As he walked past he grabbed the waffle Fred had stolen from Ron's plate then put it back on his best friend's before sitting down next to Hermione and kissing her cheek when he saw the plate of food set up for him. "Thank you."

"Don't even mention it, of course I'm not going to let you starve among this pack of wolves." She smiled at him and brushed her fingertips over his cheek before pouring both of them tea. "These waffles are amazing Harry, I actually understand Fred and Ron fighting for them."

Orion looked like a chipmunk, both cheeks full of sausage and toast. Remus only shook his head at his impossible son and concentrated on his own plate.

Sirius saw the bright red that blazed over Harry's cheeks at the compliment and added one of his own, "Hermione's very, very right. It's all delicious and definitely worth poking a brother with a fork for more."

Harry ducked his head shyly and speared a bit of sausage, "It's just a little cinnamon in the batter, really anyone can do it."

"No Harry, not anyone could do it and more importantly, not everyone would. You did though and did it brilliantly I might add." Remus smiled at him. "I know that Molly and Arthur will appreciate a breakfast in bed very, very much. I am certainly appreciating the wonderful food I'm eating. And look at Ry, he's too busy to even swallow, that's high praise indeed."

Orion glared at his Daddy and stole a sausage from his plate, cramming it inside his already full mouth.

Sirius reached over and held Orion's plate out of his reach, "Chew and swallow what's in your mouth before you choke yourself." He looked over at Harry, "What Moony said. Of you, Fred, George, Ron, and Miss Ginny who's ever thought to give Molly and Arthur a lie in with breakfast in bed before hmm?" He took a small petty enjoyment out of the four flushing redheads, "Not that there's anything wrong with not thinking about it I mean, most kids wouldn't. You do though, because you're...Harry. So soak up the praise, you deserve it. It's good food with good feeling behind it."

Fred nodded, "Yeah Scar, the food is wicked and you did a good thing for Mum."

Ron thought Harry's face was going to catch on fire it was so red.

"You deserve every bit of praise Harry." Hermione leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Don't forget to actually eat though, before you find your food missing." She slapped away George's sneaking hand that was reaching for Harry's bacon toast.

"Give me my plate back, I've chewed and swallowed. You only took it to have more for yourself." Orion reached for his plate of precious, precious sausages. When the food was this tasty, chewing was overrated.

"Well since you can talk now," Sirius lowered the plate, "eat like a human being and not a troll or it's going up again." He poked Fred's hand with his fork when the redhead tried to steal from his plate.

"Ow!"
"Hands to yourself boy. I'm not stealing today," which he wasn't. He'd not taken any of Orion's sausages, "so neither will I let myself be stolen from."

Ron snickered and shoveled waffle into his mouth as George kissed Fred's hand better.

Harry just tucked in. He didn't really think he deserved all the praise but he wasn't keen to start an argument over it. He just hoped Mr and Mrs Weasley liked the food.

Molly almost had a conniption when she opened her eyes and saw the sunlight streaming in from their bedroom window. She'd overslept, it had never happened before and she couldn't believe she'd done it now. She shot up to a sitting position blinking in confusion as she saw her husband beside her in bed. Had he overslept as well? Looking around for her dressing robe she saw the covered tray at the small table on Arthur's side of the bed. Poking her husband gently she woke him up, wanting to ask if he knew what was going on.

"Nnmm?" Arthur blinked blearily up at his wife, "Good morning my Mollywobbles."

"Morning love." Molly looked down at her husband, his balding head and warm brown eyes and she loved him. Loved him more and more with each day they got to spend together. They had honestly grown into one being over the years and she didn't want it any other way. "Looks like it's late, do you know why the house seems quiet and why we have a covered tray in our bedroom without chaos and the smell of smoke?"

He blinked and turned over to look at the tray in vague confusion, "No I can't say that I do." He sat up and reached to bring the tray over setting it between them and lifting the cover off. His mouth immediately watered at the smell of the food, none of which looked even slightly too crispy, "Perhaps Remus?"

Molly made a considering hum before shaking her head. "No, I don't think it's Remus. He's a lovely man but I've tried his cooking, it's not bad in any way but it's nothing like this." She looked at the crispy, golden waffles the sausage and bacon cooked to perfection. "We know it's not any of our redheaded brood, everything would be either burnt or raw if it was them. No...I think this has our Harry written all over it."

"I believe you're right love. Looks like he wanted to give us a bit of a lie in," Arthur met her eyes with a smile, "I'd hate for his effort to go to waste wouldn't you?"

"Oh absolutely, we can't waste such a thoughtful gift. It needs to be treasured." Molly actually giggled as she burrowed down in bed again, the tray between them. She couldn't remember the last time she and Arthur had had breakfast in bed, just the two of them. Not even when all their children were away had they indulged like this. "I love you Arthur, now hand me a piece of that toast."

He chuckled and passed her the toast before nipping a bit of bacon. He settled in with her as they ate and fed each other the truly excellent breakfast Harry had left them, talking in between bites and laughing with lazy happiness. When the last bite had been gobbled up, he leaned over and gave her a soft, sweet kiss.

"Mmm." Molly kissed him back before moving the tray out of the way and cuddling close to Arthur with her head on his chest. She knew that they had to get up and really start the day but she just wanted a few more moments of just the two of them. "We need to find a way to show our gratitude without embarrassing him."

He rubbed her back, "I think he'll prefer us simply saying thank you and not making a big fuss about it. Poor lad's so unused to even being complimented that a simple thank you and a hug of
appreciation is worth his weight in gold to him." He'd like to whack Harry's aunt and uncle over the head for the boy's lack of self-esteem.

"Yes, I think you're right about that. It was a truly nice gesture of him to do this but don't worry, I promise not to make a fuss." Molly knew she could go overboard at times but she would reign herself in when it came to her gentle, sweet Harry. "Should we get up and face the day Artiewart?"

He chuckled and kissed the tip of her nose, "Of course my Mollywobbles." He got out of the bed and gave his wife a hand up, opening the door to see Ron walking by carrying a polishing rag. "Ronald?"

"Morning Dad, Mum, I've been drafted. Hermione got the idea to give the house a cleaning top to bottom and well, no one says no to that girl. We're just about done though," he didn't mention that the speed was thanks to some little cleaning things Fred and George had apparently developed and needed to test. They had the look of a little wind up monkey and just zipped all over the place in double time doing more cleaning than just a person with rag and bucket could. They'd all wound down now and been put back into the twins' room but it had taken care of almost everything but polishing the furniture and cleaning the curtains.

Molly was gaping in astonished shock. Usually she had to scream herself purple in the face before getting her children to grudgingly pick up a broom or a wiping cloth. "Who are you and what have you done with my children?" She walked close and looked into Ron's eyes.

He scooched back a bit, "What? We can't do something to make your day easier before school starts?"

Arthur eyed his son, "Who bribed you?"

"No one! Okay maybe we felt a little guilty for being inconsiderate prats but no one's bribed us into anything." Ron flushed. It had just been a massive guilt trip triggered by Sirius' comment at the breakfast table and Harry getting up and doing the dishes after having done all the cooking.

With a sigh Molly reached out and grabbed Ron, pulling him forward and reaching up on her toes and kissing the top of his head. "It's a very nice thing to do, guilt or not." Instead of laying on the guilt more or make a huge deal of it, Molly decided to simply enjoy it. Who knew when or even if something like this would ever happen again? "I love you, all of you, brats or not."

"Love you too Mum, even if we forget to tell you or show you," he hugged her and kissed her cheek, "Don't be surprised if Mione shoos you out of your own kitchen after you deposit the tray," he nodded at the breakfast tray of dirty dishes in his dad's hands, "and tells you to go do something fun. That girl is a terror."

Molly chuckled. "It's good you have her to give you a little push Ronnie, sometimes you really do need it." She hugged him again before releasing him and taking a few steps back. "You're all good children. Now get out of here and let a poor woman get dressed in private." She made a shooing motion with her hands. When the door was closed again she turned to Arthur as she started to shed her sleeping attire for the outfit of the day. "Something fun huh?"

Arthur sent the tray to float downstairs by itself then went to the wardrobe and pulled out some casual robes, "What are you thinking my Molly?"

She buttoned up her light cardigan over simple summer robes and brushed her hair. "I'm thinking you, me and just going where our feet takes us for the day." She beamed at him.
"Just a day of rambles," He kissed the top of her head, "I like that idea. Let's tell Remus and we'll go. It seems the children have the house in hand."

Nodding Molly finished getting dressed for the day. With a family as large as theirs, every single outing took immense planning and a day to just do what struck their fancy, that would be nice. "From what we've seen this morning the house should still be standing when we get home."

"Yes it should," he took her hand and went downstairs to the kitchen, which smelled cheerily of lemon, and smiled at the sight of Harry drying the last dish while Hermione drained and dried the sink.

Hermione smiled at them both as they walked inside the kitchen and wished them a good morning as she wiped her wet hands on a tea towel. Cleaning the house and doing the dishes and such had gone easy and not taken a very long time when they had worked together.

Molly smiled back and went to hug Harry and kiss his cheek. "Thank you for a lovely breakfast and a wonderful lazy morning."

He hugged her back, cheeks a light pink, a happy smile on his lips, "You're welcome. You deserve to have a day to relax now and again."

Arthur reached over and ruffled his hair, "It's appreciated." He met the green eyes, his own gentle with gratitude before he looked around, "Where's Remus?"

"Out in the garden with Orion and Sirius setting gnome deterrents." Harry relaxed when he saw that they weren't going to make a big fuss about breakfast and grinned, "Remus promises nothing will blow up."

"That's good, I trust Remus." Molly couldn't stop smiling, sometimes a little appreciation went such a long way. "We'll go out and find him then. Don't work all day, have fun, go out in the sun...snog." She reached for Arthur's hand, chuckling at both Hermione and Harry's pink cheeks before leaving through the kitchen entrance.

Harry looked over at Hermione as they finished straightening up the kitchen and gave her a shy smile, "Shall we take their advice then? Go out in the sun, with an option to snog if the moment strikes right?"

"I think that sounds like brilliant advice and a wonderful way to spend a summer's day." Hermione smiled back, it would be really nice to spend some time alone with Harry and yes...Possibly snog if the the mood struck.

"Come on then, Remus will hold the fort." He tangled his fingers with Hermione's, "I've even got a couple of books in my wallet if we find a tree you want to sit and read under."

"With you there, I think I can manage a few hours without burying my nose in a book...It might be a struggle but hey, we all have to make sacrifices at times." She rubbed her fingers against his and kissed his jaw as she looked around the kitchen to make sure everything was in order and that the stove was firmly turned off before they left.
Harry stowed his bag up above his head and settled onto the train seat next to Ginny, leaving an empty space beside and across from him for when Hermione and Ron finished with the prefect meeting at the start of the train ride. He was both looking forward to and dreading the return to Hogwarts. There was no telling what kind of mess he'd walk into this year, especially with the tell all book Skeeter had released just yesterday. Sirius had sent him a copy and it was astonishingly lacking in the sensationalism that normally marked Skeeter's work. He had to wonder how much was true and how much was Skeeter with it but if even a quarter was honest then he had to wonder how Dumbledore had managed to bury his past enough to rise to the heights he had.

Ginny looked out the window at the landscape passing by, she felt the usual mix of nerves and excitement at going back to school. Fred and George had left the compartment to go in search of their silver dragon. Of course her eyes were drawn to the boy sitting opposite her more than she would like to admit. Neville had grown over the summer, grown tall, grown strong and grown mighty fine indeed. They had owled each other but still a whole summer apart left some serious catching up to be had. Ginny smiled at him and settled more comfortably in her seat. "Have either of you heard anything about this Ministry inquisitor that will be at school? It can't be worse than having Fudge, Bagman and Crouch skulking around can it?"

Neville gnawed on his lip, "Gran said Fudge sent his undersecretary and she didn't have anything complimentary to say about her, nothing at all. Not even a backhanded bit. Thing is an Inquisitor has the power to actually shut down or take over the school if they feel the students aren't being taught properly and well..."

"If this woman is Fudge's undersecretary that's a really, really bad thing. Even knowing that Voldemort is back Fudge is burying his head in the sand with stories of him not being active and hiding from Aurors. If he's hiding it's not out of fear."

Ginny fiddled with her hair. "It does sound bad, I'm all for Bee getting the boot but I don't want someone even worse to take his place. If the Ministry has their say we won't actually learn anything. Have you seen and heard their propaganda? They are so afraid to lose their power that they are willing to throw away the next generation and their talents just to cling to it a little bit longer. It disgusts me." She sunk down in her seat. "Merlin, I hope there will be Quidditch this year at least, I need something to look forward to and somewhere I can take out my frustrations without getting kicked out of school."

"Let's hope. If I go another year without beating the pants off of Malfoy in a Quidditch game my ego will suffer." Harry grinned at her.

"Hey the only one pantsing our dragon-" 
"-Will be us thank you very much. Anyone else that tries will find themself hexed and in pain." George leaned his chin on Fred's shoulder as they stood in the doorway of the compartment.

"Struck out at finding him then?" Ginny raised a red brow.

"Not as much struck out as got locked out." George grinned. "His temper hasn't mellowed over the summer."

Fred sighed, "No indeed it seems to have gotten worse."

Harry snorted, "Gee could that possibly have something to do with the content of your letters?"
Which reminds me, next summer I am not delivering any letters that you'd be afraid to let your Mum read."

"Boring!" George groaned. "We'll just have to put our brilliance to work and figure out another way to get word to him then...If we can find a way to smuggle him with us or us with him." George dragged Fred over to the seats and pushed his brother down on an empty one before taking one for himself, twisting so that he had his head in Fred's lap. "He looked good though, didn't he Freddie?"

"Very good, good enough to take a bite out of. To kiss down that flat stomach to his-"

"Hey!" Harry gave them a glare, "Keep that up and I'll tell Lady Malfoy what you say about her son in mixed company. I know you usually only fear your Mum but you should fear Malfoy's as well."

"Indeed you darling little perverts, or fear me." Pansy stood in the entrance with Orion.

"Hey it's the cub and our darling dragon's little fag hag." George looked up at her. "Has he said anything about us? How did he like the gifts?"

Orion rolled his eyes. "Get a grip, you're bordering on pathetic here." He turned and smiled at the older Slytherin girl. "Now you finally know the hex I used two years ago, use it wisely." His serious expression was ruined by the glitter in his eyes.

"Oh I will, believe me I will. Now as for the two of you," she pinned the twins with a look as her fingers went absently through the short tail of Orion's hair. He was simply too cute. "The only thing Draco has said, aside from mutters about impossible bending and perverted creeps, has been that he'd very much like to skin you and nail your pelts to the wall, something about prey and predator."

"Well I suppose we can owned up to the perverted thing but prey and predator...That's news. I have no idea what he could be talking about." George leaned back again, his head pillowed on Fred's thighs. A truly wicked grin spread over his lips. "He's allowed to nail us to the wall though, we don't mind switching."

"Too much information there," Harry looked pained as Parkinson laughed.

"Potter you can be too amusing. Blaise asked me to deliver something to you by the by," she held out a large phial filled with ruby red liquid, "and he mentioned you owing him a new white silk shirt as estrus females are picky about bandages. He also said it was freely given."

Harry took the phial and brought it close like a precious jewel, "Tell him I'll buy him twenty silk shirts for this."

Pansy's brows lifted but she chose not to speak on it, "Well then. I have to get back to our compartment. I will see you in the Great Hall little puppy," she tapped Orion's nose with a finger tipped by a blood red nail.

"See you lady snake." Orion grinned as she left and walked into the crowded compartment, smooshing his way down next to George, he didn't even mind having the redhead's long, lanky legs in his lap. "Isn't she great? I've seen her make boys older than her burst into tears with a single look."

Ginny chuckled and watched Harry pack away the phial very carefully. "It almost sounds like you're smitten there pup."

"No, it isn't like that." Orion shook his head. "Sure Pansy is gorgeous, I mean I have eyes after all but she's way out of my league. Besides, I want to have her as a friend. She's fun and utterly loyal to
the few people she cares about."

"Ah pup don't you know league doesn't matter so long as you play well," Fred ruffled Orion's hair, "but since you're not blushing and you say you're not smitten, you're not smitten."

"Thank you, I'm not. And I intend to play the game with the best of them...Don't know if I'll be taking advice from the two of you though, seeing as you haven't really had a smashing success with the object of your affection. A year of chasing him and what have you really got to show for it?" Orion grunted as George's foot somehow 'slipped' and kicked his side, not hard at all, more in annoyance than anything else.

Harry smirked, "They've got a big fat nothing that's what."

Ginny snickered and stuck her tongue out at her brothers. "Poor babies, I must agree with Orion that I am starting to doubt your prowess when it comes to romance."

"Georgie I do believe it is time to shun the non-believers!"

"I concur Freddie, their disbelief is dragging us down. We'll see who snickers last when this strawberry shortcake receives its vanilla filling." George hoisted himself to his feet and held out his hand for Fred. "Let's go visit Lee."

Fred took his brother's hand, "Yes indeed let's. I want to ask him to advertise our products when he announces during the first Quidditch game this year."

Harry snickered as the two left the compartment, "Is it bad I find their difficulty with Malfoy amusing?"

Neville shook his head, "No but I think they'll likely have better luck at school so you won't be finding it amusing much longer I think. It's hard to hold out against a Weasley when you're face to face with them and those two? Nine months of them being determined to get their dragon? Malfoy doesn't stand a chance."

"I think you're right Neville, still it's going to be mightly amusing to watch him try." Ginny smiled, knowing that with her brothers determination and Malfoy's stubbornness there was going to one hell of a show.

Harry hummed, "I don't know. Malfoy might not want to give in while his father and the threat of being Voldemort's play toy looms. Still we've all got front row tickets to the show."

Orion stretched and secured his low tail of hair better. "It's going to be an interesting year in the dungeons, stalked Malfoys and mated Zabinis...You realize what this means? I am going to be able to get away with almost anything." He grinned wolfishly.

Harry gave him a look, "You might like to revise that statement pup. I promised your Dad I'd keep you from getting into too much trouble. Besides with this inquisitor at Hogwarts I don't think it'd be a good idea to rock the boat too hard. You also don't want your rights to visit Hogsmeade taken away before you've got them right?" He had an ominous itch at the back of his neck, one that gave him the feeling that this year was going to be very bad.

Orion groaned but shook his head. "No, of course I don't want my Hogsmeade rights to be taken away. I need access to the shops and to visit Dad and Sirius." He understood that he had to be careful and take it easy but it was so hard when there were so many opportunities out there. "I really don't get why this inquisitor needs to stick their big nose into Hogwarts business." Orion refused to recognize the dreams he'd been having the latest month, just because his dreams were
weird and bad didn't mean that reality had to be the same.

"Fudge is trying to keep his political power without accepting that we're at war. He knows that he's useless for leading during a war and so does the rest of the world. If he can deny that we're at war, which we are though it's a cold war right now, then he'll keep his position. So he's put his little nosy inquisitor in Hogwarts to keep us from using our heads. So short answer, politics."

"Bugger politics." Orion grumbled, being raised by Remus and Severus, Orion didn't exactly have an overwhelming respect for the witches and wizards who were supposed to govern them. "Fudge is too fat up his own arse to ever see the truth and in all likelihood whomever he's sent is just one of his turds."

"Probably. Now let's play a game of Exploding Snap to pass the time, this conversation is getting depressing."

Further down the train, Pansy eyed Blaise, "You're wearing the connection cuff right? And so is your big red mate?"

"Yes Mummy dearest on both questions." Blaise smiled easily and pulled up his sleeve to show the narrow cuff circling his wrist. After a summer in Romania working outdoors his skin was an even darker tone of bronzed caramel. As fun as it was to see his friends and go back to school he would miss the hut on the reserve and he would miss living with Charlie, not to mention the dragons, he would miss all of them too. "I've also brushed my teeth and changed my underwear just so you know."

She crossed her legs, "I am allowed to worry after the insanity of last year," she studied her nails and wondered how much longer Draco would be with the prefects, "Without those cuffs it would be worse this year and you know it, even with your mate popping in every Hogsmeade weekend to feed you in person. So, letters are boring, how was it really?"

"Insane, difficult, interesting, hard in every meaning of the word and just a little bit wonderful." Blaise ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know how to explain it Pants, I have never experienced anything like it before. Look at this," He held out his hands, palms up. "I have callouses, I have worked with my own two hands...and I liked it."

"I am horrified," it was a dry comment, "my prissy Italian layabout working and enjoying it? Whatever is the world coming to? Next thing you know Draco will be kissing a muggle." She smiled, "Any special dragons there?"

"All of them are special and Merlin I sound like a puff but they are." Blaise grinned. "There was one queen, a Ridgeback that was amazing, I swear she had a wicked sense of humor, reminded me of you actually. And Icy of course, it was empty after he left."

"Please, I don't know what's worse, the prefect toadies I just managed to escape or this lovelorn incubus." Draco leaned against the doorway, his usual smirk in place.

"Dray darling, so nice to see you feeling in a better humor. Now, would you like to explain that snippy little snarl about prey and predator?" She beamed at him after patting Blaise's arm.

"Not particularly no." Draco sniffed and raised his pointy nose as he gracefully sprawled down in a seat.

"You mean you'd leave me sitting in suspense. That's cruel dear, isn't it Blaise?" Pansy pulled out a nail buffer and began shining her polish a bit.
"Terribly cruel indeed, or it would be if I didn't know you'll manage to wheedle it out of him in the next five minutes." He smirked at his blond friend.

"Oh shut up." Draco sunk down further in his seat. "So Pansy, since you managed your animagus form, care to share what animal you are?" Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all, Draco crossed his fingers that he wouldn't be all on his lonesome in his humiliation.

She smiled slowly, "Oh Potter didn't share? My goodness how surprising I'd have thought you'd have annoyed it out of him. You're not losing you touch are you darling?" She was drawing the reveal out, knowing that Draco was near to chomping at the bit for the answer.

Draco glared at her. "Potter's not even the effort it takes to be that annoying. Especially not with Mother behind my back 'reminding' me about manners. Now spill or I'll show you first hand just how annoying I can be."

She asked, "So bad tempered. Hmm how about I give you an obvious hint?" She recrossed her legs, "Howling at the moon will have new appeal."

"You're a wolf?" Draco's eyes widened. "I should have known." Oh this was bad, he thought it was bad enough with the bloody foxes, now he had to worry about the she-wolf as well. Crossing his legs he fell into a sullen sulk.

"I am indeed. Now why does that make you look as if I just stole away your favorite sweet?" She moved to put her hand on his knee, "Are you having trouble with your transformation?" She was genuinely concerned. It wasn't like him not to make a crack about her being a she-wolf.

"No, I managed my transformation just fine." It was supposed to be a scoff but he didn't quite get there, honestly he wasn't sure if he'd rather never achieved it than live with what he was.

"Come on Dray, you look as if you've run out of hairgel and we haven't even reached school yet. It's depressing." Blaise poked him but nothing but a growl was his answer.

"If you've managed it then why do you look so put out? What are you a ferret?" That was the only thing Pansy could fathom to make the blond so sour.

Draco's nose twitched and he gritted his teeth. "No I'm not a ferret and watch it wolf-girl, a new fur coat looks mighty tempting right now."

"Well what else could possibly make you so irritable? Unless it's something else in the weasel family? A fox? Hmm, a purse dog?"

"Of for Mordred's sake no, nothing of those." Draco's eyes flashed. "I'm a rabbit alright, a white, fucking fluffy bunny." His cheeks reddened in embarrassment and frustration.

There was a choked sound coming from Blaise as he tried to hold in his snickers.

Pansy was more successful, "Oh. Oh my," she coughed, "er well that does explain the comment about predator and prey then doesn't it." She slung her arm over his shoulders, "No worries dear, your secret is safe with us."

"Until you need something from me and it will be prime blackmail material." Draco was still sulking but he leaned his head on Pansy's shoulder. "The depraved duo will eat me alive if this comes out."

This time Blaise couldn't hold his amusement in and burst out laughing so hard his tears started to
Pansy made a soft, amused squeak, "Ah well I think they intend to do that anyway don't they?" She gave in and let a small giggle escape. "I'm sorry darling. It's not funny except...it is."

"No it's not funny!" Draco's lips were twitching though. "I'm a big bad Slytherin by Merlin's warts, I can't be a bunny rabbit...I'll be the laughing stock of...Everyone."

Blaise only laughed harder, he couldn't help himself, it was just too funny.

"Well...actually it does fit," Pansy cast a langlock on Blaise, silencing him, "you're quick, high-strung, bad-tempered, and beautiful. White rabbits are all of those as well."

"High strung and bad tempered? Little ol' me, the height of calm smoothness and sweet disposition." Draco managed to keep a straight face while saying that, the first thing a Malfoy was taught was to not show unwanted emotions. "Thank you for trying though, unlike some," He glared at Blaise who was still squirming with amusement albeit in silence now. "but I'm afraid nothing will make me feel better about being a twitchy, long eared ball of fluff."

"There, there darling. No one else has to know," she fussed with his hair, "So, do you plan to warm up a bit to the two terrors this year or make them wait longer?"

Draco sucked on the inside of his cheek as he thought about how he was going to reply. "Even if and that's a big bloody if I wanted to let the pervy pair closer it's not exactly an ideal time is it? With everything else going on?" Draco was well aware that this was the twins last year at Hogwarts but he still wasn't sure what to do. To himself he could admit that he was attracted to the two of them, very attracted even but he had his doubts that it could work between all three of them no matter what Fred or George said.

She laid her hand over his gently, "Perhaps not darling but if you continue to wait for the right time when you've already found the right one, or ones as the case might be, then you'll find yourself left with nothing but a big old drafty Manor and a lot of regrets."

That was what Draco was afraid of but he still didn't know how to let go and let himself be open to what he wished for deep down. "I'm fifteen, I hope to have a few years left before I face eternity alone." Draco went for sounding flippant to cover his own worry.

Blaise watched him with dark eyes. "There's no age limit when you meet the right one. When you find him, her or them, hold on to them with everything you got." He thought about Charlie and how he couldn't live without the redhead. Granted his situation was a little bit different but he still thought that the same principle applied.

Pansy stuck her tongue out at him, not at all surprised to see him talking again. Magic was essentially energy and incubi absorbed energy so Blaise had an annoying habit of absorbing hexes and jinxes tossed his way, when he wasn't laughing so hard he forgot he could do it anyway. "Well darling, until you're ready to give it a go then I think we can manage to keep the tricky twosome from moving on, especially as they're now plastered against the privacy shield." Her lips twitched in amusement.

"What?" Draco whipped his head around to see two redheads pressed against the shield so that their faces were actually smooshed against it. He shook his head. "Remind me again why I don't hex them to the end of the earth on sight."

Blaise burst out laughing again, Draco really was too amusing. He did keep an eye on Pansy though
so that she didn't blindside him with a hex again. He liked the sound of his own voice...Probably more than he should.

Pansy got up with a soft chuckle and looked over her shoulder at Draco, "Because you like them, even if you're not ready to admit it." She tapped her wand on the compartment glass waringly barely managing to keep from rolling with laughter like Blaise as they pouted at her. She pointed sternly down the hall and watched them slink away dejectedly. This year at school promised to be eventful if nothing else.

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"I can't believe she actually interrupted Dumbledore's speech with that political shite," Harry flopped into a couch in the Gryffindor common room, "I thought McGonagall was going to spit nails."

Hermione nodded and sat down next to Harry. She had a very bad feeling about that squat little woman. "I don't think I've ever seen Professor McGonagall that angry, not even last year during the Tournament. Dumbledore didn't look too happy either, though I'm not that upset about that." She pulled her feet up underneath her and leaned against Harry.

Ginny groaned. "This year is going to be horrible with her here, I already know it. Defense is going to suck."

Harry grinned, "Only in the classroom Gin, we've got our private lessons still." He wrapped his arm around Hermione.

Ron nodded, "Thank Merlin for that I say otherwise we'd end up tanking our OWLs."

Neville shifted, "I'm more worried about the look on Snape's face."

"Oh yeah, he looked practically hateful...Well more than usual." Ginny climbed into Neville's lap and lean against his strong chest. "I wonder what that was about."

Hermione nodded. "He kept looking at Orion as well and I think he looked more worried than hateful but that's just me." She snuggled closer to Harry, his arm a comforting, welcome weight around her.

"Very worried but over that was a kind of pure loathing that I've never seen from him before, not even when it came to my father. I think I need to find out what Umbridge used to do before she was Fudge's undersec-" He gawked at the letter that poofed into existence in front of him, "Well that's not unusual at all." He plucked the letter from the air and opened it, eyes going wide at the familiar spidery handwriting of their potion master.

"What is it? What does Snape write?" Hermione's wide, curious eyes looked at the letter Harry was reading. She had never seen a letter just pop into existence like that before and she couldn't wait to find out how it was done.

"This...is a problem." Harry cast the privacy charm and looked at everyone, "Umbridge was the one in charge of Remus' imprisonment and torture during his pregnancy. She's got a big problem with werewolves, a big one and if she learns that Orion is half werewolf or worse is Remus' son..."

Ron inhaled sharply, "She'll be after Ri like stink on a troll."

"Worse than that, what about when Remus learns about her being here, near his cub?" Neville's arms tightened around Ginny's waist, "He'll go mad."
"Worse than mad. Remember how Remus gets at the mere mentioning of his imprisonment? If anything can make him angry enough to kill that would be it." Hermione bit her lower lip. "I wouldn't want to be close when he finds out that the woman who ordered his torture is in the same building as his only child."

"Sirius will blow a gasket too. He's already been making plans about getting revenge for Remus once he's cleared of the charges. He hears about this...I think Snape had better pop down to Hogsmeade before they learn of it because they're going to need someone to sit on them both." Harry blew out a breath, "and we're going to have to make sure Orion is kept safe at all times. I'll talk to Dennis and ask him to stay with Orion when Umbridge is in the area."

"I think we can ask the snakes to look out for him too, without revealing too much." Ginny wrapped Neville's arms around herself, feeling cold all of a sudden. "For some reason Parkinson really seems fond of our little cub and I don't think she'd want to see him hurt and Zabini as well as Malfoy are practically family already. Family looks out for each other."

Ron nodded, "They'll help. It just scares me knowing what that woman is capable of. I mean how could anyone ever hurt Remus? Willingly I mean. Let's just hope the curse on the DADA position holds out and activates earlier this year yeah?"

"I don't think she sees Remus as a human being, to her he's just a monster, a subject to be experimented on. Tested and used and she'll think the same way about Orion." Hermione felt sick to her stomach just thinking about it.

"Over my dead body," Harry's tone was dark and lethal, "she even tries and I'll use every last ounce of influence, every single knut that I've got to bring her down and grind her under heel."

Ron shivered, "Mate cut that out. You get out and out scary when you talk like that."

Ginny had to agree with her brother, Harry really did sound scary when he talked like that and it reminded her of how powerful he really was. Harry never flaunted his power so it was easy to forget it but at times like these it slapped you in the face sort of. She didn't mess with someone Harry cared about, he didn't fight for himself as much but for his loved ones he truly was the lion of his animagus form.

"We'll all make sure she can't even try." Hermione's voice was soft and soothing as she placed her hand on Harry's leg. "That woman won't come near Orion or Remus, we'll look out for them together."

He nuzzled her hair, letting her soothe him, "Right, you're right. With all of us looking after them there's no way Umbridge can get her hands on them." He canceled the privacy spell, "We'd best go to bed. I think we're going to need all the rest we can get this year." He kissed the back of Hermione's hand, "Pleasant dreams my lady."

She smiled fondly at him and his gentleman-y ways. "Same to you my lord, try not to worry too much. You need your sleep." Hermione knew how much Harry was awake at night, wondering about his loved ones, about Death Eaters and Dark Lord's and trying to solve problems that shouldn't be his to bear to begin with. Harry worried about everyone and Hermione worried about Harry. "Love you." She sent the evil eye at George when he snickered at that.

Harry sent a stinging hex at George and tugged gently on a lock of Hermione's hair, his eyes warm and glowing softly, "I love you too." He looked around at everyone, "Goodnight you lot, see you at breakfast." He punched Ron in the arm and ran up to their dorm to begin getting ready for bed. He
thought of Remus and Sirius and hoped he was wrong about how bad their reactions were going to be, though he knew he wasn't.

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Severus grunted as Black's elbow made contact with his stomach just below the ribs and snarled out, "For Merlin's sake Black will you calm down! I need your help to calm Remus when he wakes!"

"Fuck that! I'm going to go rip that bitch's entrails out through her nostrils!" Sirius continued to fight to get Snape to let him go.

"Stop it!" Snape glanced at the stupefied Remus, a measure he'd had to take once informing him of who the newest teacher in Hogwarts was, to be sure he wasn't stirring yet, "Unless you want to be caught and given the Kiss, leaving Remus alone, again?"

Sirius jerked as the impact of the control spell slammed into his face like a cast iron frying pan then he went limp, "Shite."

"Succinctly put," Severus risked loosening his hold and then releasing the mutt, "Now, kindly go and get a grip on Remus before I wake him. This is going to be ugly."

Sirius went and cradled Remus against himself, gently putting a hand over his throat and the other arm round his waist and blew out a long breath, "Alright you greasy bastard, wake him."

Snape tensed in readiness, "Enervate."

Glowing wolf eye flew open and Remus jerked in Sirius' grip. He looked up at Sirius, looking absolutely betrayed by the hand on his throat. "Let me go Sirius." It was difficult to form the words around the growl rumbling from this throat. He'd never been like this before, he could feel the wolf take over, his teeth sharpen and his nails turn in to claws though it was no where near the full moon.

"I don't want to hurt you but you will let me go." His claw tipped fingers flexed as he shifted his gaze to Severus. "And you...You saw me when I came to Hogwarts...You were there when Poppy put me back together, saw what she'd done to Orion...How small and starved he was...Don't keep me from going after her. I am going to hang her upside down like the pig she is and bleed her slowly...Lick her blood from my fingers and peel the flesh off her bones." His eyes flashed again. Right now there was no sign of the calm and gentle Remus Lupin, now it was only the wolf.

Snape had to admit to feeling respect for Black when he didn't budge and only leaned his head against Remus' shoulder. He truly was unsure himself of where and how to step here. He'd never had to appeal to the wolf before, only the man.

Sirius nuzzled Remus' shoulder and spoke firmly with utter calm, "I can't do that Moony. I want to believe me I do. I want to let you get justice for yourself and for our cub but the big nosed bat over there made a good point."

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The arm around Remus' waist gentled in affection without releasing the werewolf, "If I attack even after I get cleared of what Wormtail set me up for I'll be put right back in Azkaban," he lifted his head and met the glowing gold gaze of the wolf, "you'd be killed if you do what we both want to," his thumb rubbed at a scar on Remus' throat, "I can't let that happen so you can try to hurt me but I'm not letting you go."

Remus tensed, right now logic and truth didn't mean shite to him. Not with the scent of vengeance
and hatred strong in his nose. "I don't give a bloody fuck. There is no way I am going to leave Orion there with that creature and do nothing."

He bucked under Sirius' hold, still reluctant to use his new claws on the other but he knew he would do it if he had to. His blood felt as if it was boiling, almost making his skin too hot to the touch. He remembered every stick of a needle, every strike and every word of contempt thrown at him and there was no way in hell he would make his son live under the same roof as the one who had put him through all that.

"So you'll leave our cub alone?" Sirius didn't want to actually grip Remus' throat, the hand was mostly a warning, something to get the wolf's attention, but if Moony wouldn't settle...he would and it would hurt him more than the claws ever could. He put the dominance he held over Remus by the wolf's nature into his voice, "You'd leave our son alone when his life is still held in the palm of Dumbledore's hand? Leave him alone to face others who'd experiment on him when he doesn't have a mother or father to stop them?"

Gritting his teeth, Moony growled. He didn't want Sirius to be right, didn't want his anger, his rightful anger to be taken away from him. "He'll have you and Severus." His jaw set in a stubborn line and his claw tipped fingers drummed against the floor in agitation. Spikes of logic were stabbing him but the wolf didn't want to realize it. The wolf wanted blood and for once Remus wanted nothing more than to indulge him. "I can kill her without getting caught, I lure her into the forbidden forest and tear her apart." There was a pleading edge to his voice by now.

"You don't think people would look for her? Moony you know better. She goes missing and the very first person Dumbledore would direct the Aurors' suspicions to would be you. He'll try anything to get us out of the picture because Harry cares about us do you really want to risk giving him the chance? And me and Snape? A man who's spying on a bastard that's got Greyback in his ranks and an ex-convict running from the Aurors? Is that the life you want for Orion? And what about Harry?" He leaned closer, knowing he was risking getting his nose bitten off, "How do you think Harry would handle losing you?"

Remus tensed and trembled before slumping against the floor dejectedly. He knew Sirius was right but knowing it didn't make it easier. To his utter shame he felt his eyes well with tears and felt them leaking down his temples and into his hair as he had his head bent. "I can't do this...I'm not strong enough. I can't handle Orion being there with her knowing what she's capable of. It hurts too much."

Sirius took his hand off Remus' throat and bent his own head, resting his brow on the top of Remus' as he rolled them from being sprawled on the floor to him sitting and holding Remus protectively in his lap, "I'm sorry too. Sorry I can't let you go and rip her gizzards out, sorry I had to stop you." Tears of his own slipped out, falling into Remus' hair as he rocked them both.

Severus shifted and half turned to stare out a window, uncomfortable with the tears and heartache in the room.

Remus swallowed around the lump in his throat and reached back behind him to tangle his fingers in Sirius' hair. "Don't apologize for doing the right thing." His voice was tired and his heart really hurt. He hadn't been lying when he said he couldn't handle it. The events of the past was pressing down on him like a huge weight and it felt as if he couldn't breathe. He could see how uncomfortable Severus was and he wished there was something he could do to make it better but he didn't even have energy to pick himself off the floor.

"Just remember you're not alone in this Remus. I'm right here, you don't have to shoulder anything on your own." Sirius cradled Remus even more protectively.
Snape cleared his throat, "I have informed Potter about the issue, I have no doubt that even now he is working out some plan to protect Orion in addition to my own efforts. I can assure you Remus, that Madam Umbridge will not so much as put one scratch on Orion if I can help it. You have my word on it."

"I appreciate that Severus because I know you don't give your word easily. I know Harry will protect Orion the best he can, as well as you but I can't relax until that bitch is gone. If I could I would remove Orion from Hogwarts in the blink of an eye. You have no idea...No idea what she wanted to do to him, what she wanted to use him for. I was just the incubator, it was Orion she wanted all along." Remus burrowed against Sirius without even thinking about it, simply needing the comfort.

Sirius ran a hand over Remus' hair. This was something he couldn't make better but he met Snape's eyes, his own nearly blazing with the fury hearing even a little of what Remus had gone through ignited in him, "She won't touch him Remus."

"She will not even have the opportunity to discover who he is, remember he is Moonstar to the school at large. Only a select few know he is your son and each of them would bite their tongues off and choke on the blood before betraying you or him."

"I know that but none of you should underestimate that woman. She's very resourceful if nothing else." Faint shudders wrecked his body and his many scars ached as if they had just happened. He was ashamed of his own reactions, of being so weak but he wasn't able to stop them.

"So am I."

Snape's tone was dark and it reminded Sirius that the man Remus had befriended was the very same man who created the nastiest cutting curse that existed and who was hailed as the best potion master in the world. Sirius heard a wealth of murderous intent in that tone and rather than disturb him as it once would have, it offered an odd sort of comfort.

Remus offered a weak chuckle. "So you are." He agreed softly. "And I've never been happier for that. Happy and grateful that Orion has people who love him and watch out for him there." Another tremble went through him. "Do me a favor though...Make sure no one tells Orion who she is and what she's done. He has too much of his father in him and will undoubtedly do something stupid if he finds out." He squeezed Sirius' hand as he said it.

Severus nodded, "Of course. Now that I have thoroughly wrecked your evening there is a slight silver lining."

"Oh?" Remus raised a questioning eyebrow, the glow having almost entirely faded from his eyes by now. "What would that be then? And don't say you wrecked our evening...You just said things we needed to know."

"Blaise brought Potter a vial of freely given dragon's blood."

Sirius sat straighter, "So the potion to protect Orion from Dumbledore..."

"It will take nearly all the school year to brew due to the long steeping times and complication but it will be done. Remember it only protects from an initial strike through."

Remus forced the excitement running through him down, knowing that Severus was right. Still it was further than any of them had gotten so far. Every ounce of protection Orion had against the ritual Dumbledore had put him through was worth...everything. "Thank you Severus, really I
cannot thank you enough...Or Charlie's little incubus."

"Thank me after it's complete."

Sirius rested his chin on Remus' shoulder, "You're such a hedgehog."

"Prickly as few but with the softest underbelly imaginable once you reach it." The teasing smile on Remus' lips was small but it was there.

Snape looked down his long nose at them both before scoffing. "Well I've delivered my messages now if you will excuse me, I have idiots to deal with tomorrow and I need my rest. Do try to get off the floor before morning."

Sirius watched him swoop out like a giant bat and shook his head, "Okay I admit it. He's not so bad."

Remus gasped in mock shock. "I think my ears were just deceiving me, no way Sirius Black could say something non-insulting about Severus Snape. We better take cover because I believe the sky is falling." Remus was trying very, very hard to get back to normal though he still felt raw all over, like a freshly cut wound.

"Not yet. You can take cover if I ever give Snape an actual compliment." He gave Remus a squeeze, understanding what he was doing. "You mind if I Padfoot out at the foot of your bed tonight?"

"No, I don't mind. In fact I'd appreciate it, Pads can even share my pillow." Remus didn't want to be alone, already knowing that the dreams wouldn't be sweet when night came.

"Then that's what I'll do," Sirius stood up, Remus actually in his arms and moved to the couch. "Sorry, arse is going numb on the floor," he settled on the couch, "He'll be okay Moony. Not only does he have a pack of gryffs looking after him but he's got his own house as well. Even I have to admit Slytherins know how to stick together against outsiders. Oh plus Luna and Diggory's lady. I'm most worried about you, if she learns you're here." His arms tightened protectively around Remus.

"Don't worry about me, why would she find out about me? Now that you and Severus have talked Moony out of ripping her guts out tying them to a tree and kicking her off a cliff, I'm not exactly about to go and introduce myself. The woman hates me plus I killed her pet Auror. The hate is completely mutual though." He looked down at their cozy if worn couch. "I know people are looking out for our boy but I don't think anything can stop me from worrying. If they look after him too hard he'll know something is up...I'm not joking about him being too much like you. He doesn't think about the consequences of his actions either."

Ouch. Sirius didn't let the sting of that show, he wanted to help Remus feel better, not worse by making him feel guilty, "Maybe not but he keeps his promises. First Hogsmeade weekend maybe we should talk to him. He's got your mind, I think he'll notice that something's up no matter how subtle everyone is about looking after him so it might be best if we wring a promise out of him not to go after the bint no matter what."

Remus nodded slowly. "Yeah, you might be right about that. We've got a smart kid, sometimes too smart for his own good...Not to mention the dreams. It would be best if he hears it from us and as you say where we can make him promise not to go after her or draw attention to himself."

"I wish..." Sirius trailed off and shook his head. Wishing didn't do anything and no matter how
much he wanted to go back in time and fix what he'd done he couldn't so there was no point in speaking about it. "I wish I could just bundle you and Orion up and get you both away from here, away from all this, and keep you safe."

"Funny, I wish I could do the same with all of you. Get you somewhere where no dangers or sadness can reach." Remus knew it was impossible, that no such place existed but he still wished it. Wished for a place where Sirius could walk free, go outside where and when he wanted to without worry. Where Harry had no troubles except for those of a normal teenage boy and where no one or nothing was bound to or after his little boy. "We'll have to do the best we can here and hope that things will get better."

"Not hope, believe. We have to believe things are going to get better, not just hope they will. Belief is half the magic. If we don't I may just snap and drag you all to Antarctica. We can eat penguins and magic a garden. Sure it might get a little cold but that's what heating charms are for. Hey think your coat would wind up turning white?" He was joking of course but it was with the hope it would make Remus smile at least.

Remus snorted softly and the corners of his lips tilted up. "Maybe completely gray from stress but I doubt it would turn white. I also think you would be sick of penguins after the first week and our son would refuse to eat them at all because of their cuteness factor. You've noticed that he refuses to eat anything with an animal name attached to it. Meat, steak, sausage, bacon all those works even though he knows it comes from cows and pigs but lamb is a no go...so you see Antarctica just wouldn't work." He was aware that he should move away from Sirius' lap, that he should put some distance between them but he just didn't want to.

"Timbucktu? Atlantis? The Forbidden City? Pigfarts?"

"Pigfarts? Well doesn't that sound like the most charming of places?" Remus' right brow rose.

Sirius poked Remus in the abs, "I heard some of the students joking about a mythical place called Pigfarts since Hogwarts..." he swished his hand in the air, "really you've got to admit that it's not the best of names."

"Yes, yes I can admit that Hogwarts isn't exactly beautiful and mythical in its name." He squirmed at the poke in his abs, being ticklish. "I can't believe I've never heard of Pigfarts..." He shook his head in disbelief, he had to admit it was funny though.

"It might have been a recent development, round the end of last year was when the nattering started." He leaned his cheek on Remus' shoulder, "It's an interesting pun."

Remus nodded, still preoccupied by turning the phrase Pigfarts over in his head. "It's actually surprising it hasn't been popular before...Even more surprising that you and James didn't think it up back in school. It has the two of you written all over it."

A light chuckle came from the other man, "It does, doesn't it." He closed his eyes and absorbed the warmth of Remus in his lap, real and touchable. Occasionally he felt the chill of Azkaban creep over his thoughts, reminding him of being so alone he didn't even have happy memories to keep him company, and he beat that chill back with Remus' presence. He might not be allowed to be with Remus the way he wanted to right now but just having him close helped.

Feeling Sirius' arms around him and his breath close to his neck made Remus ache for the things he didn't have. It wasn't all sexual, he missed the complete closeness you had with a lover, even outside of bed. It was precious having Sirius back in his life and having him as a friend. It was only his own fault that it was apparently not enough and it was something Remus would have to learn to
deal with on his own.

"I miss him." Sirius' voice was quiet, "and Lily of course but she scared me more often than not. James was...well you know, my best mate for life. It was like we were twins separated at birth. I should have protected him better, should never have suggested that damned switch. Me and my 'clever' ideas."

Remus turned in Sirius' grip so that he could wrap his arms around Sirius and lean his head against the other's shoulder. Sirius was right, he and James had been best of friends, closer than brothers and losing him must be like losing a part of yourself. Himself and Sirius had never been 'just' friends, so their relationship could never compare. "Don't...Don't do this to yourself Sirius. No one knew what Peter had done and you weren't alone in the idea about the switch. James and Lily agreed to it you know...And looking back on it now I think good old Dumbledore was up to his manipulations back then too. It was not your fault Sirius, it wasn't."

"I know that in my head but the rest of me...can't help it. I know it's stupid, foolish, but I can't help but feel that if I'd been smarter, sharper, trusted myself more than the bogus 'evidence' waved in my face like a bloody red flag then...well past is past and I can't do anything about it but hurt." He sighed, resting his face in the crook of Remus' neck, "I'm just so damned glad you're still here. Still alive and still...Remus. You've changed but you're still you."

Remus kept one hand around Sirius and used to other to cradle his head, running his fingers through Sirius' hair, remembering that Sirius had always liked his hair played with. He could recognize that he had changed but most people did in twelve years...right? Becoming a parent had been the greatest change of all. "I'll always be here for you Sirius, you know that." Sirius had changed too, since he'd come back he seemed much more aware about the world around him and he seemed to actually think about his actions.

"I do know. Sorry for getting depressing on you. Sneaks up on me from time to time." He leaned into that hand fiddling with his hair. "I don't know how you put up with me."

"Please, don't apologize to the man who just had a big mental breakdown about events in the past. We both have our baggage Pads. It's not about putting up with someone as you idiotically put it. I want to be there for you, in any way I can."

"I know." He lifted his head and gave Remus a sheepish smile, "Still don't know how you put up with me though. I can be so annoying and idiotic, even if I don't diddle on the rug anymore."

Chuckling Remus pulled gently on the hair between his fingers. "I hope you don't, this is a very nice rug you know...Dog diddle would completely ruin it." Remus wondered if Sirius really didn't realize how empty Remus' life had been before Sirius came back. He'd met Severus at times and he'd lived completely for Orion but other than that his life had been completely on hold. Maybe it was better if he actually didn't know, didn't realize how pathetic Remus really was.

Sirius reached up to squeeze Remus' wrist. He knew that Remus had spent the time he'd been in Azkaban alone aside from Orion and maybe the big dungeon bat and as he knew Moony he knew he'd have focused all his energy on Orion, would have lived for their son. He remembered how Remus had been before he and James had pulled him into the Marauders, so quiet and contained and always so alone and knowing how being so utterly alone could be, Sirius was determined to make sure Remus didn't have to face that again if he could help it at all. "Come on. It's getting late and I imagine we'll have a few owls in the morning."

"Mmm yes." Remus could imagine that too. "Besides it's been an intense day." Remus scrambled off Sirius' lap and got off the couch, holding out a hand to Sirius. "Come on then."
Sirius took the hand with an affectionate smile. He knew he'd not actually sleep tonight, he'd be watching over Remus and doing what he could to ease the nightmares when they struck.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Harry drummed his fingers on the table, practically wanting to explode as he watched Umbridge simper up at the head table next to Snape. It was small comfort that the entire school, aside from a few bootlicking Slytherins, hated her guts as well. Even Lockhart, as hideously useless as he'd been, had been a better professor. At least he'd tried for practicals. There was no possible way they'd pass their OWLs if they only had the toad's teachings. He knew Hermione was nigh to snapping over it herself.

Education was important to Hermione, she wasn't ashamed of wanting to learn and wanting to do well and having that poor excuse of a witch teaching them was not going to get her the knowledge she wanted. It was driving her spare. Hermione was very close to stalking up to the Ministry's gates and filing a formal complaint against Umbridge and her teaching methods, not that it would do much good. She poked in her food, having lost her appetite for dinner at the way Umbridge sucked up to Snape, the only bright side about that was that Snape looked horrified at the attention. She looked up when the owl delivering her copy of the evening paper soared in and dropped it by her plate. Hermione quickly unrolled it and just as quickly dropped her jaw when she read the headlines.

MINISTRY COVER UP! DEMENTORS ATTACK ON THE BOY WHO LIVED LAST LIVING RELATIVES THIS SUMMER. MINISTRY DOING ALL THEY CAN TO KEEP IT UNDER WRAPS. DOES OUR HERO EVEN KNOW?" An article by Rita Skeeter

"Hermione? What's-" Harry's voice died as he looked over her shoulder and saw the headline. He went pale, feeling cold all over, and murmured a soft apology before grabbing his own copy of the paper and rushing from the table like he was being chased by dementors without having a wand. He rushed through the school, to the second floor girl's lavatory, right through Myrtle, and into the Chamber of Secrets' library as quickly as he could. He lit the reading lamp on the desk and unrolled his paper to read.

This humble reporter has discovered the most heinous cover up, extending even to the release of necessary information to the Goblins of Gringotts. Mrs. Petunia Dursley, the maternal aunt of our hero Harry Potter, her husband, a Mr. Vernon Dursley, and her only son Dudley Dursley, were attacked by dementors this summer, at the end of July. All three Dursleys appear to have been victims of the Kiss yet there is no hint of investigation of the matter in the Ministry. Indeed our officials seem to be putting forth more effort to keep it from becoming known that they lost control of a few dementors than discovering how it happened. They have even magically held the documents that should have been released to the Gringotts Goblins to inform them of the deaths of Mr. Potter's relatives for the distribution of the effects The Boy Who Lived has inherited.

Could this cover up be because someone at the Ministry sent them to Mr. Potter's relatives? And if so why? Does our dear hero know of the loss of his relatives? Fear not gentle readers. I am on the case and investigating as we speak.

Harry set the paper down, his hands shaking, eyes staring blankly at the wall. The Dursleys were
Both Hermione and Ron stumbled inside the library, out of breath and cheeks flushed with worry about Harry. Hermione walked straight over to her boyfriend and sunk down to her knees in front of him. For once she had no idea what to say. What could she say? The Dursleys had been horrible but they had not deserved to be kissed. She leaned her head on Harry's knees, hoping she could be of some comfort.

Ron paused a little away from the two, "Harry?"

"Hm?" Harry's hand had gone automatically to Hermione's hair and was playing the curls through his fingers.

"You alright mate?"

"I..." he frowned, "I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't feel anything. Just nothing. I'm not even vaguely horrified." He looked at Ron, confusion in his eyes, "I just feel...nothing for them. I'd feel more for complete strangers than I do for the Dursleys."

"I don't think that's strange at all. They have done nothing to inspire feelings of any kind in you. And when you finally got to go to the Burrow instead you thought you were rid of them...Deserving or not of their fate I understand you." Hermione kept her head in his lap. "Still...what the fuck is the Ministry up to? I doubt very much that some dementors just happened to find their way to Little Whinging and why keep it a secret?"

Ron moved to sit on the desk, "Because they wouldn't have happened to make their way to Little Whinging. Someone ordered them there. Dementors don't like muggle neighborhoods, Dad told me. They prefer the emotions of the magical."

Hermione straightened up some and nibbled on her bottom lip. "I suppose it could be Voldemort or the Death Eaters who sent them, we all saw that Lucius Malfoy could control them but it doesn't seem like something they would do. I mean Voldemort came himself to kill you and your parents Harry, he wouldn't do anything to cover it up if it was him. He would want you to know exactly who it was and why."

Harry nodded and coaxed Hermione up into his lap so he could hold her, "Yeah, this wasn't Voldemort. Even if he'd wanted the Dursleys gone he'd have tortured them first or had them tortured. This...is too easy for him."

"That leaves Fudge or someone high up in the Ministry." Ron pulled out a bag of every flavor beans from his pocket, and plucked out a blue one, popping it into his mouth.

Hermione's eyes went to Ron, amazed that he could eat candy at a time like this, especially when they came straight from the dinner table. She didn't say anything about it though. "It must be someone high up in the Ministry yes and they must have had Fudge's blessing, at least after the fact to be able to keep it covered up like this. Keep it out of both wizard and magical news...Until Skeeter at least."

"You know I really can't see Fudge staying in office past this year. He's buggering up too badly," Harry ran his hand up and down Hermione's back, "Something's going to break before the end of
the year and when it does he'll lose his job."

"I just hope he takes Dumbledore down with him personally," Ron plucked a red and green speckled jellybean from the bag, "Hmm spiced apple."

Harry chuckled, "Ron you are so damaged. Oh...I need to go apologize to Myrtle. I just ran right through her."

Hermione tore her wide disbelieving eyes away from Ron and his beans to look at Harry, leaning in to brush her lips against his cheek. "She understands, we explained it to her when we came down here. She'd already figured out that something had to have happened. She's not upset with you."

She snuggled closer to him, wondering how long it would be before Remus and Sirius and the Weasleys had read the paper and sent owls or floo calls.

"Still she deserves an apology. Actually I've been wanting to do something for her since she's been such a big help to us, I've just been a little fuzzy on how to make it work." He played with her hair, "I've been thinking of a book stand that'll make the pages of the book turn when she tells it to or maybe touches the stand? I don't know how that would work."

Ron smiled, "That's a good idea mate. I bet she's missed reading loads. She is a Ravenclaw after all."

Hermione made a sound of deepest appreciation at Harry's idea. Myrtle would love it, Hermione could only imagine what it must be, stuck in a place and not even able to open a book and escape that way. That would truly be hell to her. "It's a wonderful idea Harry and I don't think it would be that difficult to make it happen. All around this place there are doors that open of their own at the slightest magical signature. We could use that spell and tweak it to be attuned to a certain energy instead of a magical signature."

"Have I told you lately that you're brilliant?" He kissed her cheek, ignoring Ron's teasing gags.

"Awww they're so cute aren't they Georgie, Ri?" Fred grinned as he propped his arm on his twin's shoulder, Orion on George's other side.

"Mmhmm, I can almost feel my teeth rot just by being near them." George tilted his head to the side and smiled angelically at the couple seated in the plush chair. "Look away Ri, protect those young innocent eyes."

Orion snorted. "Innocent? After being around the two of you?"

Fred pouted, "I'm wounded."

"I think you mean warped," Harry's voice was dry.

"You alright then Scar?" Fred flopped onto a floor cushion.

"Yeah I'm okay."

"Really?" Orion looked at his older brother with searching, worried amber eyes. He didn't want Harry to be hurting. Orion went to sit down next to Harry's chair, then moved with a fiery red blush when he realized he could look straight up Hermione's skirt from that position.

Harry bit back a chuckle, remembering how awkward he'd been with girls in third year, "Yeah cub really." He reached out and ruffled Orion's hair, "I was just shocked and...thrown because well...I don't care. I'm used to caring about what happens to people but my aunt, uncle, and cousin I just
Orion bit his lip as his blush slowly subsided. He couldn't even pretend to understand what it was like growing up like Harry had did. They had never had very much but his Dad had let him know every day how very much he was loved. "Okay, as long as you're fine then I am fine too." He looked up at Harry still, feeling a little embarrassed looking at Hermione after having just seen the color of her underwear. "You do know that Dad and Sirius will come storming right? Well figuratively speaking anyway."

Harry sighed and grimaced, "Right, they get the evening paper too," he dug for his pocket and pulled out his central communication mirror, tapping it with his wand on a brown enameled decorative knob around the edge, "Remus?"

"Harry?" Remus face showed up in Harry's mirror with Sirius looking over his shoulder, both men looking worried. "Are you alright? We read the papers. Do you want Snuffles to come over?"

He shook his head, "No I'm fine. Snuffles can stay where he is. I just called because the pup reminded me you'd be worried and I wanted to tell you not to be."

Sirius studied Harry's features in the mirror, "You sure cub?"

"Yes you great mog."

Remus didn't look convinced but he had to trust that Harry knew how he felt. "Alright, if you're sure. We're here if you need us, you know that. Anything you need." So much was happening at Hogwarts with Umbridge there and now this, it was hard standing on the sidelines. "The reporters will try to catch you about this, you're still under seventeen so tell them to just fuck the bloody hell off."

"Well I was planning on just sending Xeno a letter and saying no comment to the rest but if you're sure you want me to say that..." he smiled at Remus' image in the mirror as Sirius snorted in amusement.

"He's fine if he's making cracks like that Moony."

"Indeed I am. You two want to talk to the pup while I've got you on the line?"

"Please if you wouldn't mind." Remus smiled at Harry, still a sliver of worry in his eyes but feeling better than before he'd spoken to Harry. They couldn't tell Orion anything much now, not before he came to visit the first Hogsmeade weekend but they would still not turn down a chance to see and speak to him.

Harry handed the mirror to Orion. The kid had his own but Harry figured that he probably hadn't contacted his parents with it yet, too caught up in the excitement of the school year beginning.

Orion accepted the mirror and smiled at his parents through the mirror. It was only a few days since he'd seen them but it was always nice to see and talk to them. He talked to them about school and about being kept on a short leash by his Uncle.

Ron chuckled at the analogy as Sirius commiserate but didn't offer any tips to slip that leash. He'd noticed that Umbridge occasionally eyed Orion with a creepy suspicion during meals and it creeped him out. There was something fundamentally wrong about that woman that made him want to run for cover and drag Orion and the rest of his family with him.

"You going to try out for the team this year kiddo?" Sirius leaned his chin on Remus' shoulder,
happy to see that their son was in bright and chipper spirits. He might have to send Snape a high end potion ingredient basket.

"Of course I am." Orion looked at his father like he was completely daft even for asking. 
"Someone has to bring Slytherin to victory, give old Scar here a run for his Galleons." Orion had been fully prepared and ready to join the team last year and he'd nearly had a break down when Quidditch was cancelled. There was no way he was going to miss out on another year.

"Don't get overly cocky." Remus advised his son.

"I'm not, I just know that I'll be the best of the newbies...And a lot of the veterans as well." Orion smirked.

Sirius chuckled, "Thinking of a certain little blond cousin of mine are you?"

Harry snickered and murmured to Hermione, "A seeker Malfoy is not. He'd be a better chaser methinks."

"Actually from the few times I've seen him, Malfoy isn't too bad in the air...I'm just better. And who said I was simply speaking about my house?" He threw a teasing glance over at Ron, Harry and the twins. "I'm going to outfly and outplay everyone."

"Yeah, that's not too cocky at all." Hermione murmured.

Harry gave Orion a grin, "I'll take that challenge and leave you eating vapor puppy."

Ron stuck his tongue out at the third year, "I'm going out for Keeper not the airheaded seeker thank you very much."

"Good for you, you can block the quaffles with your head...or your gut if you continue stuffing yourself with those beans." A dark brow rose and Orion shot a teasing grin at his friend.

"Okay, I think we'll leave you now before it gets ugly and no Siri, you are not allowed to bet on the outcome. Be in touch if you need us." Remus said his goodbyes.

Harry smiled as Sirius sniffed that it wasn't even a bet since Orion was sure to win, "We'll see you first weekend in October. I'm sure there'll be loads to share by then."

"See you then, take care and you cub you stay good and listen to Severus." Remus gave his son a stern look before ending the connection between the mirrors.

Orion was still locked in a staring contest with Ron but he managed a wave before the mirror turned blank once again.

Harry shook his head, "Speaking of your uncle," he got up, rolling to his feet, Hermione cradled in his arms before he set her down with a kiss to her cheek, "I'd prefer to stay on his not quite bad side so let's get you back to the Slytherin common room. I know it's ages before official curfew but I also know he wants you in the safety of the common room before that."

"I know...I hardly get to go to the bathroom alone. I don't know what's wrong with him." Orion groaned but did get up on his feet. "I really hope Pansy will be there...Do you have any idea how boring our common room is?"

"I couldn't begin to fathom a guess," Harry ruffled Orion's hair and waved at the others before leaving the chamber with his little brother, "I'm sure she'll be round and the two of you can make
plots and plans and exchange hexes to your hearts content." He paused and poked his head into Myrtle's stall, "Hey. I'm sorry for running through you."

"It's okay Harry, it's not as if it hurts." Myrtle looked up at him, arms crossed over the toilet rim or slightly above it since she couldn't really touch it without going straight through it. "It's nice of you to apologize but not necessary."

"Still, no matter how upset I was it's disrespectful to you. Especially after how good a friend you've been."

"It really is okay Harry, I saw that you were upset and I took no offense. You are my friend and will continue to be so." She turned to Orion. "You on the other hand, stop turning the toilet water into different beverages, when I'm in the U-bend it makes it hard to see."

"Um...Sorry?" Orion scratched at his hair.

Harry pursed his lips, "I'm not sure I want to know why you're turning the water in the toilet bowl into beverages. I'll just chalk it up to having a dog as a father." He poked Orion in the shoulder, "I've got to get the puppy to his common room now. See you later Myrtle."

"What?...Ew, I'm not drinking it Scar." Orion looked outraged as he followed Harry out of the bathroom, hearing Myrtle's chuckles following them. "It's an experiment...I have never, ever drunk out of a toilet bowl." His hands flailed in the air, really trying to drive the point home.

"Suuuuure you haven't," he pat Orion on the head, "Maybe I should owl your Dad, tell him Snuffles is a bad influence?" He laughed as Orion jabbed him in the ribs. "Well you're the one experimenting!"

"Just you wait, once you see what the experiment is for you are going to sing a different tune." Orion sniffed and put his nose in his air. "Just for that I won't tell you that I've finally figured out a spell that would put the Bee's beard on fire and be untraceable...so hah." He stuck his tongue out.

Harry chuckled, "I can wait. Flint graduated last year, who's the Slytherin team captain this year?"

"Who do you think? It's going to make things twice as awkward when I beat him out of the Seeker spot." Orion still had his nose in the air. He'd worked extremely hard at creating the powder and spell necessary for setting Dumbledore's beard ablaze.

"Figures," he ruffled Orion's hair, "so do you-" he broke off and instinctively shifted so he was just a bit in front of Orion as Umbridge appeared from around a corner and they were face to toady face with her. Harry could feel his metaphorical fur stand on end just at the sight of her.

Orion walked into Harry's back with an oomph since he hadn't really been looking where they were going. He was just about to ask why Harry had stopped when he saw the short, squat woman in front of them. He hadn't had a lesson with Umbridge yet but he already disliked the woman very much without even knowing why. "Oh...Hi."

Beady eyes looked at both of them closely and Umbridge's mouth twisted into a grimace of disdain. "Hi what?" She straightened the frilly collar on her pink, knitted robes.

"What?" Orion had no idea what she was talking about.

"The correct way to address me is Professor Umbridge." Her glare turned sharper. "I know things have been lax her at Hogwarts but from now it we are to use proper protocol when speaking to our superiors, aren't we?"
"Okay?" Orion was not impressed in the slightest.

"Professor! You are to address me as Professor. Who are you young man, hanging on our prosperous hero's heels anyway?" There was something about the boy's posture and most especially his eyes that felt, very familiar to her.

"I'm Orion Moonstar...Professor." Orion's temper was starting to rise.

Harry narrowed his eyes at her and deliberately drew her attention, "And unless we're in class or addressing you by name *Professor* Umbridge, we don't have to use your title every time we see or speak to you. It'd get tedious and even royalty doesn't require that people put their title in every sentence directed at them."

"Actually Mr. Potter, they do. It is against the law for anyone but immediate family to call a royal anything but Majesty when addressing them. That's not the point though, this is not the muggle world and we have our own rules. Things will change around here Mr. Potter and those who will not bend...Well they will break." Umbridge smiled sweetly but her eyes remained cold.

He didn't so much as blink, his own gaze cold and his voice soft, "Not in *every* sentence. And someone can try but I've had people trying to break me for years and I'm still standing while they're all either in Azkaban or hiding from the world. And really I didn't call Professor Snape by his title for a solid three years, not likely to automatically use it for someone who's only here for a year."

There was a tense line around Umbridge's mouth but she kept her smile plastered on her lips. "That statement only shows that you are disrespectful to several of your betters and we will see about that year. The Ministry has plans for this school and right now, right here, I am the Ministry. I will keep my eyes on you Mr. Potter, you do not have the right to go around the rules just because you are who you are. Yes I will be holding a close eye on you...And your friends." Her gaze drifted to Orion again, the boy once again reminding her of someone else.

"Yes a year, you've not heard about the curse on the Defense Against The Dark Arts teaching position? And really, you're the Ministry here then I've got a question," he pulled out the Prophet article, "Why keep it under wraps to the point of holding back paperwork from the Goblins?"

"If something was held back then it must be due to a secretarial mistake. The Ministry doesn't deal with cover ups." It was clear she was rattled. That annoying boy, things should have been so much simpler if the boy had only been where he was supposed to be this summer. "Now if you excuse me I have lesson plans for tomorrow to go through." Without another word, she stepped aside and waddled on her way. Fudge trusted her to take care of the Hogwarts problem, including Harry Potter and she would do it too.

Harry watched her go with narrowed eyes. He didn't have the senses Orion did but he could almost smell the secrets and lies that made up that pink toad. He put his hand on Orion's back and started walking toward the dungeons again, "Ri I don't trust that thing. Do me a favor and go out of your way not to get caught alone with her?"

"Believe me, it won't be a hardship staying out of that woman's way." Orion shuddered. "A mupwunk has warmer and more expressive eyes than that. Did you see how she looked at us? All creepy and like we were scat underneath her shoe."

He gave Orion a hug as they arrived outside the Slytherin common room, "Let's hope she chokes on a fly?"
"Perhaps she'll die." Orion continued and after meeting Dolores Umbridge face to face he didn't even feel bad about it. "Take care Harry, don't let her corner you on your way back. I'll go inside now...Promise to be a very good boy and stay within Slytherin borders until breakfast tomorrow. He cast a quick tempus and noticed that it wasn't even seven pm yet. "It's like I'm five again." It came out as a weak grumble.

Harry chuckled, "Hey you get to go to Hogsmeade this year so a few early evenings are worth it yes?"

Before Orion could answer the entrance to the Slytherin common room opened and Pansy stood there, "There you are! Professor Snape was here a few moments ago looking for you, something about that mad cow clipping about. Ah well inside puppy," she wrapped her arm around his shoulders, "we're having a game of pin the snitch on the seeker."

"You sure you want me to join when you know I'll win?" Things weren't so bad if Pansy was there, at least he would be entertained. "Bye Harry, thank you for walking me to my door like a good date." He winked at his brother before slipping through the portrait, Pansy's arm still around his shoulders.

Harry rolled his eyes and pulled out the Marauder's Map to use it to avoid Umbridge as he made his way back to the Chamber.

Chapter End Notes

I forgot to say this last chapter but, I apologize for the long wait. My previous internet service went out of business and the new one took FOREVER to get set up (seriously it wouldn't for for a month and a half). But it's up now and I should be back to at the very least weekly updates.
Chapter 37

Fred peeked around the corner and grinned. There was his target, all pretty and wind blown from a fly, polishing his broomstick. He snuck up behind Draco, "Like a little help with that?"

Draco looked up and over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing as he caught sight of blue eyes and red hair. "No, I think I can manage," He polished the broom handle with long easy strokes, running his glove clad hands carefully over the wood, feeling for splinters and irregularities. "Besides you would probably go for another broom to polish."

"Well I'd certainly like to," Fred made no bones about his attraction to Draco's lean, rangy form, "How are things with my favorite snake?"

How should he answer that? That except for Pansy, Blaise and strangely enough Orion he was practically isolated from everyone in his house. That while he'd been hiding away with his mother, his father had apparently been very busy. Visiting all of his classmates parents who were fellow followers of the Dark Lord. "I don't know how things are in your trousers where I believe your favorite snake resides but I am well." Best to not say anything at all.

Fred chuckled then reached out and laid a gentle hand over one gloved one working on the broom, "Really, are you okay? I know it's got to be difficult in Slytherin right now."

Draco's hand stilled and he looked at the freckled hand covering his. "Really, I am okay. It takes more than a few bitchy gobdaws to take me down...As if they could." He added the last words with a scoff. "How are things in the lions den?"

"Interesting. Lots of plotting going on for ways of getting round the Toad and buzzing about how tryouts for this year's Quidditch team went. Georgie and I are still the first string Beaters and Harry's still Seeker of course, Ron got picked for Keeper, Ginny's on the reserve for both Seeker and Chaser, Peaks and Coote are the reserve Beaters...and you probably don't care. How'd the Slytherin tryouts go?"

"I'm always interested in the competition," Draco noticed that Fred's hand was still on top of his but he didn't remove it. "Our tryouts went well, you're facing hard competition this year. I'm chaser along with Lassiter, Moonstar seeker. Nott and Calhoun are beaters and Deveraux is Keeper." It had hurt to realize that Orion was a better seeker than he was but opposite to what people believed he really did love the game, enough to do what was best for the team instead of what he would have wanted most.

"Awww the puppy made it. Chaser for you huh? You'll probably hex me but that's what you should have been at all along instead of trying to beat Scar into the ground. Seekers spend too long having to stay in one spot or be idle, you don't do idle well. I mean you can but it irritates you." It was spoken without scorn or disapproval and in fact held affection, displaying not only knowledge of Draco's personality but delight in it.

"Hm, there are lots of things that irritate me...And even fewer who manage to keep my interest once they've got it." Draco's tone didn't hold its usual cutting, acidic quality. He'd recognized what Fred really said and he appreciated it. It hadn't been his choice to become Seeker in the first place, not really. It was a position that had come with the brooms that his father had paid for. He wouldn't lie though, he'd liked being Seeker and unless he was up against Potter he was a rather decent one but maybe being Chaser wouldn't be so bad either.
"It's definitely worth the effort to get and keep that interest though." Fred gave the hand under his a light squeeze, "You're a pretty special bloke Draco."

"Of course I am...I'm me." Draco threw a smile at the redhead behind him to show he was joking...Well mostly anyway. "You're sort of special too, I just haven't decided in what way yet, if it's special or you know 'special'." His gloved fingers went up to make air quotes beside his head. The hand Fred had rested his on felt strangely cold now that he'd pulled it away.

Fred laughed, "Well let me know soon as you decide though I'll be doing my best to pull for the former." He moved to sit beside Draco so they could look at each other more easily, "How's your Mum getting along?"

"I think she's doing well, Livia is good company and keeps her from getting too lonely." Draco exchanged almost daily owls with his mother, he knew that Narcissa was a take charge woman, used to keep busy and make decisions about everything. No matter what she said he knew that she had to have troubles with being hidden away and practically locked up.

"That's good. I hope that your father will I dunno, something that'll render any threat from him null and void so she can get out of wherever Harry stuck you two. Even if she's got something to do it's no fun to be cooped up." Fred brought up a knee and dangled his arm over it, "Your Mum seems like the sort who should be out and about."

"She is." Draco's smile softened. "There's not a shopkeeper in London or Paris who wouldn't cower when she sets foot in their store...Cower but love her all the same. It's not just shopping, it's Mother who runs...or ran the Manor and everything surrounding it. Father has always been too busy chasing power and glory to keep anything going."

"You got the brains from your Mum that's for bloody sure then."

"I certainly hope so." Draco raised his pointed nose and looked every inch the pureblood aristocrat he was.

"By Merlin you can't do that round me," Fred pouted a bit, "That look makes me want to kiss the tip of your nose and you'd skin me alive right now." He recognized that there was no way Draco would grant him that big a liberty but he was just so...adorable like that. Made it hard to resist.

Silver colored eyes slid over to look Fred up and down slowly without ever losing his expression. "Hmm...No. I don't think a freckled, pale skin would look good on my wall. I am all about aesthetics you know. You're still not allowed to put your mouth anywhere near me though. Believe me, I can do a lot worse to you than skin you alive."

"Cruel, gorgeous man, deliberately tormenting me. Ah well tis the stuff dreams are made of and I always appreciate good dreams."

"Sweet dreams then Fred Weasley." Draco almost smiled, at least his lips were twitching. "Otherwise you can just daydream while 'polishing your broomstick'." With his words Draco made sure that Fred knew that Draco was very much aware of which of the twins he'd been speaking with. He rose from his seat, slung his broom over his shoulder and sauntered away, when he was a little bit away from Fred he allowed his smile to bloom freely.

Fred waited until he was certain Draco wouldn't be able to hear him then let out a celebratory whoop and took off at a run to find George, who'd probably be just getting out of Arithmancy.

They were twins but they didn't do everything the same or together. They were two different
people, as shown by the fact that George had chosen Arithmancy as one of his other classes while Fred had chosen Runes and Advanced Magical Theory. It usually left Fred at loose ends as he had no classes when George was in Arithmancy. So few understood that they were two different people that he'd been able to slip into classes for George when he'd been sick or otherwise indisposed and George still got his full attendance marks.

Before today only three people in memory could tell them apart, Remus and Orion, Fred reckoned that had something to do with their noses, and Harry, which was more impressive considering that he didn't have those nifty werewolf senses. But now someone else had been added to the list. His grin widened as he spotted George stuffing his notes into his bag as he walked out of the Arithmancy classroom. He grabbed his brother and pulled him into an empty classroom with all the force of a hurricane, "Georgie!"

"Freddie?" George struggled to stay on his feet as Fred practically tackled him and dragged him into the empty classroom. Fred was flushed and twitchy and if it hadn't been for the sparkle in his eyes, George would be worried that something bad had happened. "What all this, what's gotten your weasel to pop?"

"He can tell!" Fred was nearly bouncing on his feet, "He knows the difference!"

George blinked in confusion, his mind racing to make sense of his brother's words. "No! Really?" A slow, wide grin spread over his features. "Our Dragon can really tell?" He doubted anyone else could understand the importance of that, the importance of being seen for who you were instead of just one piece of a set. He and Fred were very close, very close but they were still their own people as well. "That's bloody brilliant!" He picked Fred up and spun him around.

Fred just laughed in delight and planted a fast kiss on Geroge's lips, "He can tell, he can really tell. George I don't think I'll be feeling my feet touch the ground for the next day or so. If he thinks we're letting him go now, he's got another thing coming. Our Dragon, all others can go fly a kite or face the consequences."

George laughed happily and kept his arms around his other half. "Oh yes, all ours, he's perfect for us Forge and we're perfect for him. Dragon is too much for anyone else to handle."

"Perfect fit." Fred maneuvered so that they were walking out of the room to the Great Hall for dinner, arms slung round each other, "I look forward to getting to handle him, and I don't mean that in only the perverted sense."

"No, I look forward to handle him too. In every possible way." George leaned his head against Fred's as they walked to the Great Hall. "Come on then, tell me everything about what he said when you saw him."

Harry huffed and literally leaped over a set of second year Hufflepuffs as he took shortcuts, thanking the castle in his head for moving the staircases to help him, rushing as quickly as he could to the west conservatory where Orion had been lingering and he was pretty sure he was setting up a prank.

Normally he'd not bother rushing but when he'd seen Orion on the map, he'd also seen Umbridge moving toward the conservatory. If she got a hold of Orion in the middle of a prank...he didn't even want to think about it. He burst into the conservatory and saw Orion hanging a set of dungbombs over the door. "Ri hand them down, now." His voice was rushed and worried.
Orion startled and almost fell off the upside down bucket he used as a stepping stool. "Bloody hell Scar, you almost scared me to death." He looked down at Harry with wide, startled eyes. "What's the big deal, it's just dungbombs...Want to give the first year Ravenclaws a class they don't forget. All of them walk around as if they have a bad smell under their noses so I am going to give them a real one...See how they react to that."

Harry took the dungbombs and gave Orion a nudge toward the back door of the conservatory, "We need to go, come on hurry. I'll explain later."

Frowning and wondering what Harry was on about, Orion still did as his big brother said and kicked the bucket away as he started to walk toward the back door when he suddenly stopped dead in his tracks at the sound of a dreaded voice.

"Well, well, well...What do we have here?" Umbridge looked triumphant, delighted look on her toadlike face as she waved her wand at both of them. "Two little pranksters, caught in the act."

"The dungbombs and bucket are mine," he paused just long enough to be insulting, "Professor."

Orion's frown deepened, what was Harry doing?

Umbridge's glare hardened but she kept her smirk on. "Is that really so Mr. Potter? You don't think you have enough fame around here without adding pranks to your list of accomplishments." Her gaze swivelled around and landed on Orion. "And what do you have to say of these events Mr. Moonstar."

Orion opened his mouth but not a sound came out. He tried again but the same thing happened. "Why are you asking him?" Harry's voice was challenging, drawing her attention once more as he stepped between her and Orion.

"Perhaps because he's here right along with you Mr. Potter but since the cat seem to have gotten Mr. Moonstar's tongue and you have confessed I will see you for detention tonight and every night of this week Mr. Potter. Be in my office at seven and don't be late." She looked Harry over with contempt before turning on her heel and walking away, making a mental note to keep an even closer eye on the Slytherin Mr. Moonstar who she kept finding in Potter's company.

Harry gently nudged Orion out of the conservatory and through the halls, pulling out the Map to avoid others until they were safely down in the Chamber, where he sank onto the couch. "I saw her heading for the conservatory on the map. Hence me scaring the piss out of you and the attempt to get out before she showed up." He ruffled Orion's hair. "I think I need to figure out a way to make a copy of the Marauder's Map for you."

"Not that, that wouldn't be brilliant because it absolutely would," Orion could already imagine all the things he could pull off if he had a map like that but he was more worried about something else at the moment. "Why did you take the blame for me Scar? I can handle detention. Why does Sev lock me up at night? Why is Dad and Sirius set on having me visit the first thing when Hogsmeade weekend comes. I'm not stupid, something is going on with the toad and it has something to do with me. Why won't anyone just tell me?"

"We will, I promise. Hogsmeade weekend we'll tell you. I promised your Dad I wouldn't tell you why until he and Sirius got a chance to talk to you face to face or I'd tell you now. I can tell you that I've seen the results of a few of her detentions and your Dad would go absolutely ballistic, literally fanged and clawed ballistic. I know it sucks, from personal experience, we're all trying to protect you and won't tell you why and it sucks hard but we do have a reason and we will tell you about it.
soon. The Hogsmeade weekend is next week. Think you can wait that long?"

"Looks like I'll have to but I hate it. I hate being in the dark and I hate you taking my detention now that you told me what you did. Do you really think I want you hurt in my place?" Amber eyes were dark with conflicting emotions. He did understand that his parents wanted to tell him themselves, especially if it was a bad thing but not knowing was driving him spare. If he did know then he could act accordingly and not put any of his loved in in harms way. "I hate her most of all. Nothing is fun since she came here."

"C'mere pup," Harry pulled Orion into a hug, "I know and I know you wouldn't want me hurt in your place but I need to protect you from the toad okay? You're my little brother it's my job. You can help out by not pulling any pranks outside of the Slytherin dorms until I manage to make a second Map for you okay? If you have to get caught and get a detention, get caught by McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick...anyone but Umbridge. I'm sorry you're in this position. I wish I could get the bloody toad sacked so you weren't."

"Don't be sorry Scar, it's not your fault. It's no one's fault really except for hers." Orion sighed and slumped down next to Harry after hugging him. "If I pull anymore pranks in the Slytherin common room I won't live to see graduation, we're snakes and apparently snakes don't handle being made a fool of well."

"I could have told you that," Harry poked Orion in the ribs, "Malfoy was the seeker my second and third year remember?"

"Ah yes...I hadn't thought of that. Yeah then you'd know what I'm talking about." Orion squirmed away from the tickling poke. "Speaking of Malfoy, I don't really know how to say this but the git is one hell of a chaser. Between me and him I think you'll really have to watch your backs this year. In practice he's unstoppable, just keeps scoring."

"Well good thing our first match is against Ravenclaw this year then. Ron'll get some practice in. Gryffindor could use the challenge really. Though no matter who your beaters are, no way they can match Fred and George."

"That's true, our beaters are kind of lame actually. Good news for you and bad news for me since I'm the one George and Fred will aim at." Orion snorted, he wasn't too worried. Mostly because just the thought of actually being on the team was...amazing and partly because he knew how Fred and George and even Harry played, having played plenty of games in the Burrow's back yard with them.

Harry chuckled, "You'll do fine kiddo. Now, I'm gonna work on modifying a spell to detect a ghost's signature. Wanna help?"

Orion gave Harry an 'are you kidding?' look before nodding and jumping to his feet. "Absolutely, just tell me what we're doing and I'll figure it out for you." He sent his brother a cheeky grin.

"Brat," he ruffled Orion's hair and went into how he wanted to add an enchantment so that when the ghost's signature was detected it would move something, in this case the page of a book.

----------------------------------------

Harry checked around the door of the Chamber library, breathing a sigh of relief when he didn't see the others, then he crept in, a cloth held to his hand as he dug in the desk for some Dittany he thought might help the pain. Today had been his last day of detention and his hand throbbed like a bitch.
There had to be some law against what Umbridge was doing, there had to be but none of the others getting detentions were willing to speak up about it for fear that their parents would get in trouble for it. He had to admit that the toad picked her victims well, mostly students whose parents were employed by the Ministry or ones with creature blood. He was the only one who would risk speaking out against her to the authorities but even he had the worry of Orion and Remus. "Bloody bitch."

"Such language Harry." Hermione stood in the doorway, arms across her chest and a fierce look in her usually soft brown eyes. "Okay, hand it over." She crossed the floor and held out her hands. "Come on, you're pants at healing charms anyway. I can't believe you didn't tell me and that you tried to hide it from me...I noticed your hand the second day Harry."

He jumped and then winced, "Not really you I was trying to hide it from. I'm not that stupid. I was hiding it from Ron and them," he peeled the cloth off and let her look at the mess of his hand, "Healing charms won't work. Some sort of enchanted quill, wants the message to 'sink in' so I've been using dittany to stop the bleeding."

"I hope that hag gets eaten by a troll." Hermione hissed as she pulled out dittany from her bottomless bag. "Sit." She took his hand and dabbed it gently with the dittany. "This is horrible, somehow she has to be stopped. Even a year is too long for this. She's evil and this is not legal. Hogwarts stopped corporal punishments over two hundred years ago." Hermione brought his hand up to her mouth and kissed it. "It's only been a month of school so far and she's had detention with over fifty students so far."

"I know but none of them are willing to come forward," he sat down and tugged her down beside him, resting his head on her shoulder, "if I'm the only one stepping forward to accuse her then she might be sacked from here but she'd just go back to the Ministry and stir up trouble for her victims. One accusation isn't enough to get her fired from her position at the Ministry."

"I know." Hermione petted his hair and tugged on her bottom lip with her teeth. "I thought about turning her in myself, for everyone's sake but I'm scared for Mum and Dad...If dementors can make it to Little Whinging then they can surely find their way to my house too." She hated that she was a coward about this but she was.

He lifted his hand and pulled her lips out of her teeth, "None of that. We'll eventually convince the others to come forward, that or she'll be eaten by a troll, or something. Have you noticed that what happens to the DADA professor to kick them out seems directly proportionate to their evil? Quirrel's dead, Lockhart is mentally damaged...well more than before," he smiled at her chuckle, "Remus is just fine as he never did anything wrong, Crouch is mouldering away in Azkaban once more."

"And this time he's not getting out thank Merlin." She resisted the urge to bite down on her lip again...with difficulty. "I kind of fear what will happen to Umbridge though, or rather the fallout because for someone that evil there has to be something truly big to get rid of her." Hermione fell silent for a while. "Have you seen Remus' scars? Not the wolf ones, the Umbridge ones? I saw some of them this summer when he rolled his shirtsleeves up...It's bad Harry and it looks as if they only used silver instruments on him."

Harry's jaw went tense, "I've seen them and if I had the stomach for it I'd like to make that bitch suffer the same. She's not like Voldemort, as foul as he is he's...honest weird though it is to say. Her? She covers it all up under lies and deceptions covered in sparkly pink shellac. She gets enjoyment out of causing pain and then acts as if she's doing the world a favor. I never thought I could feel such instant loathing like I did for Pettigrew again but boy is she giving him a run for his
money. I actually find myself pitying Snape with the way she sidles up to him like..."

"She likes him, I mean she likes him, likes him." Hermione tried to smother her smile because it really wasn't all that funny. Poor Snape. "I heard her invite him for a night cap last weekend and I swear it looked as if Snape was ready to kill her right there and then...after he'd finished throwing up inside his mouth. She didn't get it though, just said they could go to his quarters if he was feeling shy."

"Yeah definitely feeling sorry for Snape here." Harry shuddered, "I think I'd rather have Snape as DADA professor this year instead of the toad. He's still a huge git of a teacher but at least we actually learn."

Hermione nodded. "I agree, I don't think I'll ever feel warm and fuzzy about Snape but he has proved to be a human being underneath all the gitness and like it or not the man knows what he's talking about. Both in Potions and Defense."

"I'm just glad Fred and George are in their last year since they can teach us the material we're supposed to be learning. If not for them we'd be screwed." He flexed his fingers, sighing when his hand didn't twinge or start bleeding again. In a week it should be healed enough that Remus wouldn't scent it when they saw him in Hogsmeade.

She made a humming agreement and took his hand again, looking at it closely. It still looked a mess but at least it wasn't bleeding any longer. "What does she make you do anyway that causes wounds like these?"

"It's a quill," he studied the marks and pat away the smeared blood making the words 'I must not tell lies' visible, "No ink pot or anything but as soon as you start writing with it your hand gets cut into and then the words on the parchment are your own blood."

Hermione blinked at him before her eyes grew dark and stormy and she got out of the chair to pace the floor angrily. "She uses a blood quill?" She muttered angrily under her breath. "Those are very much forbidden, cataloged as dark objects...Not that it matters since she's getting away with it. Ooooh it's making me so angry, the Ministry is just a joke, only after covering their own pathetic arses."

He got to his feet with a smile and caught her mid-pace, kissing her forehead, "Well we already knew that." He nuzzled his nose against hers, "It'll be alright Hermione. Fudge won't last out the year and then there'll be the opportunity for real change. I know it seems a long way off but it's shorter a time than you'd think."

"I know you're right, I'm just feeling edgy I suppose. I hate feeling powerless and scared." She brought her hands up and ran her thumbs along Harry's jawline, almost wanting to sink into his warmth and the safety he made her feel.

"I know." He kept his arms around her and swayed from side to side, "All else fails we can move to the Americas, be refugees. I'm joking." He squirmed a bit at the pinch she'd given him, "No I'm thinking of getting a magical lordship delegation together to invoke that failsafe I read about in the book I got in the hodgepodge, get the Wizengamot to return to their real job of looking after the people and not themselves."

"Mmhmm, it's a good idea. If only Wormtail would be caught then that would be so much easier because Sirius would be one of those lords. It's always easier when you have someone on the inside." Hermione was a problem solver and when there were things she couldn't figure out, couldn't solve or read her way to a solution she became testy.
Sometimes she wished she could meet Harry hidden away just to snog, no evil toads or friends in
danger. No demented Headmasters or Dark Lunatics, only the two of them. She wondered if that
would ever be. "We'll handle it the way it plays out I suppose, try to make the best of things."

He brushed a soft kiss over her lips, "We'll hammer things out and then at the end of all this mess,
when Dumbledore and Voldemort are out of our hair, we'll finally be able to have a pleasant,
peaceful year or two."

"I look forward to that, somehow I doubt things will ever be too peaceful around you Harry. As
long as the maniacs filled with evil are out of the way then I will be happy." She smiled and kissed
him back a little firmer.

He smiled against her mouth and stilled, angling his head for a better kiss, fitting his lips perfectly
against hers in a long, slow, loving kiss. One hand went to cup the back of her head, the other
resting in the small of her back as he kissed her, the now familiar tingle sweeping through him
along with the sometimes overwhelming love he felt for Hermione.

Every time Harry kissed her, the world disappeared. It sounded Disney princess cliché but it was
true. Lightning and sparks went through her every time and the electricity between them only
enhanced the utter love she felt for him. "Hmm." She hummed happily into the kiss and ran her
fingers through his unruly hair.

He nibbled affectionately on her bottom lip. His eyes closed at the pet of her fingers through his
hair like some great cat being stroked and he ran his hand up and down her back.

"Hey Hermi- oops." Ron's face turned a bright flaming red and he turned round, "I um...sorry."

Hermione half sighed, half chuckled into her kiss with Harry and pulled her bottom lip out from
between Harry's teeth. She continued to rake her fingers through Harry's hair as she looked over
his shouler at the blushing Ron. "None of that Ron, it's nothing that you and Luna haven't done.
What can I do for you?"

"Er you went to get himself there," Ron turned to them still an embarrassed red, "and I was
wondering if he wasn't down here since you didn't come up to the common room to help the ikles
with their Defense stuff like we've been doing. And me and Luna kissing is exactly why I'm
flustered. I know I hate interruptions."

Harry chuckled softly and pressed a kiss to Hermione's cheek, "I'll grab my things and we'll go help
the younger years."

"Yes well, I suppose it's time for me to get back there as well. Suddenly I feel like making them
learning how to dodge hexes." Hermione was not beyond viciousness and she really didn't like
interruptions either. The time she had alone with Harry was very limited and very, very precious.
"Let's go then boys."

Harry finished tugging his fingerless gloves on, he'd been wearing them all week to hide his hand,
and took her hand, shouldering his bag, "Right then."

Ron scratched the side of his neck, "Um, I'll poke the twin terrors away from the Chamber for a
while if you want some time tomorrow," he started climbing the staircase they'd discovered that
lead out, "Ginny'll be practicing her shots anyway and Nev likes to watch her at it."

Softening Hermione walked up to him and kissed his cheek lovingly. "You Ron aren't all bad,
sometimes you can be rather wonderful you know." Going back to taking Harry's hand again she
squeezed it before the three of them made their way out of the Chamber. "Do you have the map ready Harry? So we can dodge any toads?"

"Always these days," he pulled the map out of his inside cloak pocket and scanned it, "Corridor is clear, looks like she's in her office," his brows lifted, "with Zabini." He paused in thought, "Now there is definitely someone who won't be precisely keen on keeping silent if she gives him one of her detentions."

"No, you're right about that. If she has that kind of detention with him he will tell, tell everyone and tell them loudly. He is proud of his creature blood, especially since he found Charlie." Hermione furrowed her brow though. "Zabini is a top student and he's not into pranks. I wonder what she wants with him."

Ron opened the lavatory door, "Probably trying to get him to admit to something she can punish him for." He snorted, "Never happen but I heard the gorillas making grunting noises about how crazy Zabini would be if he's kept back from meeting Charlie next weekend."

Harry made a growl, "That cow."

"She can't do that!" Hermione looked horrified. "Even with their bracelets Zabini needs to meet with Charlie, what could possibly be the purpose of keeping someone in pain? Besides Charlie would freak too."

Ron snorted, "Charlie would more than freak, he'd storm the castle and bring the woman before the full Wizengamot for attempted murder."

Harry made another growl, "She's after proving that Zabini is dangerous. He looked over at Ron, "It's not just werewolves, she hates all creatures and the creature blooded. If Zabini doesn't get fed he'll start starving and that is dangerous not only for Zabini but the rest of the student body."

Ron nodded, "Without his mate's energy, if he starves too much he'll reach a point of no return and his full nature will break out in the middle of a class or something and he could kill someone just trying to stay alive himself. She can't keep him here though. He's not done anything, well not anything he's been caught at, and there's no way she'll be able to get him to spew. Veritaserum is all but useless on incubi."

"And Incubi can absorb hexes so there's really not much she can do except to push and threaten and hope he folds. Still it's horrible and scary that she is targeting the creature blooded like this, also it makes things even more dangerous for Orion, we can't let her even get an inkling about what he is."

Harry nodded, "He's promised to keep his head down until Hogsmeade weekend at least. Until then we'll just make sure he's never caught alone with her." Hogsmeade weekend couldn't come fast enough for Harry.

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Sirius watched Remus look out the window again, "Moony take it easy, they'll be here soon. I imagine they just left the school."

"I know, I know, it's just I really hoped I wouldn't ever have to tell Orion these things. And I know him. We might be able to lure a promise out of him but he will not leave things alone, that's not in his nature. We both know that." Remus continued to look out the window nervously, running his fingers through his hair repeatedly.
Sirius got up and went over to squeeze Remus' shoulders, "Merlin Remus you're full of knots. Sit
down," without waiting for him to protest or anything Sirius steered him to sit in a chair and began
rubbing and working out the knots in Remus' shoulders, "I know you're worried and scared, so am
I, but you can't work yourself into one big knot or worry yourself sick. If you do then you won't be
in any condition to protect Orion when the time comes."

"I can't! I can't relax while Umbridge is a hundred kilometers near Orion.” He groaned as Sirius'
fingers dug into his knotted muscles. He tried to relax and let Sirius' hands work their magic but he
couldn't. He just dreaded the conversation they were going to have to have with their son. "I just
want him safe Pads and I can't stand us being stuck here unable to be the ones keeping him safe."

Sirius ran his hands down Remus' arms and rested his brow on the top of his head, speaking softly,
"I know." He fell silent because there really wasn't anything left to say about it. He couldn't soothe
Remus on this matter, couldn't make him feel better or make anything okay again.

Remus sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I'm sorry to be taking my worries out on you Siri. It's
not fair."

"Don't start with that Moony. I'm here because I want you to share your worries and concerns with
me. What's not fair is the depth of worry you're under. You don't deserve that, you deserve peace
and happiness." Unspoken was the desire to be the one who gave Remus the chance for that peace
and who brought him happiness.

"I don't have any more worries than you Pads and you certainly deserve them either." Remus
reached up and pulled Sirius into the chair next to him, so he could lean his head on Sirius
shoulder. "I just wish we could have some peace and raise our son without people who want to
experiment on him. I know wishes don't mean anything but that's not too much to ask for is it?"

He reached up and ran his fingers through graying brown hair, "It shouldn't be no." he looked up as
the door was knocked on just before a tousled dark head peeked around and he smiled at the sight
of his son grinning at them, "Look who's here then."

Finding his his parents cuddled in the same chair was a welcome surprise and for just a second the
thought that that was the news they wanted to share with him. That they'd finally dislodged their
heads from their bums and gotten back together. Then he saw the shadows underneath his Dad's
eyes and how tired and worn they both looked and realized that no, no reunion news was in the
offing. "Hello parentals, I hope you've stocked up on Jaffa cakes." He grinned and hoped it would
ease the tension somewhat.

Remus smiled at him and took a deep breath, suddenly not knowing at all what to say.

Harry and Hermione followed Orion into the kitchen and Harry pointed a warning finger at Remus,
"Eh! You look like you're about to fall flat on your face. I'll make the tea."

Sirius studied his godson, tilting his head in curiousity at the slight change in clothing, the leather
jacket, fingerless gloves, and slightly tighter jeans giving him a not quite rebellious look. "Looking
good and getting bossy."

Ron chuckled as he took off his scarf, "I blame Mione, she just swished her wand one day last
weekend and had all his jeans a size smaller then suggested the jacket. You'd think she's got a taste
for bad boys or something."

Harry set about making the tea, giving Hermione a small smile. She'd adjusted his wardrobe to
make the gloves look less out of place so Remus wouldn't get suspicious.
"Not bad boys exactly, I just got sick of seeing Harry walking around in clothes much too big for him. Harry's got a very nice looking body, why hide it?" She smiled back at him as he put the kettle on and squirmed when Remus raised his nose and then he narrowed his eyes at Harry suspiciously.

Harry took down the teapot and looked back at Remus, "What is it?" He tilted his head for effect and hoped like hell his hand had healed enough that Remus couldn't smell it. It had been a week since the final detention after all and it was scabbed over and mostly painless. He shouldn't be able to sniff it out.

"You're hurt." It was a simple answer and Remus still had his eyes on Harry. It was strange to see how they turned a lighter amber as Remus called on his senses. "It's not fresh but you're still hurt, bad enough to leave a scar so spill...What's happened?"

Hermione's jaw dropped, she had been sure Remus wouldn't smell it out, especially not from across the room and with so many others close by.

Ron's head whipped around and he narrowed his eyes on Harry, who looked uncomfortable, "Mate, what did-"

"It's nothing, really just a-"

"Harry," Sirius spoke, recognizing the start of a whopper of a lie. Harry had the same posture James had when he was fibbing, "We'll pin you down and search out the answer."

Harry pulled a face and muttered, "Like to see you do that to a lion." His animagus form's fur would hide the almost healed cuts on top of them not being able to pin him down. He didn't expect for Ron to pull his wand through.

"Accio gloves." Ron caught Harry's gloves as they flew off his best friend's hands and caught the sight of the bandage over his right hand before Harry shifted subtly to hide it.

"No point in trying to hide it now cub." Remus voice was very serious as he looked at Harry. "Just show us and get it over with. Something has happened and you don't want us to know about it. You're usually not afraid of a scrape or cut so this has to be something more."

Orion paled. "It's the detention isn't it? The one you took in my place?"

Sirius stepped over and grabbed Harry's wrist, despite his protests, and unwrapped the bandage slowly, eyes glinting with quiet fury as he saw the words cut into the back of Harry's hand. "A fucking blood quill. She made you use a blood quill."

Harry made a growl of annoyance and pushed Sirius off, "It doesn't matter." He stuck his hand in his jacket pocket then looked over at Orion and spoke softly, "Don't look like that pup."

"What should I look like then?" Orion took his hair tie out and pulled his hair into a ponytail just to have something to do with hands to keep them from shaking. "I told you I didn't want you hurt on my account. I hung those bloody dungbombs, it was my fault." He looked around the room. "Please, please just tell me what's going on."

Remus was already fighting his wolf, seeing Harry who was also his cub hurt by the same woman who'd hurt him so badly for seven months had made something switch off in him again and Moony was creeping closer to control.

Harry gave his godfather then Remus a speaking look before returning to brewing the tea, "Floor's
yours.” He was irritated at having his hand revealed in front of Orion as he'd been trying to keep his guilt to a minimum.

Sirius stepped back from Harry and went to lay a calming hand on Remus' shoulder, "Sit down son. It's a long story."

Orion gave them both wary looks but walked across the floor and sat down next to Ron. "Just tell me, long or short I'm sick of being in the dark."

Remus was still struggling but Sirius hand on him anchored him somewhat. "You remember that I told you about being at the Ministry before you were born right?" He tried to keep his voice calm.

Orion nodded carefully, his eyes still locked on his parents as an uncomfortable weight lodged in his stomach.

Remus opened his mouth several times and then he crumpled and buried his face in his hands. "I can't do it, I can't tell him...He shouldn't have to know."

Sirius moved to wrap his arms around Remus comfortingly, not sure what to do to help him through this.

Harry sighed and poured the hot water into the teapot over the leaves to steep then reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the article on Remus having been unlawfully held and experimented on. He walked over to Orion and handed him the article, his arm around his little brother's shoulder as he spoke gently. "Umbridge was the one in charge. I don't know the details beyond what that article says no one does except for those involved."

Orion sat completely still for a long time, his eyes on the article but the started to tremble. His eyes became almost yellow and the growl that came out of his throat proved that there was plenty of wolf inside him too. "She's the bitch who hurt you, poisoned you and scarred you. What the fuck is she doing at Hogwarts? Why isn't she in Azkaban for what she did? I can remember you being sick from the silver poisoning...That means you had troubles for years Dad. I'm going to kill her. I will!"

"Language Orion and no, you're not going to kill her. That reaction right there is exactly why we couldn't tell you." Remus still sounded broken and embarrassed that Orion had to find out this about him.

Orion only growled in response.

Harry's hand went to the back of Orion's neck and he growled right back, "Stop that now," he met the wolf bright eyes, "You go after her and do you know what will happen?"

Ron picked it up, "She'll use it as an excuse to claim you and every other werewolf halfling in the world are dangerous animals. We all know that's not true but people like her will strip you of your rights. It won't matter to her that you're a minor. It's not just you and your Dad who'll suffer if you attack her Ri but every werewolf and every werewolf's child and grandchildren."

The cub was still tense but he wasn't older than the one chastising him and the grip on the back of his neck made him slump some. He was aware that in their pack Harry was the stronger of them, at least at the moment. His eyes were still wild though and the trembling wouldn't stop. "What am I supposed to do then? Just smile and wave when I see her, knowing she hurt my Dad, almost killed him. Knowing that she is the cause of every cut, needle mark, chain mark and so on covering him. Scars that I know never stop hurting. I can't do that. One way or another I am going to take her
down. On my own if I have to."

"We don't want her there any more than you do cub." Remus voice was choked up, Orion had just revealed a little more than he'd been prepared for anyone to know. "Just have patience and stay out of her way. Give her no reason to figure out you're a creature blood and more importantly my son."

Sirius was rubbing Remus' back gently, hiding the devastation on his own face at the depth of what his Moony had suffered. "Orion please. It'd hurt your Dad and me more to know she hurt you."

"She'll go down Orion. You don't honestly think I'm just sitting round with my thumb up my bum do you?" Harry's tone eased back from the growl he'd put in it and gone to soothing, "I'm working on it but if you go after her you'll be the one in the wrong. You don't have to smile and wave, Merlin knows I don't. Just stay away from her as much as you can."

Orion puffed out his cheeks before heaving a huge sigh. "Somehow I'm not happier knowing...I just hate her more." He looked at his parents and then Harry, the wolf retreating from his eyes, leaving them their usual soft amber. "I'll play nice...In the open. Promise me you let me help working on taking her down from the shadows. I won't draw attention to myself or pull any stupid tricks but please, please, please don't ask me to be idle."

Harry ruffled his hair, "We're not stupid kiddo, trying to keep you completely out of it would be like holding back the tide. We just want you safe and uninjured." He pulled out the Marauder's Map, "Speaking of, as much as I hate to make you duplicate utter brilliance, I was wondering if there's a way to make a copy of the map for Orion?" He set it on the table in front of Remus and Sirius, "So he can see where the Toad is and properly avoid her."

Remus looked at the map and then turned his head to Sirius. "Well it shouldn't be too much of a problem since we've already created the magic for it once. The thing is that the map need four people to channel north, south, east and west. If we use Harry and Orion it should work, right Pads?" Remus was grateful for something to concentrate on, something other than how weak he'd been. This was something that he could do.

Sirius nodded, nuzzling the top of Remus' head before smoothing the map out, tracing the lines with a fond expression, "Yes it would work though one of these days we'll have to actually update the map. that's for later as it would require serious cartography art."

Ron tilted his head, "Who drew it all out anyway?"

"Both James and I did," he trailed a finger along the east corridor, "He did the east and north, I did south and west. Moony figured out the spells and proper applications."

"It took more time than I care to remember but I've never laughed, cursed, argued and fought so much as during the months we put this thing together." Remus smiled in reminiscence and looked at the yellowed parchment lovingly, "Remember that James wanted the map to include whether the girls were dressed or not in their dorms and bathrooms?" He shook his head fondly.

"Of course we all knew that there was only one girl he really wanted to know about." Remus felt himself choke up a little. With everything that happened he'd never really been allowed or had the time to mourn the loss of James and Lily. He wondered if Sirius would come with him to Godrics Hollow and actually say goodbye sometime.

Sirius smoothed the map down again, voice soft in memory and wistful sorrow, "I remember. He and I both also wanted the map to buzz when Snape was anywhere nearby so we could prank him. You vetoed that, very loudly and with a vicious hex to James' pants."
"He deserved it, you did too but you were too quick for me, turning into Padfoot knowing I would never hex him. Besides having a buzzing map kind of defeats the purpose of being sneaky." Remus smiled but it was a smile full of memory and sadness.

"Which is what made James eventually drop it." Sirius looked at the lines on the map, "Just took the one hex on him to make me shut it."

Harry looked between them, hearing the aching sadness in their voices but more the utterly lost tone in Sirius' and caught Ron's eyes. He felt a pang at the thought of losing his best friend the way Sirius had lost his.

Hermione heard that tone too and she looked at both Harry and Ron, she loved them both in different ways but she knew that for Harry to lose Ron or the other way around would break them. A best friend is something that can't be replaced no matter how many other great friendships and relationship you have. There was nothing she could do now but she decided to give both of them an extra strong hug later, just because they were in her life.

"Anyway, if we swerve off memory lane for a moment," Remus cleared his throat. "I think we should be able to make a duplicate map without too much trouble. If all goes well and you Harry and you Orion are willing to help we should have one before you have to leave today. I'll go to the study to get a blank piece of parchment." 

Harry nodded, "Not a problem for me. How about you pup?" He ruffled Orion's hair.  

"Like I would say no. I would love having a map of my own and it will be a chance to learn something new. I'm all over it." Orion smiled and found Harry's ticklish rib to get even for the hair ruffling.

"Are you sure there isn't a little hidden Ravenclaw somewhere inside that snake persona?" Hermione asked with a smile, thinking about Orion's eagerness to always learn new things.

"I don't think you're one to talk lady tiger." Orion rolled his eyes in response.

Ron rolled his eyes, "I think most of us have bits of the other houses don't we? It's just what's best for us we're put in innit?" He hid his face in his teacup when heads turned in surprise. "What?"

"Nothing, it's just still surprising when you make sense, that's all. We're all used to you being...you know...you. " Orion grinned wickedly at the redhead, even going as far as sticking his tongue out to show Ron that he was kidding. They all knew that there was more to Ron that he let show most of the time.

"This from the squirt who's still getting destroyed by me in chess?" Ron raised his brows.

"Ouch," Sirius chuckled, "This summer you and I will have to have long chess lessons kiddo." He lunged and grabbed his son for a tickle and wrestle match.

Laughing madly, Orion threw himself into the wrestle match with all his heart, tackling his father to the floor and using every dirty trick the twins and Pansy had taught him.

Remus returned with a scroll of parchment and let out a sigh as he walked over to the fireplace mantle and removed the clock Severus had given him once before it was broken. "This happened every day this summer....every day."

Harry chuckled, "Well two puppies in the same house, bound to happen." He got up and shifted into his lion form, padding over to the wrestling pair and nudged Orion toward the table with a
massive head and a playful growl before sitting on Sirius.

"Oof! Bloody hell get off Scar! You weigh a ton!"

Harry just yawned and flicked his tail lazily.

Hermione hid her smile but Orion cackled madly and stood up to dance in place. "Woohoo, crushed by Scar butt. I call victory."

Remus snorted. "I call victory for Harry, looks like he's the one on top." He rolled out the blank parchment. "If everyone is done playing for the moment, let's do this then."

Harry got up with a lazy stretch and padded back over to the table, transforming back to human, "Well you know lion, king of the jungle, of course I was on top of a fluffy little dog."

"Brat," Sirius got to his feet and went to stand next to Remus, "If you're the king what does that make Hermione then?"

"The lady who owns me." It was said simply, with utter honesty.

Hermione's cheeks turned pink but her smile was radiant. "That goes the other way around as well, you know that."

Remus found the two of them adorable but more than that they comforted him, showed him that there still was such a thing as true love. Also he was glad that Harry had his Hermione, that with every weight resting on his shoulders, at least he wasn't alone. "Please if you could each stand at the side of the table that will represent your element. Harry will be north, Sirius south, Orion east and I'll be west. Take your wands out and point them at the Marauders map."

Harry snagged Hermione's hand and gave the back of it a kiss before he got into position and drew his wand.

Sirius smiled at his godson and Hermione. James would have been proud of Harry for the way he cherished Hermione and would have wound up getting brained with something when he pulled out his dubious charm on her. He pulled out his own wand with a grin, "Ready all?"

"Ready." Remus said, his wand already out and pointing at the map and Orion nodded and pretended that his slight trembling was just about excitement and nothing to do with nerves.

Hermione leaned forward on the couch, trying to catch everything about the ceremony going on as magic filled the room. Just like Orion she would never turn her nose up at the chance to learn something new and this was high end advanced magic.

Sirius smiled, "Alright channel your magic into the map and the second parchment and repeat after me." He directed his own magic into the map and second parchment with the intent to copy the map, "Utriusque Partis."

The other three followed his lead and enchantment and slowly spiderwebs of thin black lines started to show up on the second parchment. Remus smiled in spite of himself, pleased that it was working and feeling that tingling sensation of doing this sort of magic. He'd missed it, much more than he'd even realized. Remus knew he looked and sounded boring but once upon a time he'd been a Marauder with the best of them.

Harry watched the lines bloom over the second parchment, slowly forming Hogwarts before his eyes. Moving dots sprung up and names appeared until it was almost identical to the first map.
Sirius nodded and pricked his finger, letting a drop of blood fall onto the second parchment that soon formed a paw print in the center of the compass rose on the map, "Ibi in Perpetuum." He tucked his wand away and waggled his fingers, "That should do it. The original will be a master copy, if it gets destroyed then the second map will go blank. But it's the same passwords for both."

Orion's eyes were saucer wide as he looked at the lines and the moving dots and fingers all but twitched to reach out and grab it, study it closer and learn it. Damn that toad. Without her he would undoubtedly be the prank emperor this year. Still he was thankful that his family reached out and did this for him, to help him be able stay out of the hell lady's way. "Wicked."

Harry chuckled, "Well I fear for everyone's hair next year."

Ron snickered, "Hair, skin, ability to smell correctly."

"You got it, Hogwarts, start to cower because next year will be mine!" Orion let out a mad cackle.

"Definitely your son." Remus stated calmly without changing his expression. Inside he was full with amusement and just a little trepidation.

"Excuse me? I seem to recall, oh around sixth year, a certain group of prissy purebloods looking and smelling like swamp monsters for a solid two weeks. Mysteriously they transformed while the rest of us were in detention and you were the only one out and about and they'd mocked Cassidy Flynn over her 'hunchback' in front of you earlier that day." Sirius picked up his tea, "A supposed hunchback I know you knew were wing buds."

"Ah yes...Still proud of that spell. I've never seen a group shower so much but I'd designed it so that the more they washed up the worse they smelled." Remus grin absolutely matched that of his son.

"And the only reason you lot were in detention was that you were sloppy and allowed yourself to get caught. That was James and yours problem, always in too much of a hurry, too eager. Oh and Cassidy grew beautiful wings."

"Well yeah I figured that. My point though Moony, is that Orion does not get all his mischief from me." He nudged Remus in the side, "He gets plenty from Mummy too."

"Hmmm, perhaps." Remus continued to grin and slung his arm around Sirius' shoulders. "With both of our genes he will be unstoppable...Hogwarts should cower."

Hermione rolled her eyes but she was happy to see Remus smiling and not looking as distraught as he had when they came to visit.

Ron flicked a thumb at them, "Their genes and Snape's tutelage...I think I should invest in armor."

Harry chuckled and sat down, tucking the original map back into his inside pocket before he took Hermione's hand to play with her fingers, "Ri wouldn't do more than turn you different colors Ron."

"That's right, I don't target family...Unless you'd do something extraordinarily pratty." Orion was still studying the map with an eager intent. "Look at this passage, I can make it all the way from the dungeons up to Gryffindor Tower without ever being seen. This is so brilliant."

Remus looked at his son with utter adoration before he went over to cabinet and pulled out a wrapped gift and handed it to Hermione. "This is from me and Pads, sorry it's late but happy sweet sixteen."

Hermione blushed and got up to hug both Remus and Sirius. "Thank you so much but you didn't
Harry grinned because Hermione had squealed when she'd gotten the permanently feather light miniature trunk with the entire Encyclopedia Britannica Magica in the extension charmed interior.

"Well maybe not entirely to the rooftops." She replied with a new blush. Privately she thought her squeal had been heard through the grounds and the forbidden forest. Harry knew her so well and knew just what would make her the happiest.

She opened the package from Sirius and Remus and gasped loudly at the delicate gold bracelet that was inside, it was thin and sparkling and it had charms hanging from it that turned out to be her and her friends animagus forms.

"We only have the charms of the forms we know of but there's room so you can add to them if anyone else, like the snakes get their form." Remus smiled at her.

"Thank you so, so much but it's way too much." Hermione got all teary eyed as she looked at the small lion and tiger next to each other. "It's so beautiful."

Harry took it, kissed the tigress charm, then put it around her wrist, "Just like the lady it's for."

Ron ran a hand over his face, "Harry mate, you're making the rest of us guys look bad."

"He's doing just perfectly, you'd do well to take a pointer or two from him. I'm sure Luna would appreciate it." Hermione smiled and leaned in to kiss Harry gently before she turned back to admire her bracelet more. When she moved her wrist it almost looked as if the small, glittering gold animals moved.

"Hey Luna likes me just the way I am. I may not be as good with words and stuff as Harry but she knows I love her and if she really wanted me to change I would. But she doesn't want me to become a perfect courtier and I don't want her to turn into some boring regular girl." Ron stuck his tongue out at her. "So there."

Sirius shook his head, "Cute aren't they Moony?"

"Adorable." Remus agreed and he really thought that they were.

Hermione made a considering face. "Stick your tongue out at me again and you'll find it growing out of your arse but you're right. Luna is not a regular girl and it would be horrible if she became one since she's lovely just as she is. Okay...Just keep doing whatever you do with her since it seems to be working." She leaned close to Harry, happy that he was who he was because to Hermione he was utterly perfect.

"Thank you. I fully intend to." Ron grabbed a biscuit and nibbled, "Oh yeah, Fred and George wanted me to ask you if you've got any notes or anything for seventh year DADA Remus. The way the toad's going they'll fail their NEWTs if they listen to her. Not that they ever planned to."

"Mmm, hold on a sec." Remus disappeared into his study again, rummaging through his drawers and cabinets before returning with a thick leather binder. "Here you are, there's the notes from when we were in seventh year so they're probably horribly outdated. Also my notes from when I taught Defense two years are there, both practical exercises and reading material. I have copies so
you can keep this. I hope it will be of some help." Of course everything in the binder was organized perfectly, alphabetically as well as in which turn the practical exercises should go.

"Thanks. I'd hate for Fred and George to fail since they're teaching us all from their previous years. Five years of DADA and only one decent professor for it," Ron carefully tucked the binder into his bag, "By Merlin I wish you were still teaching."

"Agreed!" Hermione said with feeling. "You were a brilliant teacher, none of the others can compare."

Remus blushed and squirmed where he stood. He'd loved teaching, loved working together with the students and if circumstances had been different he'd have been very happy to do it for the rest of his working life. "Thank you." He said simply, not knowing what else to say. What was done was done and no matter how he might wish differently they weren't.

Sirius tugged on Remus' hair, "See. I keep telling you to at least write a textbook. You're brilliant and the world should know it."

Remus blushed deeper. "I'm not brilliant in the least. I'm just a nerd and no one would like to read a textbook by me, what new could I have to add?"

"A lot Remus, you could add a lot from a new point of view. I think writing a textbook is a brilliant idea and I'd be the first to read it." Hermione sounded eager. "Most textbooks are outdated and you could put in the views of a creature blooded, it would be amazing. You really should do it professor." Hermione was so into it she didn't even realize that she'd slipped and used his old title. He would always be professor Lupin to her.

Harry nodded, "You explain things in a way that even the thickest can get it if they want to. I'd back you if you ever did write one. At the very least it would give you something more to do during the school year."

"Yeah come on Professor," Ron slipped back into the title as well, "You'd be brilliant at it!"

"Go for it Dad, you deserve so much better than doing those boring translations that you're not even allowed to put your name on." Orion walked over and pulled on his dad's graying hair. "I'd be proud to have an author Dad, not that I'm not proud now too."

"I...I don't know, I'll think about. Promise." Remus caught his son and pulled him into a hug.

Sirius grinned and winked at the trio of Gryffindors in the kitchen. He felt so much better and relieved to have Remus less tense and focused on something other than the Umbridge situation. "So First Quidditch game of the season is coming up, who's playing who?"

"We're playing Ravenclaw, Slytherin is playing Hufflepuff." Harry finally reclaimed his gloves from Ron and re-bandaged his hand.

"Yeah, poor 'Puffs are going to get flattened. Without Diggory as their seeker their team is a little weak." Soon the kitchen was filled with Quidditch talk and taunts between Ron and Orion as to who would win when Slytherin played Gryffindor, the stresses of the year momentarily put aside.
"I thought McGonagall was going to kill her. She thinks Trelawney is barmy and all but she's part of Hogwarts, part of the staff and does her job when Harry's not in class and the toad just...I swear I saw McGonagall's hand tighten on her wand before she went about comforting Trelawney." Ron flopped into a couch in the common room, "I'm just glad Hagrid decided on soft and fluffy for his lesson when Umbridge was doing his 'evaluation' cause if she'd tried to sack him...McGonagall really would have hexed Umbridge."

"If she tried to sack Hagrid I think I would have hexed her myself, consequences be damned." Hermione sat on the floor in front of the fire, surrounded by textbooks and scrolls of parchment. "And I felt so sorry for professor Trelawney. She's not my favorite person and I don't think she ever will be but she's lived her most of her life here, it's all she knows and tossing her out is just plain cruel."

With every passing day Hermione hated Umbridge more and more. Not only did the woman hate creature blooded, she had it in for muggleborns as well. All that she needed was the Death Eater mask and she would be like the female version of Voldemort. Hermione still found it hard to believe that someone like that could have risen to the rank she held within the Ministry. Things needed to change and they needed to change now, it was long past due.

Harry settled in beside her, casting the privacy spell when the twins, Neville, and Ginny arrived and they all formed their little group, "She and her Inquisitorial Squad are doing all they can to make the school a training ground for mindless Ministry drones and anyone who she doesn't like who won't or can't make too big a fuss gets detention for the smallest thing."

He rubbed the back of his hand still covered by the glove. Umbridge had taken to targeting him since the first detention. Dittany was starting to do nothing to help so he'd gotten a salve and a jar of mugwort from Snape to soak his hand in. The salve was for when he visited Remus on Hogsmeade weekends, to keep him from smelling how bad it was getting. Hermione and Ron knew and helped him keep it from the others.

Ron nodded, "Plus the in-house DADA tutoring's been shut down thanks to the squealers," he cast an absolutely evil look over at Romilda Vane, who'd squealed on their tutoring sessions, even though she couldn't see him. "We can still learn from Fred and George in the Chamber but everyone else doesn't have that chance."

Neville chewed on his bottom lip, "We...well we could...nevermind." He looked uncomfortably away as they all swung their eyes to him. He was getting better but he was still shy.

"No please Neville, say what you were thinking." Ginny looked at her boyfriend. She'd discovered that Neville was quietly quite brilliant though he didn't voice his ideas very often in groups. If he had thought of something now, then Ginny bet that it was something good and doable.

She reached for his hand to give him courage and just because she liked feeling his larger hand surrounding hers. She really did love him and now that she knew what love really was she'd realized how childish her crush on Harry had been, it had been part hero worship and part just wanting to be his friend. She had that friendship and a wonderful boyfriend and she couldn't be more pleased.

Neville gave Ginny a smile and squeezed her hand, "Well I was thinking we could use the Room of Requirements and have DADA lessons there for those who really want to learn. T-that way the
whole school benefits. Not just Fred and George will be the oldest years either since I'm pretty sure most of them would jump on the chance to learn from Remus' notes plus a patronus."

Harry blinked then smiled slowly, "That, Neville, is a brilliant idea."

Ron nodded, "Yeah. We'll need to weed out the," another glance at Vane, "undesirables and people who'd squeal though. Some sort of magical contract?"

"That can easily be arranged. We have everyone sign a list if they want to join, you know how easy it is to attach spells to your name. If they turn on the group or go tell something not very pleasant will happen. Besides we can charm the parchment they sign to recognize if they mean it or not, that they really want to learn. If the parchment protests then they can't join." Hermione was already going over how to spell parchment and members in her head, grabbing her notebook to scribble down some ideas. "Oh and Harry's right Neville, it's a brilliant idea."

Ginny smiled proudly at her boyfriend, squeezing his hand and rubbing her thumb over his knuckles. "Pure genius." She leaned in and whispered in his ear.

Fred chuckled as Neville blushed and snuggled his chin on George's shoulder, "He's redder than a Weasley."

Harry leaned over Hermione's shoulder, "Make sure the top of the list warns them about what happens if they sign and then squeal. They have to know what they're getting into."

"Absolutely, I wasn't about to trick anyone or let them join unknowing of the consequences." Hermione replied as she continued to scribble furiously in her notebook, bottom lip getting caught between her teeth once more as she concentrated.

"Forge and I have some pretty good suggestions what might happen to the unfortunate souls who squeals." George said with an evil grin as he ran his fingers through Fred's hair soothingly as his twin rested his chin on his shoulder. He loved touching Fred, even casually, it gave him comfort and a sense of calm that nothing else could.

Ron snickered, "Of course you do. Okay well to meet up at first and sign the sheet, how about the Hog's Head? Third years and up can bring the younger years in later. I can't see old Aberforth letting Umbridge or You Know Who poke their noses in there."

Harry nodded, "How do we arrange meetings though. Whispering it around has too much chance of being caught."

"We'll leave that up to you mate." George grinned. "You're the one with the famous name, if you call people will come flocking. You'll think of something, thankfully you're not as stupid as you look." He yelped loudly at the cutting stinging hex that hit him at those words and he looked up to meet Hermione's glaring ones.

Harry coughed, hiding his amusement, "I meant how do we arrange meetings after the initial sign up. I've already got an idea for how to get people together for the first one. How do we let people know when we're meeting for the lessons? Passing notes is too dangerous, we can't use owls, Hedwig's missing feathers are coming back in by the way."

He was still absolutely infuriated that not only was Umbridge trying to intercept the mail but she'd pulled out several of Hedwig's feathers when his familiar kept her from one of his business letters to Gringotts. "We'll already know where we're meeting for the lessons but when will have to change to avoid Umbridge finding us all."
"I've got an idea about that as well...Actually Malfoy is the inspiration. Just let me think it through a little more and do some calculations if it's really going to work before I share it." Hermione bit her lip harder. "Let's concentrate on the first meeting to begin with and how to get people to know what we're up to and that we're having sign ups."

She reached up and twisted her hair into a messy bun, fastening it with a spare quill so that it wasn't hanging in her eyes as she wrote in her notebook and pondered just what sort of spell to use to make what she thought about a reality. This was her element and Merlin help her, she loved it.

Harry smiled and explained his plan to arrange for the first meeting in the Hog's Head with everyone while his girl worked things out.

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Snuffles stepped contentedly alongside Remus as the werewolf walked from shop to shop picking things up for the kids' next visit. Harry had mentioned a meeting in the Hog's Head that had Moony in a bit of a flurry, knowing just how rancid Aberforth's cooking was. He wanted the kids to have real food instead of inn fare. Snuffles nosed Remus' elbow in affection, happy to be out with him especially as it tended to make the people who might be trying to mess with Moony take a step back from it but then a Grim the size of a pony could do that.

Remus was making smalltalk to the Grim trotting next to him, causing a few people look at him strange but he didn't care. People stared regardless. "What do you think about pasta Snuffles? I mean they don't get that very often at school unless they ask the elves for it especially." He hummed gently and reached out to scratch Snuffles behind the ear.

The dog gave an eager yip, tail wagging in double time. He loved spaghetti, made a mess of himself with it but loved it. He came to an abrupt stop when they went past the Hog's Head Inn and a tall, blond, ruggedly handsome, very well muscled man who smelled strongly of wolf and the wild stepped out, sniffed the air then turned with a surprised, charming smile.

"Remus Lupin. Now this is a surprise. I wasn't aware you were also in Hogsmeade."

Sirius felt his hackles raise at the voice, smooth as aged whiskey it annoyed him, almost as much as the too familiar glint in the unknown man's eyes.

Remus' eyes lit up with pleasant surprise. "I think I'm the one who should be surprised. Hogsmeade seems a little out of your way Aleksander." He smiled at the other wolf while tilting his head back slightly baring his throat for a second. Aleksander was very much an alpha and Remus wasn't about to accidentally challenge him.

Aleksander held out a hand to shake, "Please, call me Alek. Perhaps you would let me treat you and your furry friend to lunch while I tell you what brings me here? The innkeeper is most tolerant."

Sirius ground his teeth at the look in the pale gold eyes and heard the underlying interest. Alpha or not this bastard was hitting on his Moony. He made a snort and moved very deliberately between Remus and the other werewolf, glaring up at him.

The alpha werewolf looked down and his lips twitched in amusement at the Grim's possessive display, far more amused than threatened at the moment.

Remus looked at Sirius, standing between him and the other wolf. Usually Snuffles was very friendly, Remus couldn't quite understand what prompted this behavior. "Lunch sounds nice, it's
been a long time, we should catch up. I live here though so if you want I can make something."

"Never let it be said I refused your cooking," Aleksander's voice was ripe with pleasure, a Scottish burr making itself known, "I don't get such wonderful fare out in the woods."

The dog pinned his ears back and made sure to keep himself between Remus and this interloper as they walked on toward the house.

"No, not much cooked meat in the woods, I remember." Remus grew more serious as they reached his and Sirius little house. He lowered the wards and opened the door, letting both Grim and wolf enter before he did. "I'm sorry I can't offer something fancy, will steak and fried potatoes do? And please do sit down." Remus shrugged out of his cloak and brought the groceries into the kitchen.

"More than do." Aleksander moved to the table, and blinked when the Grim made a growl as he was about to sit in the seat to the right of the one that had the strongest scent of Remus.

Sirius knew that Remus would probably nail him to the wall for growling but this bloody man was not sitting in his seat.

The alpha simply moved to the chair on the left of what was Remus' and noted that the dog's hackles lowered just a bit. This was interesting. He'd never met a dog that would so blatantly challenge any werewolf much less an alpha. "You have an interesting companion."

"Hm yes, interesting indeed." Remus furrowed his brow as he watched Sirius. "Seems a little grouchy today though and if he doesn't change his attitude he will be put outside." There was a warning gleam in amber eyes as Remus raised his wand and made the boiled potatoes from last night's supper fly out of the pantry and cut themselves up before landing in a hot pan.

Sirius made a pitiful whine, ears drooping, then shot Aleksander a glare as the alpha werewolf laughed.

"No don't do that. He's looking after you, as a good companion should. I am a stranger who smells of wolf after all." He watched the Grim pad to a vantage point in the kitchen and flop down with a huff, in a good position to throw himself between Remus and himself again.

Remus' eyes softened a little and he bent down to stroke his hand over soft black fur. "He is a good companion, grouchy temper and all." Straightening up he walked to wash his hands before pulling the steaks out of the icebox. "Now Alek, please tell me what brings you out of the woods and into a small wizard village?"

"A month or so ago I received an owl of all things. A snowy, beautiful creature really, asking if I would be willing to be interviewed as a possible headmaster for the werewolf school being built in Wales. Even included ink, quill and parchment for my reply. Day after I sent my reply another owl, this one tiny and a bit hyper, came with a parchment telling me when and where to meet the interviewer." Aleksander lifted a brow, "I don't suppose you might know anything about this?"

Grinning Remus looked at the other wolf. "I'm might know a little something yes." The potatoes finished frying and Remus knew well enough to make the steaks rare. "The white owl was Hedwig and the hyper one was Pig. Did you meet with the interviewer and do you think you'd like being responsible for a school full of cubs? For what it's worth I think you'd make a great Headmaster, the school could use someone like you Alek."

"I've not met with the interviewer just yet. Supposed to this weekend. As for if I'd like the responsibility, well I am here. I've not got a pack of my own, depending on what I learn from the
meeting I might just take the job. I want to be sure this school is an honest thing, not something to corral a bunch of 'animals' to be guinea pigs," the last bit was spoken with a growl.

He'd seen far too many pups taken by Ministry officials and put through experiments that wound up killing them to blindly trust something that seemed such a good deal. He closed his eyes and calmed himself, "What do you know about this school? About the one having it built? There's not much information on it."

Remus was silent for a while before he made a decision and rolled up his shirtsleeves. "Look at me Alek." He showed off his silvermarked arms. "I swear to you on my honor that this school will be nothing like a corral, it's the real deal. A chance for those like us to be themselves and learn in peace without being hounded. The one building the school is my cub in everything but blood and I trust him with my life, I would give my life for him and what he believes in and tries to achieve."

Sirius had to hold back a growl of both anger that Remus had been put through that and jealousy. It hurt that Remus would so easily show those scars to someone he hardly knew but hid them from him, it hurt a lot and had him drooping in his corner.

Alek studied the scars, his eyes going moon bright before nodding, "Then I will go in with an open mind and might just come out with a job. Huh, gainful employment there's something I never thought I'd be given a shot at." He paused then nodded at Remus' arms, "May I ask who?"

"The Ministry of Magic." Remus' voice was flat and emotionless as he rolled his sleeves back down, not comfortable to keep his arms on display. He walked over to the stove and fixed a plate of food before putting it before Alek, he then fixed a plate for himself and a third one that he placed under a stasis charm. He wanted Sirius to have a hot meal too once Alek left. "Please dig in while it's hot."

"Thank you," Alek made a sound of pure bliss as he lifted a bite of steak to his mouth. He might be wolf and live in the woods but he was human too and he had manners so as much as he'd enjoy 'wolfing' the food down, he took his time to savor it. Who knew when he'd get a chance at such good food again?

Sirius got up, still smarting from Remus' ease showing Alek his scars, and sat at Remus' feet. He nuzzled his thigh before sprawling out over his feet, offering comfort the best way he could as Padfoot while Remus ate.

Bending down, Remus scratched and petted Sirius, showing his appreciation at the other's closeness. "Tell me Alek, have you heard of Harry Potter?" He looked up from his plate to meet the other wolf's eyes.

Sirius lifted his head and turned it to lick at Remus' hand, ears sharp to hear the alpha werewolf's answer.

"Of course. Is there anyone connected to the magical world who hasn't?" Alek speared a potato, "It's all hearsay of course and more fickle than the wind. One day he's the savior of us all the next he's our doom," his snort was eloquent in expressing his opinion of that. "He's what, fifteen if my math isn't off? He's a pup, far from a harbinger of doom or an incredible savior. Just a kid. Why do you ask?"

"You're right, he's not a savior and he's not a bringer of doom. He's a human being and he's a better person than either of us will ever be." Remus looked at Alek calmly. "I ask because if you go to the interview that pup is who you will face. That pup is the person who cares enough to try the make the world a better place for creatures like us and if you do or say anything disrespectful or
hurtful to him when you see him then I will take you down...Alpha or not. That boy is family, pack."

Alek froze, scenting the challenge his own wolf growling at it but he was alpha for a reason and the growl wasn't all hostility. It was also approval and not a little attraction. An attraction that had another growl rumbling from under the table.

Sirius' hackles were up, his ears pinned back. He did not like Remus being growled at, especially as that growl held an undertone of sexual interest.

The dog's growl reminded him that while he certainly was an alpha, he was not Remus' alpha and he was in Remus' home, in another wolf's territory and submissive or not he was stepping over a line growling at the other werewolf. Alek calmed himself, though the approval and attraction still lingered.

He'd always been interested in Remus. The man was a strong submissive and very attractive and him being so protective of a pup who he considered his just made him more attractive to Alek and his wolf. No wolf wanted a partner who'd ignore or abandon the pups after all. He nodded, "Understood."

"Good that was all I wanted to make clear." Remus nodded and went to stroke Sirius' pinned back ears soothingly. Remus wasn't an alpha and he wouldn't fight for himself, if it had to do with him he'd roll over and show belly but if it had to do with his family, his cubs or Sirius then he would defend them and fight until his last breath.

"There's more food if you're hungry and there's ice cream if you're in the mood for dessert." Remus pretended he didn't recognize the attraction the other wolf felt. He didn't feel the same, couldn't. He had a mate even though they weren't together now, Sirius would be the only one he'd ever want.

Sirius nuzzled and licked at the hand, stilling his own growl. He really, really didn't like this Alek guy being around his Moony.

Alek's eyes gleamed, "Chocolate ice cream?"

"What else? Of course it's chocolate." Remus flashed a grin. "Fortescue's finest."

"I'd be a fool to refuse then. I'd love some dessert."

Sirius had to wonder how long he'd be in the doghouse if he pissed on Alek's leg.

Having known Padfoot for almost all his life, Remus sent him a warning look, to keep him from doing something stupid as he brought out the ice cream and bowls. He spooned up a generous portion for Alek, wanting to give the wolf a treat since he lived in the woods and ice cream was hard to come by there. He took a bowl for himself and placed a bowl on the floor as well, maybe some chocolate ice cream would improve Padfoot's mood some.

Sirius whined at the look. He hadn't done anything! He was thinking about it but he hadn't done it, there was no need for Remus to give him The Look. He drooped again, just nosing at the ice cream taking a few listless licks. He really didn't feel very hungry anymore.

What was so great about this Alek guy, aside from being an alpha werewolf and gorgeous and buff and not hunted by Aurors and about to be gainfully employed. And there went the last of his appetite. He really came up short in comparison to this blond werewolf.

Aleksander made a happy hum as he spooned up some ice cream, "Mmm thank you."
"You're very welcome, ice cream is never a mistake," Remus smiled at Alek but his eyes were worried as he looked at the drooping Grim. When Sirius declined ice cream something was wrong. Was he not feeling well? He placed a questioning hand on the large, furry body, trying to catch Sirius’ gaze.

He didn't meet Remus' eyes but he gave the hand an affectionate lick. He really hated it when he compared himself to someone else and found himself lacking and boy was he lacking right now. Didn't mean he wasn't going to keep working at keeping Mr. Alpha there away because he was a selfish bastard and wasn't about to just step away from Remus.

Still a little bit worried about Sirius, Remus finished his ice cream as he kept up a conversation with Alek, asking him about how he'd been during the years they hadn't seen each other. He really was interested, Alek had been one of the few wolves that had welcomed Remus when he'd been on his missions back during the first war. He considered the alpha wolf a friend.

Sirius listened, ears occasionally dropping then pricking depending on the subject but when he heard Greyback's name he out and out snarled. He honestly couldn't help it, he loathed that sick fucker.

Alek paused in telling Remus about Greyback's movements and gathering of the ones he'd bitten who were adults now and lifted a brow, "Sounds as if your companion has met Greyback."

"Yes, we've both had the displeasure." Remus held back his growl by force. Along with Umbridge, Greyback was someone he really, truly hated. Not just because he was the one who'd made him into what he was but because he was a twisted, evil son of a bitch who should have been made into a rug years ago.

"I knew you had, you had the scent of one of his children back when we first met. It's changed now," Alek sniffed the air testingly, "You've defined yourself another way and it all but erased his scent. You should be careful though. He's doing all he can to snatch the grown ones he once bit. Having a little trouble with it as many of them have joined peaceful packs with alphas who more than stand toe to toe with him but he's managed to get a few."

A challenging growl rumbled low in Sirius' chest. He dared that bastard to show up here, he'd rip him to shreds.

"I'd never go with him." Remus set his jaw stubbornly, he'd rather die than be a part of Greyback's pack, the mere thought of it made him feel sick. "Why is he snatching back the adults? Once bitten and left Greyback's never had much of an interest before."

Remus had to admit that the news worried him. Greyback was unstable on the best of days and for him to gather a larger pack meant that something was up and it wasn't likely to be a good thing.

"I'm not sure but there are whispers that he's thrown his lot in with the Dark Lord and is trying to build up a small army." Alek swirled his spoon in melted ice cream, "Come the end of summer it looks like he'll start snatching the younger ones, the teenagers and pre-teens. The school your pup's come up with will be a big target."

Remus couldn't stop the growl that rose from his throat. He couldn't help thinking about Orion, he was only half wolf but Greyback had never been particular in his choices. "Then he'll just have to be stopped won't he? If the free packs stood together against him then he wouldn't stand a chance. That bloody bastard should be gutted and the sooner it happens the better."

"Agreed but the free packs just want to stay out of it. None of them want to be involved in the war
that's building and all of them know it's coming. Why the British Minister is keeping his head up
his arse is beyond me. Even the goblins are gearing up for the impact a war will have."

Sirius made a snort at the mention of Fudge. The man never took his head out of his arse, it was
permanently lodged there.

Alek looked down at the dog, a suspicion poking its head out, then lifted his gaze to Remus again,
"That's another reason I accepted the interview. Someone has to keep the pups who aren't in packs
safe."

"You're absolutely right about that and I know you'd do a fantastic job at it. With you there the
pups would be as safe as they can be." Remus was honest, Alek was strong and loyal and if he was
responsible for someone he'd do his best to look out for them and keep them safe. He really hoped
that Alek and Harry would get along, the school would benefit from having Alek there. "And don't
even ask me about the Minister, I don't have any faith in the entire Ministry."

"Some of the Aurors aren't too bad and there's a woman in the DMLE who's been cracking down
hard on unsanctioned wolf hunts so I've still got hope for the world." Alek stood, "I'd best get
going though. My interview is early in the morning and I want to get plenty of sleep."

Remus' lips twitched. "I promise that Harry doesn't bite, but it's good that you want to be rested."
He got up as well and held his hand out for the other. "It was great catching up and if you do take
the Headmaster job then we have to get together again, not let years go by until the next chance
meeting."

Sirius managed to keep in his growl though his ears went back again as Alek smiled warmly.

"Absolutely. I'll be looking forward to it. Take good care of yourself Remus." The blond werewolf
left, whistling brightly as he walked down the cold stone path and looked up at the sky. It would
snow soon.

Sirius stood and shook out his fur. Good riddance.

"What kind of bug bit your bum today Pads?" Remus asked as he brought the dirty dishes to the
sink and filled it with foaming water before setting the cleaning charm, feeling to lazy to do the
dishes by hand. "Is there something troubling you?"

The dog shifted back into man and sat down in his chair, shrugging, "I just don't like him. He was
too...smiley."

A brow lifted. "Too smiley? What are you talking about? Alek was perfectly pleasant and nice.
You were the one who was all growly. Besides it's not as if you'll have to spend a lot of time with
him, he was just here for lunch." Speaking of, Remus lifted the stasis charm and placed the plate in
front of Sirius. "Now eat, before I get really worried about you."

"Yes Dad," he nibbled at the food. Still not possessed of much of an appetite but he didn't want to
make Remus worry, not when Remus already had so much he was worrying about.

"So was the blond one of the guys you suggested Harry contact about the Headmaster position?"
He asked mainly to keep things even and show he wasn't a giant, petulant child who'd had his lolly
given away to a prettier brother, even if he felt like one.

"Dad? Well that opens a whole jar of incestuous worms all of a sudden." Remus smirked and sat
down next to Sirius, running his fingers through silky black hair, he really did love Sirius' hair,
always had. "And yes, Aleksander was one of the guys I suggested. He's a good person and a
strong wolf, he'd be an asset to the school."

"Not arguing that." Sirius leaned into the touch even as he felt a pang knowing he didn't deserve it. "I just don't like him," he shrugged, "can't really finger why." That was a blatant lie. He knew why but he didn't want to say it since he rather thought it would mess up what he had with Remus right now, throwing them several steps back.

"Meh," Remus shrugged. "Sometimes you dislike someone on sight, even if you've never met them before. It's not a big deal and you don't have to like him, I don't think anyone will ask that of you."

Remus stayed seated next to Sirius as he ate. "So...Spaghetti when the kids are coming, meatballs or meat sauce?"

"Hmm hard decision there but this time I vote for the sauce." He kept picking his way through his meal little by little as he and Remus talked about the meal plan for the kids.

"Really Siri, what's bothering you? You're making me worry." Remus was frowning now as he looked as Sirius. How could he help if Sirius wasn't talking to him. "Did something happen that I just don't get? Did Alek say or do something to you that I missed?"

He shook his head, "No. It's nothing Moony, just a stupid little thing is all."

"Tell me, even if it's stupid it's obviously bothering you and I want to help." Remus scratched at Sirius' scalp, much like he did when Sirius was in canine form.

He groaned, "That's playing dirty. I don't want to tell you cause...well...damn it I'm scared it'll piss you off or just plain upset you and take us all the way back to square one."

"Sirius...You can tell me anything. We're at least that good friends aren't we? If something is bothering you then of course I want to make it better. I can't promise not to get upset before I know what it is but it won't end our friendship or set us back, I think we've gotten too far for that." Remus was starting to look really worried and his stomach knotted.

Sirius looked down at his plate, poking his food around and muttered, "I was jealous."

Remus stilled with his fingers still tangled in Sirius' hair as he thought about how to respond. Finally he decided on going with the truth, he owed that to Sirius, he had been truthful with Remus after all. "There's really no reason for you to be jealous Sirius. A wolf mates for life."

He looked up into Remus' eyes, he'd always known that, "Yeah but you've got a lousy mate. I'm quick-tempered, judgmental, petty, hunted by Aurors everywhere, not really much to look at after Azkaban, and can't be trusted."

That much had been made blatantly, painfully clear when Remus had shown Alek his scars, scars he kept hidden from him. "You deserve so much better and no matter what I know about you not taking another I can't help but be jealous when I see someone like Mr. Alpha who'd be so much better for you but I also know that if you could drop me and choose someone else that I'd fight tooth and nail to keep it from happening. You deserve so much better than me Moony but Merlin help us I love you too much to ever let you go."

"We're mated and I'm a submissive but that doesn't mean that I don't have my free will. I chose you Sirius...I will always choose you. You are beautiful so don't say otherwise. You were thoughtless but the point of that statement is were. Since you returned to me, you have been nothing but wonderful. Don't you see? I'm the one who doesn't measure up...I know you put up with my wolf scars but I'm...I'm marked in a different way now, ugly. I don't want you to be trapped with what
I've become. I would fight for you too Sirius, I will always love you, always have."

Sirius made a sound of frustrated affection, "You never did get that did you? Remus I never just 'put up' with your scars. I cherished and adored each and every one. Every scar on your body is a testament to your strength and in my eyes is a badge of honor."

He looked into Remus' eyes, his entire heart in his own, "Each one speaks of how much you've come through to be here, alive and still the incredible, humongous heart I always loved about you. There is not a single mark on you, then or now, that I could ever see as anything but beautiful."

Remus couldn't believe that, every new scar, those he kept hidden from Sirius were marks of shame. Marks of how weak he'd allowed himself to be. Still he did the only thing he could think of, the only thing he wanted to do and pressed his lips against Sirius. Suddenly it was all clear to him, it didn't matter what had happened in the past. The two of them had lost too much time as it was and Remus didn't want to lose another second.

It was a shock and surprise but Sirius excelled in taking chances and holding on to them with both hands and he did much the same now. His hands went to burrow into Remus' hair as he returned the kiss, the familiar yet unknown taste and feel of his beloved's lips on his, so long missed and gone without, was heaven. He made a sound of welcome, the old tingling rush sweeping through him, something he'd once thought he was too broken to feel again.

His lips tingled and his whole body caught on fire. Remus wasn't even aware of the needy sound he made as he angled his head so he could deepen the kiss. After all these years, Sirius' lips still fit perfectly against his. His arms went around Sirius' shoulders and he held on for dear life. He pulled away just far enough so that he could whisper against Sirius' lips. "I love you, love you so much." Before he dove back in, doing his best to get familiar with Sirius' taste once more.

Sirius opened his mouth in welcome, meeting Remus' tongue with his, groaning in hungry approval. So many nights dreaming of this and none of those dreams compared. Here was home, love, everything. His hands slipped down to Remus' neck, gently tracing the scars there with through adoration. He pulled back from the dance of their tongues to press gentle, loving kisses over the scars on Remus' face. "Love you Remus, I love you more than words could ever say." He continued to kiss his love's scars, to shower them with affection and worship.

Remus closed his eyes as years of longing and love rose in him. He felt too much, love for Sirius leaking even through the smallest pore and he couldn't hold back the hot tears that welled up in his eyes. No one had ever touched him like this except for Sirius, Remus had never wanted anyone to. He buried his face in Sirius' neck as he clung to the other man, holding on for dear life as if afraid that someone would take him away again. He didn't mean to cry but he couldn't help himself.

The other man rocked him, tears welling in his own eyes as his emotions rioted around inside him. He'd feared having lost this with Remus so much, being relegated to friendship alone, that the relief was nearly overwhelming. He stroked his hand over his love's hair, "I'm here Remus, not going anywhere without you there."

"I've missed you so much, missed this." Remus' voice was smothered against Sirius' skin since he refused to let go. Right now it felt as if he'd never be able to let go of Sirius again, feeling his warmth and hearing his heartbeat felt like coming home. Touching him felt exhilarating and safe at the same time and Remus couldn't get enough. He was starved when it came to Sirius.

"I know baby," Sirius pressed a kiss to Remus' hair since he couldn't reach skin, "I know. I missed you too. Even when I was being a stupid arse I missed you, missed this." He tangled the fingers of one hand in the graying brown hair the the other hand pet and stroked wherever he could reach,
reveling in being able to touch his Moony the way he'd been wanting to for an eternity.

"I missed coming home and smelling the tea you always kept brewing, missed sneaking under that
gods awful tattered blue blanket with you to hold each other, missed tackling you after you walk
out of a shower and getting scolded before you kissed and tackled back, missed waking up and
seeing the morning sun creep over your face and then you making that funny noise before burying
your head under the pillow and asking me to turn off the sun. I missed everything about you even
the lectures and The Look."

Sirius' words only made Remus cry harder because he felt exactly the same way. He'd missed all
the small things so much that it was nearly crippling. Like Sirius always stealing his socks and the
way they'd always shared the last biscuit of the pack and the way Sirius' hair smelt like fresh spring
rain and cloves as Remus buried his nose into it before falling asleep at night. He'd missed
everything about Sirius, even the short temper and the arrogance.

"Never," He choked out and pressed his lips against Sirius' pale throat. "I never want to be apart
from you again. I don't want to be alone." Feeling Sirius' skin under his lips, warm and alive and
there made his heart pound and his breath catch in his throat.

"You won't be if I can help it." He'd seen too much death to assure Remus he'd never leave but he'd
never again leave of his own free will. "You're stuck with me Remus, thick, thin, sickness, health,
happy, sad, angry from now until the end of forever."

"I wouldn't want it any other way and it goes both ways. You're stuck with me as well...My
beautiful mate." Remus ran his fingertips over Sirius' jawline and cheekbones before raking them
through Sirius' hair, once again scratching lightly at his scalp as he continued to press kisses to
Sirius' neck and collarbone.

"You need your eyes checked but if you want to believe I'm beautiful who am I to complain,"
Sirius made a sensual hum at the gentle scrap of nails on his scalp. He turned his head to kiss the
inside of Remus' wrist, eyes connecting with Moony's, almost glowing in love. His wandering hand
slipped between them to trace fingertips over the beautiful curve of Remus' lips.

"My sight is perfect, wolf vision remember? I know beauty when I see it." It didn't matter that
years and troubles had marked both of them. Sirius would always be the most beautiful creature
Remus had ever seen, it was something that would never change. He opened his mouth more and
nipped gently at the fingers who traced his lips, barely biting down at the soft pads of Sirius'
fingertips.

Sirius shivered. He'd always had a bit of a thing for Remus' teeth. He took his hand from his lover's
mouth and leaned in to catch them in a soft, sweet loving kiss, once more measuring and
memorizing the texture and taste of the mouth beneath his. He scraped his bottom teeth over
Remus' lower lip before taking it between them and sucking on it.

Trembling all over in longing and delight, Remus surrendered to the kiss and allowed himself to
simply feel and rejoice that Sirius was there with him, his lips against his own. He flicked his
tongue out and ran it over Sirius' top lip, tasting him and feeling the thrilling hint of stubble against
his own sensitive skin. Carefully he caught Sirius' tongue and sucked it, his fingers cupping the
back of Sirius' neck to hold him close.

The small distance between them created by sitting in the kitchen chairs became just too much for
Sirius and he moved his hands to haul Remus out of the chair and into his lap, holding him as close
as they could get without being naked. One hand wiggled under the sweater Remus wore until it
could stroke over his back.
He could feel the difference in velvety untouched skin and the smooth almost polished feeling of scars. He could even tell the difference between scars inflicted during a full moon without Wolfsbane and the scars inflicted by silver instruments. He caressed every inch he could reach with affection and angled his head to better play his tongue against Remus'.

Sirius' fingers against his skin made him tingle and it warmed him from the inside out. Thawing the piece of his heart that had been frozen for over fourteen years. His whole being ached for Sirius and if he's been able to crawl inside his beloved then he would have, never to leave again.

He pressed against Sirius, chest against chest, thigh against thigh and crotch against crotch, as close as he could get as he kept on kissing and kissing and kissing. Kissing Sirius was more important that air, he couldn't get enough. A low long moan escaped him and he arched into Sirius' touch at a particular scratch at his back. He pressed his palms against Sirius' chest, feeling clothed nipples beneath his hands before scrambling to get underneath Sirius' clothes, feeling skin against skin.

Sirius made a soft, soothing sound and worked Remus' sweater up over his head, breaking the kiss for the barest instant before diving back in. His hand stroked down Remus' shoulders and arms and he chuckled into his mouth when a savage yank on his shirt had seams ripping and buttons popping off to Merlin only knew where. He shrugged his shoulders and helped Moony divest him of his shirt, feeling the edge of shame as his love's fingers ghosted over the runic tattoos that had been forced upon him in Azkaban.

The instant he was free he had every intention to get them removed. He'd never wanted the damned things and the one tattoo he'd ever wanted had never been inked into his skin before he'd been tossed into prison. He shoved those thoughts far away, they had no place here and now. The only thoughts that belonged right now were the ones about Remus and how good his touch felt.

Remus traced the additions to Sirius' skin, familiarizing himself them and with the smooth, warm skin underneath his fingers. He'd never forgotten what it felt like touching Sirius but doing it in reality was a hundreds time better than any memory, any daydream or fantasy. He finally managed to wrench his mouth away from Sirius' only to fasten it on his neck, his shoulders, his chest. Tasting and nibbling any expanse of flesh he could reach. Goose bumps rose on his skin in the wake of of Sirius' fingers and his eyes grew dark and hungry when he felt the hard ridge poking his backside as he ground down on Sirius' lap.

Sirius teased and stroked his fingers around to the front of Remus' chest and made a hungry growling sound as he mapped out the wide, muscled pectorals normally hidden under patched and baggy clothes.

"You are so insanely hot," he scraped his nails lightly over his Moony's ribs, "I don't know whether to hit my knees and sing hallelujah or just find the nearest flat surface to worship every centimeter of you." His lips curved up and he bumped Remus' head back so he could do some nibbling on a neck himself, "Or better yet a mix of the two."

"B-brilliant ideas all of them...At least in my ears." Remus groaned out as flashes of Sirius on his knees in front of him or of himself spread out and wanting played out in his mind. Making him hot and aching. Sirius' teeth on his neck also drove him crazy. Both the wolf and the man had a serious kink about being bitten, claimed and in a way dominated.

His pulse beat rapidly underneath Sirius' lips and once more his fingers found their way into Sirius' hair where he pulled on it slightly as he rocked harder against the hardness underneath him. His own erection poking Sirius in the stomach with every movement of his hips.

He licked at Remus' pulse, sucking and nipping on the skin, the stubble of Remus' shave rasping
against his lips and tongue. He bit down, just shy of drawing blood and licked over the mark created. "Mark them all down on my to do list but to start off," in a swift motion he turned them round and had Remus sitting in his chair as he fell to his knees between Remus' and looked up.

The flush over those cheeks and heat in the amber eyes had his cock sitting up and begging inside his trousers but he just smiled and ran his hands down his lover's abdomen before unfastening the rough wool trousers, "How about I hit my knees and worship you and you sing hallelujah?" He pulled Remus' cock out and licked around the crown before taking it into his mouth.

"Oh fuck!" Remus almost arched off the chair at the sensation of Sirius' mouth on him. "I'll sing anything you want me to as long as you don't stop." He had to force himself to keep still and not thrust up into that tight, wet heat and choke his lover. He couldn't take his eyes off of Sirius, the red swollen ring of his lips around his prick and how gorgeous he looked with his cheeks hollowed out as he sucked.

"Oh Sirius...The things you do to me." He petted Sirius' hair with one hand and held on to the chair for dear life with the other as pleasure and love rose inside him like a tidal wave. He caught Sirius' gaze and tried to convey all his love, admiration and adoration for the other with a single look.

Sirius kept his eyes on Remus' as he took more and more of him into his mouth with each bob of his head. It had been so long, relearning how to deep throat your lover was a bitch but gods it was worth it to see his careful, controlled Remus slowly losing his mind. He could taste the salty bitterness of precome as it dripped onto his tongue and if he could have, he'd have smiled but instead he just applied himself to taking all of Remus' cock in. Little by little he took more of the shaft into his mouth until his nose was buried in the coarse curls of brown and gray pubic hair and he was swallowing around it.

"Gods!" It came out almost as a shriek and his thighs trembled with the effort to hold himself back, to not thrust, take and ravish. "Feels so good, so wonderful, love you so much." Remus wasn't even aware that he was babbling, it felt as if his brain had been disconnected and all there was, was the pleasure, the hot mouth on his cock, sucking and swallowing around him, driving him crazy.

Remus knew he wouldn't be able to hold out much longer. It was the first time in long over a decade that someone other than himself touched his cock, much less had his mouth on it. He wanted to last longer, draw out the moment and the pleasure but there was no way he'd be able too, he could already feel the liquid fire pooling low in his stomach and the tingles along his spine. "Sirius, love...I'm about to...to come...please." He didn't even know what he was begging for.

Sirius shivered at the husky voice of his mate and the wild, sexy look on his face. "Mmm-hmm," he hummed around Remus' cock, backing off just a bit and stroking the part of the shaft that wasn't in his mouth as he licked and laved and sucked at the tip. Remus looked so fucking beautiful like this, on the edge of orgasm, that he felt his own orgasm approaching fast. Just the sight, sound, taste of his Moony after so long was going to toss him over the edge.

Every nerve ending in his body was on fire, screaming at Remus to let go and he couldn't refuse. Reaching out and petting Sirius, his hair, his cheeks, running his fingers around the stretched lips and still looking at him, Remus arched off the chair and climaxed. His body trembling and his breath ragged with a hoarse shout of Sirius' name spilling from his lips as he painted Sirius' throat and tongue with his tongue.

He felt absolutely wrecked, deliciously so as he spasmed in aftershocks and his pulse was thundering in his ears and still, still he could not take his eyes off of Sirius. The man enchanted him, entrapped him and he never, ever wanted to be released.
Sirius gave a long, low moan as Remus' come filled his mouth and he swallowed it down and shuddered, feeling himself spill inside his trousers as soon as it hit his tongue. He lapped at the head of Remus' cock as it softened, cleaning him as well as he could then pressed a kiss just below his love's navel, still shaking as his system jolted in the throes of his own climax. He rested his cheek on Remus' thigh and breathed deep and slow to get his head to stop spinning.

Strangely even after the powerful, mind blowing orgasm he'd just had, that simple kiss to his lower stomach absolutely melted him inside. Making him choke back a sob of pure love for the other. Remus petted Sirius' hair with a shaking hand and bent almost double so that he'd be able to press a kiss to a high, sculpted cheekbone.

"Thank you, that was incredible...I love you so much. C-can I do anything to return the favor?" Remus was still feeling out of breath but the thought of touching or tasting Sirius was a tempting one none the less.

The other man gave a breathless laugh and reached up to cup Remus' cheek, "I'll have to take a rain check on that love. See I've made a bit of a mess of the inside of my trousers and it is quite wonderfully your fault." His eyes gleamed with soul deep love and sensual innuendo, "You've always been almost painfully gorgeous when you come."

Even though he was still flushed from coming, Remus could feel his cheeks heat at that. "The gorgeous one is you, you still take my breath away just by being you." The thought that Sirius had come in his trousers was exceedingly hot and if he hadn't been so sated, Remus would have twitched with interest. "You're so hot."

"Are we gonna argue about who's sexier?" He managed to get his body under control again and leaned up to give Remus a short, loving kiss, "I think we used to have a lot of those, usually ended in a bed or the shower." He nuzzled Remus' jaw, "I love you Remus, always have, forever will."

"I love you too, with everything that I am." Remus leaned his forehead against Sirius, one hand cupping his cheek. "Speaking of showers, I think we could need one...I'll wash your back."

The corner of his mouth kicked up in a both teasing and alluring smile. He wanted to shower with Sirius and then he wanted to curl up naked in the same bed as him and just hold him, reveling in the fact that he was allowed to do so, that Sirius was there and that wonders of all wonders he still loved and wanted Remus too. Remus was forever humbled and grateful for that fact.

"Hm, sounds good," Sirius got to his, slightly wobbly, feet and looped an arm around Remus' waist, "I'll wash your front." He stole a quick kiss. "Then your back just to be fair." He tugged Remus with him toward the shower. "Then we'll have a nap and I'll find out if you still need to have your feet sandwiched between my ankles to keep them from freezing off."

"Hey a wolf gets cold and you were always like a living furnace." For once Remus' smile was completely open, a little boyish and a lot wicked. He was glad that Sirius had an arm around his waist though because he wasn't sure he'd be able to walk otherwise, his legs still felt as if they were filled with jelly. "Let's get naked, wet and clean first though."

"I'm wrung out or I'd say let's get naked, wet and dirty." He kissed Remus' jaw, "Ah well there's always tomorrow, after the sprogs are forced to leave."

"Oh yes, the children are coming...Think they'll notice?" Supporting each other they managed to get up the narrow stairs to the upper floor where the bathroom with the shower was. Remus turned the old knobs making the water run before his hands went to their trousers.
"I'm fairly certain Orion will unless you want to hide it." He helped Remus peel their trousers and pants off, stepping out of his with a grimace at the now cool come that had smeared down his leg from his groin. He hoped Remus didn't want to hide it. He had his Moony back and didn't want to hide but if that was what Remus wanted...

"No! I don't want to hide it, absolutely not." Remus looked shocked as he balanced on one foot to shimmy off his striped socks. "I just thought it would be fun to see if they noticed before we told them, you know that I won't be able to keep my hands off of you." Once they were both naked Remus pulled Sirius with him into the narrow shower stall, hissing slightly when the hot water beat down on them.

"I won't either you know," Sirius made a pleased sigh and leaned his head back to let the water sluice over his face for a moment before looking back to Remus, "Now that I can touch I'll be all over you like your own personal leech unless you whack me with the newspaper."

"I don't think there will be any newspaper whacking, personal leeching sounds really lovely at the moment actually." Remus smiled and lathered his hands with the ginger and citrus smelling soap before running his hands all over Sirius' torso, front and back, cleaning him gently.

Sirius let his eyes fall half shut with a sound of enjoyment, "Well I guess I'll just be your little lover sucker then." He snorted a laugh, "Oh Merlin that was bad even for me."

"It really was." Remus was shaking with laughter though as he continued to soap Sirius up. "And there's nothing little about you." Remus' eyebrows waggled as he reached down to soap up the not so little thing he was speaking about.

Sirius' lips twitched as his body tried to stir enough to show interest then he sighed at the vain effort, "Ah the trials of being thirty six, longer refractory period." He gave Remus a peck on the lips before grabbing a washcloth as well and starting to wash Remus clean.

Remus just smiled and continued washing his beloved. He knew exactly what Sirius was talking about, his body was still too sated to get aroused just yet even though he was running his hands over Sirius' slick, warm skin. This was nice too though, being together and touching each other without the burning edge of desire. Now he could touch just because he wanted to touch, without wanting it to lead to more. He leaned in and kissed Sirius' tattoos, showing that he loved and treasured even these parts of his mate's body.

Sirius leaned his head on Remus' at the tender touch of those lips. The tattoos gave him an understanding of how Remus felt about his scars but unlike him Remus couldn't get shed of his scars. It made him wonder if his plan to get them removed was really all that wise or important. After all it wasn't as if he could erase Azkaban completely. Even if he got rid of the tattoos the mark of the prison would still be on him, simply invisible. He stroked the wash cloth over Remus' back, feeling the scars there again. Perhaps he'd keep them but if he did he'd add another, one he'd wanted on his body long before Azkaban, one that would forever mark him as Remus'.

It was gentle and easy and Remus was surprised. It should have been awkward and uncomfortable to stand naked in front of Sirius, showing off a body that was almost twenty years older and a lot more worn than the one Sirius had known but it wasn't. All he saw in Sirius' eyes was love and that was all he felt too. In his eyes Sirius could be nothing but perfect.

He hurried to grab the shampoo bottle and lather up Sirius' hair, knowing that they wouldn't have many minutes of hot water left. This little house on the edge of Hogsmeade was far from modern or very comfortable but together Sirius and Remus had managed to make it into a home anyway. That didn't mean that he didn't miss his cottage at times though, especially the large garden and
surrounding woods.

Sirius smiled and bent to the attention letting Remus lather his hair before he leaned back again the rinse out the soap. Then he did the same for Remus, scrubbing gently over his scalp, working the lather through the silver shot hair and pressing a kiss to the hollow of his throat before washing away the suds. "Christmas is coming up soon you know Moony."

"Mmm yes, I'm aware of that. Any special reason you're bringing it up?" Remus was almost going boneless with bliss at Sirius attention to his hair. Something about his mate grooming him had the wolf inside him ecstatic and if a wolf could purr then that was what Moony would be doing. The water turned lukewarm, letting them know it was time to wrap the shower up rather soon.

Sirius made sure they were both clean of soap and grunge then leaned to turn the water off. He reached outside the shower stall, remembering Remus' issues with getting out wet and dripping on the floor, and grabbed two big, fluffy towels. Then he set himself to drying Remus off from head to toe, "I'm just wondering if you want to take Molly and Arthur up on their offer to stay at the Burrow for the break as that's where Harry will be this year."

"Yeah, I think that would be nice, getting to spend Christmas with both our cubs." Remus nodded and set about mirroring Sirius and drying his mate off, using the towel to gently caress and rub Sirius' shower flushed and rosy skin. It was a little bit awkward to try and dry them both off inside the small stall but where there was a will there was a way.

Once they were both dry, Sirius using a charm on his hair as it took forever to dry on its own, he pulled Remus into the bedroom, "Naked or sleep trousers?"

"Naked." The answer came without hesitation. "I want to feel you against me as much as I can." He practically pushed Sirius into the bed and crawled in after him, curling himself around the other man and quickly sticking his feet in between Sirius' ankles, rubbing his cold toes against the other's calves. Reaching for his wand he charmed the curtains closed, leaving the room in pleasant half darkness as he pillowed his head on Sirius' shoulder, his hand caressing Sirius' side as he sighed in contentment.

Sirius wrapped himself around his beloved, grateful and relieved to be here in this exact moment. He pulled the blanket tighter around them and kissed Remus' temple. "I'm looking forward to the Hols, time with you and the cubs away from Hogwarts."

"Mmm, me too...away from the Bee and the devil woman. Away where we can keep them safe." Remus' voice was low and slow as he replied, already feeling his eyelids drooping as well as feeling warm and safe and wonderful. Things he hadn't felt in years and years.

The other man smiled and nuzzled at Remus' slightly damp hair, "Sleep now love. We'll talk more after our nap."

"M'kay." Remus agreed and pressed a lazy, tired kiss to Sirius' chest as he drifted off, still wrapped closely around his mate, still feeling like he never wanted to let go.

Sirius closed his eyes and followed, content and happy down to his soul for the first time in ages.
Ron raised his finger to his mouth in a hissing shush as Fred and George barreled into the library. He cut off their questions by pointing to Harry, who was fast asleep sprawled out on his stomach on one of the couches, hand in a jar of mugwort potion. Earlier today had been the first Quidditch game of the season against Ravenclaw and it had been a vicious one that had left Harry drained.

Tired and hungry he'd snapped at Umbridge when she'd tried to waylay him from lunch and earned a detention that, on top of the game, made him too exhausted to do much more than stagger into the library and pass out. Hermione had nearly been spitting red hot tacks. He whispered lowly, "If the two of you wake him so help me I will tell Mum about what you wrote to Malfoy over the summer understood? He's barely been getting any sleep as it is lately."

"Oi, no need to spit fire at us baby brother, we didn't know he was sleeping in here, now did we? We've no intention of waking him up." George looked from Ron to Harry and back again, feeling angry and protective on Harry's behalf. "Absolutely no reason to threaten with Mum."

Fred caressed the back of George's neck and murmured, "What do you mean he's not been sleeping?"

Ron rolled his shoulders, "Nightmares again. He's been having them ever since the lesson with the Thestrals."

"Think it's about Krum and the cemetry or is it something else?" George looked concerned even as Fred's touch instantly soothed him. He hated the thought of Harry being plagued with nightmares. With everything going on he really did need his sleep.

"At least some of them yeah but not all. He's getting small flashes of the visions he did before he learned Occlumency. Mione thinks that after a detention with Umbridge he's too worn out to shore his mental defenses up again before going to sleep and that Voldemort is actually pushing the visions to him."

"Harry says it doesn't feel like Riddle knows about the connection but it's all muddled right now and he's just too strung out to really think of a solution." He ran a hand through his hair, "Hermione's gone to get him something to eat when he wakes up. Mum's going to stuff him til he explodes as he's been losing weight again."

George nodded stiffly, knowing his mother would fret and fuss and as Ron said stuff Harry with everything in her kitchen. "I was wondering where lady tigress were, not like her not to hover protectively." He heaved a huge sigh. "I want to crush Umbridge, I wish we could use Orion's beard burning hex on her, she certainly has enough facial hair for it to work."

"Trust me you are not alone in that desire." Ron rubbed at his forehead. They were all going spare trying to figure out a way to take Umbridge down but it all went back to the Ministry. So long as she had Fudge's sanction too many were afraid to come forward against her.

Fred sat down on the floor in front of the fireplace, tugging George down to join him, "At least the Hols are coming up. He'll have two weeks to rest, relax, and think without the pressure."

"Yeah, I hope he'll be allowed to relax with both Mum and Remus fretting over him." George nodded and rubbed the tip of his nose against Fred's shoulder. "For once I can't wait to get out of here, the castle isn't what it used to be." He only wished that their dragon wouldn't have to
disappear into hiding again over the Holidays. It would have been very, very nice to have a chance to meet with Draco outside of school.

"I know what you mean Gred. Only one drawback to not being here, no hope of vanilla filling."

Ron's soft sound of disgust was echoed by the female toned one from the doorway. He looked over and saw Hermione with a plate heaped with Harry's favorite foods, "Mione. You see the terrors are here."

"Mm yes, both see and hear them...unfortunately. With talk like that I don't find it any surprise that Malfoy is still running in the opposite direction from you." Hermione's nose was wrinkled but she was looking past the twins over to where Harry slept to make sure he was still sleeping. He needed all the rest he could possibly get and Hermione was going to make sure he got it.

"Hey I'll have you know we aren't always perverted. More often than not we're actually very decent in our dealings with our dragon." Fred pouted indignantly. They'd crossed a decency line a couple of times but mostly they left the sex out of it, mostly.

"Hm, I know you too well, you can be decent but not for very long." Hermione knew she was acting catty but she couldn't help herself, she was so angry at Umbridge and the Ministry and so, so worried about Harry.

George rolled his eyes but wisely kept his mouth shut, knowing that anything said would only set Hermione off more when she was in this mood.

Ron reached out and tugged on the end of Hermione's scarf. Not saying anything, just letting her know he was worried too. "You and your parents going to come by for Christma-" he broke off suddenly as Harry made a sound somewhere between a sob and a scream of denial and started thrashing.

Hermione thrust the plate in Ron's hand and rushed over to the couch Harry lay on where she hit her knees and petted his hair, stroking his temples gently. She shushed him soothingly, keeping her hands on him in hope that he would know that she was there.

Ron set the plate down on the desk and went over to shake Harry's shoulder hard. He knew from experience that if Harry wasn't shaken out of it this could go on for hours, "Harry wake up!"

Wild green eyes shot open and Harry gasped like a diver surfacing for air, a hand instantly shooting out to grasp Hermione's, anchoring himself in the reality of the here and now and not the end of the previous year. He slumped and flopped onto his side, "Shite."

Hermione squeezed his hand and her other one cupped Harry's cheek before running down his neck. She was still on his knees in front of him, doing her best to offer him comfort. "It's okay Harry." She didn't know if it was okay but he hoped it would be. "I'm so sorry you have these dreams."

He squeezed back and gave her a weary, reassuring smile, "I know. I'll be alright though, soon as I can get a break." He brought her hand to his face to rub his cheek against it, soaking in the comfort. "At least enough of one that I can properly meditate before sleeping anyway."

Ron poked him in the shoulder, "Just a few more days then mate. Then we'll be on the Express and spending the Christmas holiday at home for once."

"Thank Merlin for large favors."
"Well do our best to keep Mum off your back as much as we can." George promised. Their mother was the most loving woman they'd met but she could be rather intense in her quest to mother her young and make sure they were safe, well and well fed.

"Mum and Dad are bringing me to the Burrow on Boxing day, then I'll spend the rest of Christmas break there." Hermione was a little sad she wouldn't spend the whole Holiday with Harry and the others but she looked forward to seeing her parents too.

He kissed her hand, "That'll be great." He caught George's eye, "I'll be happy for your Mum's fussing. I'm actually more worried about Remus' reaction." He grimaced, "Papa Wolf is not going to be a happy camper."

Fred chuckled, "Well you're on your own there mate. No way we're getting between Moony and his intent."

Ron grinned, "Yeah sorry but I like all my limbs in one place."

"Prats," Harry sat up and rolled his head round to stretch his neck, "Even if he goes mad it'll still be a welcome break." And it truly couldn't come fast enough even with the amount he'd miss Hermione. For now though he pulled her onto the couch with him and let her fuss gently and coax him to eat.

Harry poked Fred in front of him as Molly spotted them all disembarking from the train. He wanted maybe two more minutes before she noticed his weight loss and the bags under his eyes.

Ginny snorted as she eyed Harry and stepped in front of him as well to give a few more seconds before being discovered. She hugged and kissed her Mum hello same as her siblings and she knew the exact moment Molly caught sight of Harry.

"Harry Potter, what is this that I see?" Molly looked horrified as she practically elbowed her way to him, placing her hands on his shoulders. "Dear child, what's happened? You're only skin and bones and look, you could carry all your luggage in the bags beneath your eyes." She clucked her tongue and ran his hands over him as if checking for injuries.

He blushed and gave her a sheepish smile, "Things have been a little...rough lately."

He was still wearing the gloves and sporting the style Hermione had given him for them and he hoped Molly wouldn't want to get a close look at his hands any time soon. One murderous parental figure to calm down was going to be enough because without the salve Snape gave him Remus was going to smell the injury of his hand and he was going to be pissed. He gave Mrs. Weasley a hug. "Two weeks of your cooking and peace from the toad and I'll be right as rain again."

Molly hugged him back, keeping her arms around him. "I am certainly going to feed you." She still looked worried but there wasn't much she could say. Inside she was seething, something had to be done about that horrid woman. Harry looked practically ill and Molly wouldn't stand for that. When she got the chance she would speak with Arthur in private, hear what her husband thought and if there were any chances to report her some way and get rid of her. "Let's go home, have a spot of tea. I have meatball sandwiches waiting at the Burrow." Molly addressed all her children and Orion who was going to follow to the Burrow directly from the station since Remus and Sirius were going to come there anyway.

Harry chuckled at Ron's happy whoop, "Sounds perfect. Let me give my girl one more kiss to tide
us over until Boxing Day and I'll be ready to go." He stepped back and went to where Hermione stood cupping her face in his hands, "Don't go forgetting me now." It was an obvious tease to clear the worry from her eyes.

"Silly boy, as if I ever could." Hermione leaned forward and pressed her lips against his in a soft kiss. "Please rest and take care of yourself now. Owl me instantly if the nightmares continue and I'll come in a flash, as quickly as I possibly can." She kissed him again before leaning her forehead against his. "I love you Harry."

He smiled, "I love you too Hermione. I promise I'll owl if the nightmares keep going and that I'll rest." He pulled out a polished amethyst pendant and a man's watch with tiny amethyst points as the hands, "For your parents. You'll have to charge them but they should work for them."

Surprise lit up Hermione's eyes as she took the pendant and the watch, humbled and grateful that Harry thought to give something that would offer at least some protection to her parents.

"Thank you so much, this means so much to me. You are so wonderful, when I think I couldn't love you more than I already do, you do something amazing that makes me fall even deeper." She smiled softly at him, drawing out their goodbye since it hurt to leave him, even knowing that they would soon be together again. Oh she had it bad.

He kissed the tip of her nose, "That goes both ways you know my brilliant, beautiful lady." He heard Mrs. Weasley calling and gave Hermione a strong hug, "Look for Hedwig, I'll be writing. Cross my heart."

"I'll write too." Hermione promised and managed a smile for Harry. "Now go before Mrs. Weasley has the twins come and drag you away. See you Boxing day and we'll write before then. Just take care, rest and be safe, that's all I want for you." She gave him a quick kiss and watched him walk toward the Weasley clan before she turned away and hurried over to her parents that had just arrived.

Harry watched her go for a moment, waving at her parents before his name was called and he went back to the Weasleys. He ruffled Orion's hair, "I'll buy your next quarter's potions supplies if you give your Dad a tackle hug and don't let go until we're all sure he's not going to pop back to Hogwarts to skin a toad."

"Deal but I don't need the potions supplies...I'm kind of fond of my Dad and I don't want him to get in trouble." Orion knew that Remus' temper would flare and he could do something stupid. "Especially not now when he and Sirius are finally back together." He couldn't help wide smile that spread across his face as he said that.

"I'll be giving you the supplies anyway kiddo. I know you'd do it without them but I like knowing I've got a little hand in helping you become the next great potion master." Harry grinned, "It is great that they're back together. The longing between them was almost getting painful to witness."

Orion nodded. "It really was and I couldn't interfere either, made a promise to Uncle Sev not to push them." Orion was just happy that they had gotten together again, both his parents deserved happiness and it was clear to him that the one thing that made them happiest was each other.

"It's a good thing you made that promise. Pushing on that would have probably had your Dad digging his heels in. Now, let's hope he doesn't completely pop a blood vessel when he sees me yeah?" Harry grimaced as he thought of that. He hoped Remus wouldn't be too angry but as they reached the Leaky to floo back to the Burrow he knew that was a hope in vain.
Remus smiled at Sirius and reached for his hand as they apparated straight onto the path that led up to the Burrow's main entrance. The ground was covered in a thin blanket of snow and the air was cold, making their breath come out in soft clouds as they walked toward the house. Remus couldn't wait to see his cubs and spend these weeks with them and the Weasleys. He was surprised when his son came bowling out of the house and attached himself to his waist, holding on and hugging but he smiled and ruffled Orion's hair.

Sirius blinked then looked at Orion with suspicion, "Well hello to you too pup."

"Feeling neglected Snuffles?" Harry steeled himself and stepped outside, inwardly cringing when a pair of amber eyes brightened and turned a flaming yellow in temper and a silver pair matched them. "Er hi."

Remus' reply was a low, lethal growl that made Orion hold on to him tighter. "Harry..." Remus was so angry he really didn't know what to say, he could feel himself vibrating with rage and again he really wanted to just tear out Umbridge throat and watch her bleed out on the ground in front of him.

Sirius took in the obvious weight Harry had lost, the bags under his eyes, and stepped forward to tilt Harry's head up to meet his eyes, "How bad?"

"Er," Harry shifted under the regard and peeled off his glove, unwrapping the bandage there to show his hand, grimacing at Sirius' exclaimed curse. The last detention had cut down to the tendon. If his hand didn't heal over these two weeks another detention could sever the connecting tissue.

Sirius gently took Harry's hand, vibrating in anger, "This has gone beyond too far. Harry you have to report her."

"To who? Who'll listen and can do more than have her sacked from Hogwarts at best? Just me isn't enough to get her booted from the Ministry and if she stays there she'll cause problems for everyone. No one else is willing to come forward and risk their parents suffering for it and I don't blame them." He slid his hand from Sirius' grasp and began rewrapping it in the murtlap essence soaked bandage, "I'll heal over the Hols. I just need the break is all."

"That's not all." Remus' voice was tense and there was still an underlying growl to it. "You're anemic, that bitch has used the blood quill on you to such an extent that you actually have blood loss. We need to floo Severus and get a blood replenishing potion for you, if you don't get one then you won't heal properly."

He was aware of Orion's arms circling his waist and holding on tightly to keep him from doing something stupid. Remus wasn't angry at Harry but he was furious with Umbridge and quite frankly the rest of the faculty who let it go on. They had to see how ill Harry was getting and still they let him go to detention with the person that made him ill.

"Anemic? Huh, guess that explains the tiredness." Harry rubbed the back of his neck, "And please don't call her a bitch, that's insulting to bitches the world over."

Sirius shook his head, "Haven't any of the staff done anything?"

"McGonagall tries to get the detentions switched to be served with her but Umbridge won't accept that and if McGonagall pushes she'll be sacked, Deputy Headmistress or not."
Ron came out carrying a bucket of soot his mother wanted him to put in the compost heap and put in his two cents, "Since Trelawney got sacked the staff walks on eggshells just like most of the students. The bleeding Inquisitorial Squad is all over the school giving out detentions and taking away points at the drop of a hat and if I see Romilda Vane try to poke her nose into our business one more time I'm breaking it girl or no girl."

"She's in love with Harry and pissed that he chose Hermione over her. That's why she's joined Umbridge's underlings." Orion turned his head and looked at Harry and Ron. "You knew that right? It's common knowledge in the Slytherin common room. Vane even tried to get Uncle Sev to tell her how Amortentia was brewed so she could get Harry to love her back.

Remus placed a hand on his son's head. He was still angry but he had calmed down enough so that he wouldn't apparate away and do something truly stupid. The most useful thing he could do now was to be there for Harry, help him heal and see to it that he'd get the potions he needed.

Harry rubbed his temples, "Ugh, wonderful. Note to self, double check my food and drink when I get back to Hogwarts."

Ron shook his head, "There's not enough Amortentia in the world to make Harry drop Hermione."

Sirius nodded, "You're more right about that then you know. They're called love potions but they don't actually create love, that's impossible really. Love can't be created with a potion. The potions create infatuation or obsession but if someone were to dose say Arthur or myself, it wouldn't work because we already have someone we love, someone we love more than anything. The potion would be rendered null if Harry was slipped it because he's in love with Hermione, completely, one hundred percent in love with her."

"And how." Harry yawned, shaking his head and blinking, "There's also the venom effect thing so even if I wasn't bum over teakettle for Hermione I doubt it would work."

"You're right about that." Remus nodded and watched Harry closely, seeing how he blinked his eyes owlishly.

Before he could say anything Molly walked out. "What are you doing out here? Keeping Harry in the cold when he's not well, shame on you." She walked over to Harry and wrapped her arms around him. "You young man are to go straight to bed now. Go rest, I'll wake you up when it's supper time."

He smiled sheepishly, "Yes ma'am. Moony would you mind contacting Professor Snape for those potions? I'd do it but I need the time before I pass out to meditate and reset my shields," he tapped his temple.

Ron pushed Harry toward the door, "Mate just go. Remus would crawl over broken glass for you and contacting Snape is no trouble for him and even if it was I'd do it my own bloody self. Go, sleep, have an actual rest for once and leave the remains to us."

"Ron, anyone ever tell you that you take after your Mum?" Harry laughed and ducked out of the way of Ron's swipe before clambering inside and upstairs.

Molly watched him like a hawk to make sure he actually went upstairs to his and Ron's attic room. When she was satisfied that Harry was going to rest she turned to Ron and gave him a hug, feeling proud of her youngest son for looking out for Harry. "Come in the rest of you as well instead of standing out in the cold. Remus you can use the floo in Arthur's study to contact professor Snape."
Remus nodded in thanks and moved to go inside when Orion finally released him to give his father a hug as well.

Sirius smiled and ruffled his son's hair, following after Remus and the others, "How have things been with you then? The little Slytherin trio keeping you entertained?"

"Mmm yes, although Blaise mostly talks about Charlie and his greatness and for someone who's supposedly avoiding Fred and George, Malfoy cannot shut up about them. It's like flirting disguised as complaints. It's all very tiresome really. Thank Merlin that at least Pansy is sane, she keeps me entertained when the others wallow in their lovesickness."

Sirius laughed, "Well that's good. As for Malfoy, it is flirting."

Fred popped his head in, "Really? Do elaborate."

"Yes please do." George's head showed up over Fred's, blue eyes shining with interest. "Tell us anything and everything you can about a Malfoy's mating habits."

Orion rolled his eyes and went in search of Ginny, hoping that she wouldn't mope around over Neville. Love seemed like such hard work, Orion was not in a hurry to fall in love.

Sirius shook his head at the twins. "The two of you have an uncanny talent to appear when you're mentioned. All the two of you need to know is that you're doing things right so long as he's not telling you flat out to get and stay the hell away from him. Better than right if he complains about you to his best friends and they've not come after you wands blazing. If you really want a gauge on how good you're doing pay attention to how those friends treat you. If you're in their good graces, you're in his."

Fred slid a look over to George, "Well the lethal lady has given us little tips here and there."

"And Blaise did clap us on the shoulder the other day, I thought it was due to our kinship with Charlie-boy but still." George met his brother's gaze, hope lighting his eyes. "He *likes* us Forge..." a wicked, wicked grin lit up George's features as he thought about their little dragon.

"Likes us and can tell us apart." Fred almost bounced in place, "Gred I do believe that we should redouble our efforts on the Christmas gift for our dragon yes?"

"Oh yes." George agreed and held out his hand to Fred. "Let's go work on it right away, it has to be perfect. Something our dragon will treasure at the same time as it shows our intent." He dragged his brother away somewhere private for some very important work.

Sirius chuckled and moved to the kitchen where Molly was bustling around, "Any potatoes you'd like me to peel? That's about the extent of my culinary ability."

She chuckled and moved to pat him on the cheek. "It's very nice of you to offer but I think I've got things under control. A few more mouths to feed doesn't really make much of a difference." Molly smiled and pointed over to the sink where a large stack of potatoes was getting peeled by themselves. "You just relax, you are guests in my home, I'm supposed to take care of you. I don't mind the company though, if you wish to stay in the kitchen."

"Keeping someone company in a kitchen I can do." He sat down, fiddling with the pepper shaker, "I know you'll say it's silly to do but I just wanted to say thank you, for what you've done for Harry." He gave her a smile, "I'm grateful for it."

"You're right, it's very silly to thank me for something I do gladly." Molly was still smiling. "But
you're welcome. We love him too, just as you do. Caring for him is not a hardship in any way." She poured a tall glass of chilled pumpkin juice and placed it in front of Sirius so he would have something to sip as she cooked.

"I know I'm just so glad he's had people who love him." He sipped at the pumpkin juice, the spiced sweetness rolling over his tongue, "He's just...his heart is bigger than all the world despite having been kicked around like a football and he'd crawl through the pits of hell or burn heaven to ashes for his loved ones." His lips tilted, "Reminds me of Remus more than he does of James or Lily in attitude actually."

"Yes, he's like Remus in that aspect. Remus and you. Don't sell yourself short Sirius Black. We haven't always seen eye to eye on everything but I've always seen how much you care about your precious persons and how far you'd go for their sakes." She grew serious. "Harry is truly amazing and I'm just trying to do what I can to keep him and his heart from being battered more, try to protect it the way he deserves."

He lifted his glass in salute to her on that, "Cheers to that Molly Weasley. So," he grinned, "if memory serves you're family had a special connection to white harts. I don't suppose you might happen to have a way to get your hands on the fur of one would you? Not much, just a little clump."

Molly scratched her cheek. "I don't think it would be impossible to get some fur. May I ask what you need it for though? You're right that the Prewetts have a special connection to the white harts, which means we're very protective of them as well. I don't think you'd do anything to hurt them but I have to ask all the same."

He turned his glass on the table, "Have you heard of the Threefold Ritual? It's also called the Ritual of Return if that helps."

"I've heard of it yes, it's not performed very often these days though, now is it?" Molly waved her wands at the now peeled potatoes and made them jump into a large pot which she levitated to the huge stove. The stew was already simmering, spreading tantalizing scents through the house as well as the bread baking in the oven did.

"Not performed as there's not many who know all entails no. One requirement of the ritual is the fur of a white hart, to guide the energy properly to the intended destination." He folded his arms on the tabletop, "I intend to perform the ritual, destination Dumbledore, once I can get to the Black Manor's light ritual chamber."

Molly nodded slowly and pushed a lock of slightly graying red hair behind her ear. "That is a cause I support fully. I'll do my best to get the fur to you as quickly as I can. Hopefully before you have to leave for home at the end of the holidays, can't promise though...The harts wander as they please and don't always come when you want them to."

She placed a hand on Sirius' shoulder in silent support and looked up when Remus walked into the kitchen, cradling several small vials in his arms. Severus had been very helpful and sent the needed potions as well as some vitamin boosts over through the floo.

Sirius smiled and helped him set the potions down before pulling Remus to sit next to him, "Take your time Molly. I can't get into the chamber until I can get to Black manor anyway, which is a long way off unless a miracle happens and a certain wormy rat is found and captured all of a sudden."

"Well it's the time of miracles, isn't that what they say? We can always hope one happens and that
Wormtail finds himself caught and delivered to the Aurors with a bow around his neck.” Molly hated Wormtail both for what he'd done, betrayed his best friends and the rest of the Order too and for living it up in her house, with her precious boys for all those years. The thought that he'd lived in their bedrooms still made her feel sick.

Remus nodded his agreement at Molly's words and placed his hand on top of Sirius, squeezing it lightly before removing it.

Sirius leaned his leg against Remus' and smiled, "I hope you get a shot or two in on him if, when he's caught the little amoeba."

Grinning Molly nodded. "I have studied up on curses on the off chance it would happen. I've found this lovely one that liquefies the muscle tone and makes it run out of the victim's nose and ears. That would be rather fitting I think." She was mostly joking but the curse was real and Molly wouldn't regret anything if she could use it on Peter Pettigrew.

Remus was reminded of what a formidable woman Molly really was and that he didn't want to get on her bad side.

Sirius just grinned, "I do like your style Molly." He let Molly and Remus change the subject to Christmas and how hard Molly found it to keep the twins from their presents before the 25th while he just listened with a happy smile on his face.
Chapter 40

Harry crept through the fog and knocked softly on the door, smiling when Kreacher opened it, "Happy Yule Kreacher."

"Happy Yule Master." Kreacher grumbled back and shuffled backwards to let Harry in. Even with his grumpiness the old house elf looked healthier and much cleaner than he had before. "I's can take Master's coat if Master wishes it."

"Thanks but I'm not going to be here for long. I'm just picking up Draco and Narcissa and here," he pulled a wrapped present for the elf out, "For you. I know it's not much but I thought you deserved a Yule gift."

Spindly long fingers accepted the gift with thinly veiled curiosity. "May I's open it now Master?" At Harry's nod, Kreacher made quick work of the wrapping paper and very nearly beamed when he saw the elf sweet mushrooms. It was a delicacy and very hard to come by for a house elf. "I's thank you Master. I's are sorry I's do not have a gift for Master."

"You're looking after Lady Malfoy and her son. That's all the gift I need."

"Potter?" Draco came down the stairs and stopped in the middle of them when he saw Harry at the door.

"Malfoy. I know it's ungodly early, sun's not even up yet, but no one should be spending Christmas alone so you and your Mum are cordially invited to a Weasley Christmas morning."

Narcissa appeared behind her son, already completely dressed and put together perfectly, "Ah Mr. Potter right on time. Draco dear do go dress yourself, casually I believe yes?"

Harry nodded with a grin, "Yup."

Draco sputtered. "You knew about this Mother? Why in the name of Merlin's underpants didn't you tell me?" He looked down at his low slung pyjama bottoms and worn cotton shirt that he used to sleep in. They were to go to the Weasleys for Christmas? To Fred and George? Draco could almost feel a slight panic attack coming. What if they said something like the things they wrote in their letters to his Mother, Draco would be mortified.

"Of course I knew dear and I knew you'd contrive to escape it had I informed you in advance. Now dear do get dressed or I'm afraid you'll be going in your sleep clothes."

Curses that his Mother knew him so well, of course he would have found a way to escape if he'd known about this plan. Barely resisting to stomp up the steps he made his way back upstairs to his bedroom and dug out a pair of black denims and a soft blue cashmere sweater. He ran a brush through his hair but left it un-gelled and hanging loose as he reached under the bed to pull out the Christmas presents he'd gotten for the twins. Turning them over in his hands he shrunk them and placed them in a small bag to bring them to the Weasel lair before returning downstairs to join his Mother and Potter.

Narcissa stood speaking with Harry before the foyer fireplace, "So we'll be flooing to Spinner's End?"

"Yes. Professor Snape caved to Orion's pleading so he'll be there too." He glanced over at Draco, "Ready Malfoy?"
"As I'll ever be to travel to the Weasley HQ I suppose." Draco pulled on a butter soft leather jacket and walked to stand in front of the floo. At least Severus would be there too and Orion was...tolerable which had come a surprise.

"Don't worry no one bites...well except for Orion but he saves that for his father so you're safe. I think you'll find more than just one ally there." He grinned and turned to Kreacher, "Kreacher do you have any old friends or family you'd like to visit?"

"No Master, I's be happy to stay here." Kreacher looked forward to crawl into his cupboard, bundle up and eat his treat that Master had gifted him. He was an old elf and he appreciated the simple things in life.

"Alright, if you're sure," Harry nibbled his bottom lip. He didn't like the idea of Kreacher being alone but knew that the old elf wouldn't appreciate Harry calling in other elves he knew.

Narcissa pat him on the shoulder, "No need to worry. Kreacher prefers quiet and simple comforts."

Kreacher nodded his agreement, clutching his gift close to his thin chest. He didn't want to be forced to leave his house or to have visitors.

Draco stood in the doorway, waiting for them. "Believe me Potter, Kreacher is not afraid to speak his mind so if he'd wanted to go somewhere he would tell you."

Harry nodded, "So long as you're happy then Kreacher. I wouldn't want to force you into something you'd hate doing."

Narcissa smiled and nudged him toward the floo, "I do believe we need to be going before we're late."

"Oh right," Harry stepped into the floo and called out for Spinner's End, hoping he'd not fall flat on his face at Snape's feet.

"Well darling shall we," Narcissa waved at the floo.

"Ready when you are Mother." Draco nodded and let his mother step into the floo first before following her to his godfather's home. The soft place deep, deep inside him was happy that Severus wouldn't have to spend Christmas alone...Or worse go to the Manor and keep his father company. Draco shuddered at the mere thought of that.

Harry crept back into the Burrow followed by the Malfoys and Snape, an ear out for stirring from the others. Molly and Arthur already knew as did Remus and Sirius so he wasn't worried about them. He lead the guests to the living room and grinned at the sight of Blaise Zabini curled up in the lap of Charlie Weasley while Pansy sat and watched them in great amusement. The Slytherin girl looked up and lifted a brow, "Ah Potter. I see you've brought more snakes into the weasel den."

Draco's eyes lit up at the sight of his best friends though he had to snort at Blaise's blissed out expression. It seemed that Charlie Weasley was his drug of choice. "Thank goodness you're here, I was afraid I was going to be skinned and eaten alive by Weasels."

He walked over and sat down next to Pansy before sprawling out and placing his head in her lap. "Pity me Pans, Potter here showed up before I was even dressed, I didn't know I would be required to visit anyone today and Potter and Mother didn't even give me time to coordinate my wardrobe or
do my hair properly. It was really quite traumatic."

"Oh you poor dear. Must have set your fluffy tail to twitching." She pet his hair condescendingly, slipping a red bow with Fred and George's names on it onto his head with an ever stick charm as she did.

Harry pursed his lips and offered Charlie a shrug at his confused look, "I'm going to get the kettle on then. I imagine Orion and or the twins will be waking the house soon."

Draco felt his head and frowned when he felt the bow and was unable to remove it. "You are a horrid, evil wench...No compassion and I thought we had agreed not to mention anything about the...fluffy." He was very, very close to pouting, causing Blaise to laugh at him even in his blissed out state where he clung to Charlie like a leech.

"Hey Charlie, less than three months left until I turn sixteen." He gave his mate a heated look.

Pansy laughed softly at how red Charlie's face turned, "You say I am evil? What of our darling, very horny friend over there?"

Narcissa sat down regally next to Pansy, causing the girl to blanch a bit, especially at the smile she was given, "I do believe I've discovered the source of the language problem my son has been displaying recently. Pansy dear I do believe you and I have a few discussions ahead of us."

Charlie shook his head and murmured into Blaise's ear, "Behave and behave well."

"I have been nothing but good Charlie, nothing but good, in hopes of getting to be very, very bad." Blaise blinked innocent dark eyes up at Charlie, making his extremely long lashes flutter against his cheekbones.

There was a sound of a door slamming and suddenly a very sleepy Orion, his hair on end and dressed in an old worn pyjamas showed up in the stairs, his eyes widening at the sight of the people in the living room. "Uncle Sev!" His face lit up in a smile and he hurried down to hug his uncle before grinning happily at Pansy. "What a surprise to see all of you here, a welcome surprise though."

Forgetting the trouble she was no doubt in with Narcissa for a moment in the face of Orion's delight, Pansy smiled back, "Happy Christmas puppy. I must confess surprise to the lack of loud wakening of the rest of the-" she paused when a loud boom of holiday music suddenly went off upstairs accompanied by twin voices shouting a Happy Christmas to all, "Ah never mind then."

Severus scoffed in vague amusement then moved into a gloomy corner as the dual terrors raced into the room then came to a sudden halt at the sight that met their eyes.

"Gred, am I seeing things?" Fred's eyes were fixed firmly on Draco, taking in every detail from the delicious way the sweater and denims fit him to the blush slowly creeping over his cheeks, to the red bow gracing his hair.

"If you are then we're hallucinating as a pair Forge." George's eyes raked over Draco greedily, a small possessive smile showing at the sight of the bow with their names on it. "To me it seems as if Father Christmas has decided that we're on the nice list and has gifted us with what we wish for most of all." George's voice was thick and soft as velvet and it made Draco's blush darken as he flicked his eyes from the twins to his mother and back again. He felt completely tongue tied.

Fred caught sight of Draco's mother looking at them reassuringly and nudged George just a bit before going to give a sweeping bow to Narcissa, "Lady can I just thank you for creating such a
perfect human being and not locking him in some tall tower to keep all the unworthy sots away thus giving us a chance to meet him." He grinned at her, "I'm giving you all the credit, what's-his-name didn't give much beyond a couple of measly chromosomes."

Narcissa lifted a brow in amusement, "Well I can not precisely argue that point."

George smiled brilliantly and conjured a single perfect rose, so pale pink that it was almost white. He presented it to Narcissa with a bow of his own. "It's nowhere near as beautiful as the lady I'm gifting it too but please accept it anyway as a token of my utter respect and adoration for the wonderful way you have raised your son."

Draco looked horror stricken as he stared at the twins charming his mother with wide, gray eyes. Narcissa took the thornless rose with a knowing smile, tucking it artfully into her hair before looking between her son and the two torturers after him, "Buttering me up will do you no good. In the end it is, of course, my son's decision. However I will say this," she smirked, "You'll do, the both of you. Pansy dear let's give the young Messrs Weasley room on the couch shall we." It wasn't a question and both the women were up and joining Severus in his corner, allowing the twins to sit beside Draco.

Quick as a flash two redheads were on the couch, sandwiching their delicious blond between them. "Happy Christmas little Dragon." George leaned in and whispered in a soft, pale pink ear. "You being here made our wildest dreams come true."

Fred almost purred, "Having you here is making this the best Christmas ever to date." He looked at the red bow and flicked his wand at it, making it turn into a blue circlet holding Draco's hair out of his face, "You look good in blue."

"Of course I do, I look good in everything." Finally Draco seemed to have gotten his voice back though the blasted blush refused to go down. He did put his nose in the air though and called on his breeding and aristocracy and wrapped it around himself like a cloak.

George almost groaned at how tempting Draco was when he did that.

Blaise just watched everything play out with amusement. You couldn't buy entertainment this good.

Harry came in with a loaded tea tray, "Malfoy one day you're going to do that and Fred or George won't be able to resist it anymore. Just fair warning for you." He set the tray down on the table so whoever wanted tea could serve themselves then settled on the floor next to the fireplace.

"Hm." Draco mumbled something about cretins under his breath, it wasn't his fault that George and Fred got off on haughtiness and pride. Draco couldn't change who he was.

"Want tea hot stuff?" Blaise tilted his head up and looked at Charlie.

Charlie chuckled and gave Blaise a gentle squeeze before nuzzling his cheek, "No I'm fine as I am." After Icy's little stunt the times he spent with Blaise had been less sexually charged and more emotionally building. He was slipping quietly into love with his little incubus and it was a wonderful feeling.

Severus listened as Narcissa took Pansy to task almost silently but very effectively then lifted a brow when Remus came into the room with Black at his heels, both shirtless and sleep rumpled. "Dear Merlin at least put on a dressing gown before you scar innocent minds."
Sirius' gaze snapped to the snakes in the room before replying, just as dryly, "Well we would but ours seem to have gone missing," he looked at his son who was nearly climbing on Harry, "I don't know who could have done as such."

Huge amber eyes shining with innocence turned on his parents from where he was perched almost on top of Harry. "Don't look at me, must be the gnomes. Maybe they were cold."

"Well I can't say I mind the view," Blaise stretched in Charlie's lap. Who knew that professor Lupin had hid such a body underneath his frumpy robes? "But I was under the impression that you were wizards. A simple Accio or a transfiguration could have had you covered up in no time." He gave them a lazy smile.

Sirius made a growl and wrapped his arms around Remus even though he knew Blaise was utterly Charlie's, "Oi eyes off my Moony."

Harry shook his head and poked Orion in the side, "Can't be gnomes, Fred blew them up remember?"

"I did not!" Fred looked indignant, "I blew up the gnome holes, there's a world of difference."

"My Forge isn't a gnome murderer, they just migrated when their holes were destroyed." George jumped to his brother's defense, his glare daring anyone to question them.

"Oh well...It must be the poltergeist then, who says he can't get chills? Orion said in a completely unworried tone. He wondered what his parents would say if they knew their dressing robes were at the bottom of the almost frozen duck pond outside of the burrow. Using them to try and catch a hinkypunk hadn't worked as well as Orion had hoped it would. They were supposed to be drawn to the scent of an adult male but it hadn't worked and Orion had almost fallen in the cold water since it had been pitch black outside when he was on his quest.

Remus pet Sirius cheek, admitting to himself that it felt rather nice to be in Sirius' arms in public. "Come on Pads, we'll go up and get dressed properly and then we're going to having a discussion with our son about the importance of telling the truth." He pinned Orion with a stern look.

Harry chuckled at Orion's eep and waved as Molly and Arthur came in along with the rest of the Weasley family. Ron's look of gobsmacked horror was particularly amusing until he saw how happy his brothers looked.

"Ugh fine." Ron went and parked it next to Harry. "I resign myself. I'll be seeing this lot every Christmas morning for the foreseeable future, might as well get used to it now." He gave Harry a punch on the shoulder, happy to see that his friend was recovering from Umbridge's torture.

Harry grinned, "Hermione would be so proud of you mate."

"Bite me Scar."

Orion chuckled at the best friends squabbling, for a moment being able to repress the 'discussion' he would have with his parents. Damn but his Dad could be scary when he donned The Look. It was nice being here though, surrounded by family and loved ones and Harry was right, Hermione would be proud of Ron for not causing a scene or saying something that would cause tension.

Right now the atmosphere was relaxed and comfortable, even Draco seemed to have relaxed some, smooshed as he was between his two redheads.

"So Ron, will you be traveling across the hill to see your lady some? Or is she coming here?" Orion really liked Luna, if anyone could understand the feelings and dreams he could have at times it was...
"She and her Dad are coming by later for the big Christmas dinner. Right now she's probably on the roof of her house looking for flying fiddlebobber prints." Ron grinned, the love he felt for his girl shining through, "That or checking her plimpie traps."

Arthur settled with Molly on a settee and smiled at his children before nodding at Narcissa and Severus in the corner, "Before we fall too far into our normal chaos, let me say welcome to our guests. I'm glad you could make it."

Narcissa nodded back, grateful that Arthur didn't seem to extend his animosity with Lucius to her, "Thank you for having us."

"Indeed." Snape's reply was short but lacking his usual disdainful bite.

"Of course, we're all family here, in some way. It is only right that you are here when there's something to celebrate and even when it's not a Holiday you are still always welcome." Molly smiled at all her guests, she could think what she wanted about Lucius Malfoy but she could see how important the little Malfoy was to her boys and that made him important to her too. If he was the one for Fred and George, the one that would make him happy then she was all for it.

It was the same with Blaise Zabini, Molly could see the look Charlie had in his eyes when he watched to boy and it was so much more than duty and compassion now. "I hope you will stay for dinner as well. As Ron said, Xenophilius and Luna Lovegood is coming and so are my other sons, Bill and Percy." Molly looked forward to that, she hadn't seen them in a long time now. Percy living in France and Bill in Egypt though he was moving back to England come spring, to work for Gringotts in London.

Harry spoke dryly, "Remember to lock the bathroom door when Bill gets here."

Charlie chuckled, "You're still on about that?"

"He saw my girlfriend in the shower! Granted she wasn't my girlfriend at the time and it was an accident but still."

Ron snickered, "In other words Charlie, yes. He's still on about it."

Sirius and Remus came back in fully dressed once more and went to sit with Harry, Orion, and Ron, "I don't blame him. I'd be exactly the same way. 'lo Cissy."

"Sirius. You're looking well."

"Doing well too, and you?"

"Well as can be expected."

Harry looked between them and lifted a brow. He had a feeling a few dozen years worth of conversation had just been exchanged silently while observing pleasantries.

Remus didn't say anything but he held Sirius' hand. Secretly he hoped that Sirius and Narcissa would get along now, family was so important and Sirius didn't have much family left. Narcissa was his cousin and once in their childhood they had been friends. Remus hoped they could become so again.

He then turned and watched his son sitting still and innocent like an angel, making Remus want to
"Don't think I've forgotten about you young man. We will have that conversation and you are going to tell us exactly what you've done with our dressing robes and when you did it."

Orion bit his bottom lip but kept quiet. Against all hopes he had hoped that maybe his parents would be distracted by the guests and the celebration and forget his nightly, little mishap. He knew he would be yelled at as well as grounded when they found out he'd been out creeping on his own during the night...Perhaps they would even bring Uncle Sev in on the 'discussion'. Orion shivered at that thought.

Pansy excused herself from Narcissa to go and sit primly beside Orion, ruffling his hair and whispering very low in his ear, "I can see I need to teach you a few tricks, most especially the replicating spell."

He nodded. "And how to lie successfully. Both my parents and Uncle Sev can sniff out a lie from miles away." He looked at the Christmas tree forlornly. Orion hadn't meant to lose the dressing robes, his plan had been to put them back before his parents even woke up. He'd been behaving in school so much that it felt as if he would burst if he couldn't experiment, explore and prank now. It felt as if he was itching beneath his skin.

"Ah well I've yet to master lying to Professor Snape. That I fear is a lost cause." She pat his shoulder and tucked a bit of hair behind her ear, "So do you lot open presents now or do you do the unthinkable and wait until evening?"

Arthur laughed, "With this brood? We'd be fighting a losing battle trying to keep the presents wrapped until evening. Orion, Ginny, Ron would you like to pass out the presents to everyone?"

Ron just made a whoop and dove to start the sorting to assorted laughter.

Narcissa reached into her bag and pulled out four gifts, one of course for her son, one for Severus, one for their hosts, and one for Harry, passing them subtly to the youngest Weasley as she passed.

Harry just grinned as he recognized familiar shaped packages passed out, especially when Narcissa was caught with a startled expression as she was handed one of them. It would appear everyone was getting a Weasley sweater today.

Draco glanced over under the tree and made sure his gifts to his mother and the depravity duo was there. He had to admit that he watched the chaos with wide gray eyes. He'd never ever experienced a Christmas morning like this. At the Manor everyone stayed in their appointed seat as a house elf gave you your presents and no one was allowed to open even one until all presents were distributed. This was better, the chaos, the laughter and bright paper flying in all directions. A look over at his mother showed that she seemed to enjoy this as well.

Ron laughed as those who knew tore into their sweaters first and set about getting them on and then proceeded to poke the visiting snakes to do the same. Seeing Severus Snape forced by mighty puppy eyes to don his, black, sweater with a bubbling beaker on it was going to stay with him and make it very hard to keep a straight face in potions class. He sat back down, all the presents distributed and set to ripping into his own presents.

Narcissa was staring at the delicate cream sweater with the blue celtic knotwork around the hems. She actually recalled the very first sweater Molly had made back in Hogwarts for her then boyfriend. It had been, for lack of a better word, a disaster and the boyfriend had thrown it away in secret, or what he'd thought was secret. If memory served Molly had seen him and run crying.

Her lips twitched as she recalled that Arthur had come up to the other boy, whose name she
couldn't remember, and clocked him so hard he'd lost a couple of teeth before salvaging the sweater and approaching Molly to ask if she'd mind if he wore it as he didn't have any warm sweaters outside of the uniform. He'd looked positively awful in that sweater but had worn it every day he could and with a big silly grin on his face. Even back then Arthur Weasley had been madly in love with Molly Prewett. She looked up and met Molly's eyes, "It's lovely. Thank you." She couldn't put it on over her dress but she would wear it as it was just her style.

Molly beamed at her. "You're very welcome." She looked around at all the people wearing her sweaters and reached out to pat her husband's arm. She remembered that horrible first sweater as well. Turned out that the sweater had been worth it, the boyfriend hadn't. If not for that ugly, wonky sweater she might never have seen how utterly amazing Arthur Weasley was and that would have been the true disaster. Even after all these years she loved him more and more with each day they were allowed to wake up next to each other.

Arthur took her hand and brought it to his mouth, kissing it. That sweater had looked awful but his heart had just about broken seeing Molly cry when Landon had thrown it away so he'd salvaged it and in the process won his princess. He still had that sweater, tucked back in his little shed where he kept his treasures from the years gone by.

Draco rolled his eyes at the twins prodding before giving in and pulling his cashmere sweater over his head, showing off a very pale, porcelain like torso before replacing it with the ice blue knitted sweater with the silver dragon on the front. It was actually quite nice and very, very soft. He was happy though not to get a letter sweater.

Fred grinned impossibly wide then his eyes widened, "Oh Merlin's beard, one second!" He was tearing out of the room in a flash and pounding up to his and George's room. In keeping with the fact that their dragon could tell them apart they'd each created their own gift for him but the two gifts, while perfectly useful on their own, worked best when you put them together.

He'd spent a solid two months making a focus sword, silver from pommel to tip, sharp as could be, with a storage crystal at the end that Draco could slip his wand into and use the sword as he would his wand.

Since swords were frowned upon in Hogwarts, George had worked with him to make a ring to sit on Draco's middle finger that would 'store' the sword and that Draco could just draw his wand from if he was anywhere a sword would be a bad idea. As he clambered back into the living room, hearing Orion's whoop at the basilisk feathers and skin Harry had given him, he hoped Draco would like the gifts. He and George had put more than just time and effort into them, they'd put their hearts and souls into them as well.

George caught his brother's eye and when he received a nod he reached into his pocket and pulled out the small box containing the ring. It was very classic and no nonsense since it was something their dragon should be able to wear all the time. As soon as Fred had made it over to them again they presented their gifts to Draco and George had to admit that his heart was beating faster than normal.

Draco was utterly speechless, this gift was indescribable. The sword and the ring were beautiful on their own and put together they were a treasure fit for a king. The magic used for making something like this was exquisite and that the twins had made it work and work so greatly spoke volumes about how brilliant the two of them really were. Now his own gifts felt silly and thoughtless.

He'd optioned for a book on hidden magical runes for Fred, something he could use in their prank business to make one object appear as something else and for George he'd gathered an assortment
of magical objects and potion ingredients to use as pleased. He'd included both feathers and tail hair from the Abraxans who lived at the Manor. Draco didn't live there any longer but he was still on good terms with the house elves there. One of them had brought him what he needed.

Sirius gave a long, low whistle, "Forget just surpassing us Moony, we're eating those two's cloud dust." He caught sight of Narcissa's expression and it was a mix between speechlessness, approval, and something that wasn't quite gratitude but in the general neighborhood.

Remus nodded, still absolutely awed about the high class magic and craftsmanship the twins had shown. "Oh yeah, they are so high above us they can even spot us on the ground anymore."

Molly was silent, she was so proud of her boys but she felt a twinge of worry too. The time and money spent on the gifts for the littlest Malfoy proved their intent better than anything else could. Just like her and Arthur they knew the one when they found them. Just...the boy was still only fifteen years old. She was afraid that her babies would end up heartbroken.

Pansy stood up and walked over to her silent best friend, nudging the twins to the side, "One moment boys, I'll return him in just a bit but first. I have something I want to say to my very best friend here." She grabbed Draco by the hair and yanked him out of the room and the house, well out of hearing range, where she stopped short and turned round to poke Draco in the chest, "Draco I am telling you right here and now that if you let those two slip away I am not speaking to you ever again do you hear me. That present, no those presents, are the most amazing things I have ever seen. I know you understand the amount of work and brilliance it takes to craft such.

"Those two aren't just hot for you, don't just find you intriguing and a possible part time companion, they are completely arse over tits completely in love with you. I know what you're afraid of, I know as few others do but if you let that fear make you break the hearts of two men who put their hearts and souls into creating something so...incredible to keep you safe and make you happy so help me I will turn you into a ferret and you will stay that way!"

In the house there were several people plastered against the windows watching Pansy's hands flying as she ranted and spoke to Draco. Ron just stared in amazement, "Blimey I wonder what and all she's saying to him."

"I'm not sure we really want to know." Ginny replied and watched Pansy rant on and Draco rub his scalp after having been pulled outside by his hair.

"Wise choice that." Orion nodded, feeling more amusement and admiration for the feisty lady snake than anything else.

Narcissa watched the girl poke her son in the chest again, "Knowing Pansy as I do she's likely warning my son not to be a fool."

Pansy wagged her finger in Draco's face, "What you've got in that house waiting for you is a gift more incredible than any special sword or ring and if you toss it aw-mmph!" She narrowed her eyes and lifted a brow when Draco's hand covered her mouth.

"Enough." Draco narrowed his own eyes at her and met her glare. "I've let you rant and rave because I do agree with what you had to say but enough is enough. You drag me out by my hair in front of everyone to schreech at me for Merlin knows how long. Do you honestly think I don't know what those boys just gifted me? You pulled me out of there before I even had a chance to thank them for it.

"You say you're my very best friend but perhaps you should try to actually have a little faith in me."
Maybe wait to chew me out until I have done something worth chewing me out over. I am not happy with you now Pansy. You embarrassed me and I know you can be much smoother than this when you wish to be. Happy Christmas.” Draco turned on his heel and walked back inside, finding his way to a restroom where could hide away for a while.

Yes he was scared but even he knew better than to throw away something like Fred and George were offering him. He leaned his head against the locked door and tried to work up the courage to move back into the living room.

Narcissa looked out at Pansy standing in the yard and felt a pang for the girl. She understood exactly what had her acting so far out of her normal persona. She cleared her throat, "I'm going to coax my son out of your restroom Molly. Please do continue with the festivities here. Pansy will come back in when she's ready." She cast a privacy spell around the bathroom and knocked shortly before unlocking it and looking at her son as he scrambled to regain his balance. "Sorry dear. I didn't think you'd be against the door."

"No because just unlocking the door and walking in on your son in the restroom is so normal no matter what." Draco's voice didn't have any bite to it though, this morning had been far too much of an emotional rollercoaster for him to be upset over his mother being who she was. "What can I do for you then Mother, since you were in such a hurry to see me?"

She stepped in and closed the door, coaxing him to sit on the closed toilet seat and set to straightening his hair for him. "I wanted to make sure you'd not shut yourself in here all day dear. You've done so in the past after all." Her lips twitched, "I also wanted to try and keep you from being too put out with Pansy."

She tilted his chin up and met his eyes, the same color as his father's yet softer, more alive and human, "She was, of course, in the wrong to make such a scene, but it is most unlike her is it not?" She waited for his nod, "She's frustrated darling, with her own life. She's seeing everyone pair off and cuddle and coo and yet there she stands, on her own. Then she sees you and your two charming courtiers, them coaxing and doing their best to lure you to them when they fit you so very well, and you stringing it out, as of course you should do. She wants what you can so easily get now by stretching out your hand but not a single person who fits her is appearing in her field of vision. She's lonely for a companion deeper than a friend and is afraid you'll wreck your chance at that and she doesn't want you to feel like she does right now."

She kissed his brow, "Catch her on her own later and she'll apologize."

"I understand that Mother and I do sympathize with Pansy, I love her. I can't stand the thought of her hurting and anyway and I wish there was something I could do for her but she hurt me too right now."

Draco ran a frustrated hand through his hair and looked up at his mother's lovely pale blue eyes. "I haven't strung Fred and George along just to string them along, to tease. The world is a very uncertain place at the moment for me and for them. I'm fifteen and who says I don't end up like Lucius? The bastard gene could just lie in wait. These two, gorgeous, wonderful and brilliant men practically laid their hearts at my feet earlier and I'm terrified that I'll bruise them or drop them. I am so scared but I didn't need to hear everything I was doing wrong...It doesn't help."

"Oh sweetheart is that what's scaring you so badly?" She wrapped her arms around him, "You won't end up like Lucius and I will tell you why. You are indeed Slytherin to the bone darling but those you care for you would do anything for. I can assure you the only person your father has ever been willing to sacrifice for has been himself. He might have once cared somewhat for young Miss Lovegood's mother but never enough to help her when he was in the position to do so. Lucius has
never had room in his heart for love of anything but himself and power."

She moved back and met his eyes, "Tell me Draco, who do you love?"

"I love you and Pansy and Blaise. I love Severus and yes...I love the terrible two out there." Draco felt his heart speeding up just by saying that out loud. What if love wasn't enough? What if his mother was wrong and he will still end up like his father and what if Fred and George would change their minds, after Draco had lowered all defenses?

"There you have it then. That is really the only answer that you need dear. Because I will tell you that love never stops being terrifying," she smiled, "It also never stops being wonderful and worth every ounce of fear."

It was on the tip of Draco's tongue to blurt out, 'look how well love ended for you.' but he didn't. He wouldn't hurt his mother like that just because he was scared. "Yeah," He nodded instead. "I'm a bloody, devious Slytherin...I can do this." He ran his hand through his hair again. "We should probably go back out there before they believe we have managed to flush ourselves away."

"Yet another difference between you and Lucius, your turn of phrase," she shook her head canceling the privacy spell and opened the door, brows lifting in amusement at the two worried redheads waiting against the opposite wall.

Fred straightened up as soon as he saw Narcissa, "Is Draco okay?"

"I'm perfectly fine." Draco stepped out from behind his mother. "Actually though..." He leaned in and kissed his mother on the cheek. "Thank you for the advice, I'll see you shortly." Then he reached forward, grabbed the arms of both redheads and pulled them back into the bathroom he'd just exited, once again locking the door. If he was going to do this then he'd much rather do it without a room full of onlookers.

Fred blinked in confusion then exchanged a look with George before turning wide, curious eyes on Draco, "Er are we in trouble?"

"What? No! Maybe...I don't know, it depends how you look at it I suppose." Draco started to pace the small space between door and sink.

George exchanged another worried look with Fred before clearing his throat. "Are you alright dragon?"

"Shush, just shush...I have something to say here and I need you to be quiet and stay over there." He pushed George down on the toilet and then pushed Fred into his brother's lap as he resumed his pacing. "I'm spoilt, selfish, rude, very high maintenance, posh and very particular about my choices." He paced, three steps turn, three steps to the sink, turn. Repeat over and over again. "You make me unsure and fidgety and as much as you drive me crazy, I might just be somewhat crazy about you as well." Pace, pace, pace, three steps and turn.

Fred blinked, watched Draco pace, blinked again, then shot out a hand on Draco's next pass to catch him and make him still, "Draco are you saying that you're considering giving us a chance?"

All teasing and humor was dropped, this was a serious matter, something so precious it should never be joked about.

"I'm not considering anything." Draco watched George flinch back and hurried to continue. "As I said I'm very particular about my choices...And I have chosen...So you better well live up to the hype." He looked up at the two of them for a moment before returning his eyes to the tiled floor.
It took less than a split second for Fred's mind to catch the meaning then a thrilled whoop filled the bathroom and he was on his feet, catching Draco round the waist and pulling him into his arms in one fluid motion, "I always live up to grand expectations. Can I kiss you? Pretty please?"

Much to his chagrin Draco flushed pink again at those words but was he supposed to do, especially when another, tall warm body pressed against his back so he was cradled between the two of them? "Well...I suppose so, if you're shite at kissing though all bets are off." He pressed out a smirk to show he was joking.

Fred's answer to that was to cover Draco's lips with his in a slow, skilled meeting of mouths that had electric tinges shiver through his entire body. It was a chaste kiss by most standards but the impact rocked Fred right down to his toes.

Oh...Oh my. No there was definitely not anything shite about this kiss, in fact it was actually rather mindblowingly wonderful. Someone moaned and Draco was just a little bit horrified to realize that it was him. Once the kiss ended and Draco tried to figure out if he was still able to breath when he was turned around and it all started again. The kiss wasn't the same but it was just as electrifying and wonderful.

Fred hide his smile in Draco's shoulder, his eyes alight and alive with joy. He knew that there was a long way to go until he and George got to call Draco permanently theirs but this was the first, massively important step and though he was certain struggles and arguments were to be found later on, if he had anything to do with it they'd come through them together and be even stronger.

George grinned against Draco's lips before slowly pulling away, feeling a little satisfied about the dazed expression he and Fred had placed on their dragon's features. He knew that there would be stormy waters ahead but nothing could take this moment away from them. This was happening and George had no doubt he would always remember it as the day they got their dragon because now that he'd had a taste there was no way he would ever let the blond go without one hell of a fight.

"Yes...Well..." Draco straightened his hair and tugged his Weasley jumper back into place, trying his best to ignore how flustered he felt. "Perhaps we should get back."

Fred nuzzled Draco's jawline before letting him go and going to open the door. He turned back and held out his hand with a soft smile. "As you say pretty dragon, best to return to the horde before someone worries about your virtue."

"In that case let them worry." Draco took the offered hand and raised his pointy chin haughtily. He would not walk back into that room blushing and with his tail between his legs. He was Draco Bloody Malfoy and he would walk with his head raised high.

Fred chuckled even as he felt heat pool in his stomach when Draco put on that expression as he followed behind Fred and Draco.

"Okay before we go, now that I can, I have to do this," Fred stepped closer and dropped a kiss on the tip of Draco's pointy nose, "You know what that look does to me." He began walking to the living room where he heard talk and soft laughter coming from. "Your lass hadn't come back inside before you pulled us in with you by the by," he looked back at Draco, "Will things be alright with the two of you?"

"Yes, it may take a little while but we will be alright. We have something much too important for it to be lost over this. You have siblings, I can't imagine it's all sunshine and roses between you all the time either." Draco decided to pointedly ignore the nose kissing. His nose wasn't cute, it was aristocratic.
"Nope, sometimes it's hurricanes and dragon dung. Of course Charlie's well aquainted with the latter so it doesn't bother him much."

"I heard that!" Charlie's voice came from the linen closet off the living room.

"Why Charlie what are you up to? Not taking advantage of your snake in the closet are you?"

"Ha-ha, there's not enough room for me to take advantage of myself in this closet much less Blaise." He chose not to mention the fact that his Italian was standing outside the closet hand on his bum.

"Then what are you doing in there?" George tilted his head to the side in curiosity. "I was under the impression that you'd come out of the closet a long time ago. Has Blaise driven you to try and press your way back inside it?"

"May I hex him caro? Please." Blaise's hand curved around the delicious bum he was gripping and gave it a tighter little squeeze.

"You're not of age." Charlie dug deeper into the box, "I'd rather you not get a warning letter."

"Not to mention Georgie is of age so he gets to block the hexes." Fred grinned and poked his head around the open door, ignoring the groping going on, "What are you doing Charlie?"

"Looking for that old thick warming charmed blanket Mum made me back when I was looking after Tiny," he named the large abandoned hippocamp he'd found injured beside their duck pond when he was sixteen.

"Okay, next question then is why are you looking for it?" George asked. "I didn't think you had time these days to look after any other wing clipped strays than your boy here."

"You know you could let go of his arse when you're in mixed company." Draco raised a brow at his friend.

"I could yes but why would I ever want to when it's such a nice, squeezable arse?" Blaise just grinned wickedly.

Charlie shook his head, "It'd free your hand up to clock my impudent brother. As for why I'm looking for the blanket oh cretin little brother of mine, there's a lass outside, refusing to come in, who's in only one of Mum's jumpers, a skirt, and a pair of impractical shoes. Even after an argument I doubt your lad wants her to catch ill and I know mine doesn't. Ah-ha," he pulled a blue and green thick fleece plaid blanket out of the closet and called out, "Found it Ri!"

"Good boy!" Orion came bouncing from the living room and took the blanket from Charlie. "I'll go out and see that the stubborn lady doesn't freeze to death. If she kills me I will all my stuff to Scar."

She was standing out by the duck pond, feeling absolutely miserable over losing her control and ripping into Draco the way she had and embarrassing the both of them. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered, the cold starting to seep in to her bones but she really wasn't ready to go back inside, not when she'd not had a chance to apologize to Draco. She felt even worse when she sniffled like some fluffy, fragile little Hufflepuff.

Orion walked up behind her and wrapped the charmed warm blanket around her shoulders, making sure it covered her completely. "I almost took a swim in this pond last night." Orion looked out of
the frozen water. "Dad and Sirius' dressing robes are at the bottom of it somewhere," He didn't mention anything about what had happened and why she was out there in the first place. Orion didn't think that, that was what Pansy needed right now, besides he didn't care, he just wanted her warm.

She wiped secretly at her eyes and pulled the blanket tight around herself, "Is that where they are? Well I'm sure you can get the two terrors to help you fish them out before you get too deeply into trouble. A diffindo, an accio and then cleaning and drying charms and voila, you can slip them back where they belong before the lecture." She looked over at him, a bit surprised when she realized he came up to her shoulder now. Much more growing and he'd be taller than she was. "What were you doing with them may I ask?"

"I was trying to catch a hinkypunk so I could place it in Ron's bed as payback for him farting me in the face yesterday." He shrugged. "It didn't work completely as I'd planned it. It sucks when you're not allowed to use magic." Orion looked at her. "Besides...I'm not really sure my parents would want the dressing gowns back after what I did to them."

That got a chuckle from her, "Entirely possible. Ah well present it in the right light and you might be able to escape too strict a punishment. Let's see," she tapped her chin in thought, "A hinkypunk, ah their hair is good for a potion that eases skin conditions. It's a high level potion not only because of the difficulty of the brewing but also the difficulty of getting hinkypunk hair. dray's always carping about that."

"Anyone else other than two ex Marauders and Severus Snape and I could perhaps actually get away with that but they have some stupid sixth sense when it comes to these things. Sirius calls it his bullshitometer." Orion smiled at her. "I think I'm gonna have to face the wand and be prepared to be grounded until I turn seventeen."

"Oh don't be so negative. It'll be no longer than til you're fifteen. It is a very minor infraction after all. Out to the Weasley Pond at night? I imagine those two did much more dangerous and worse in their youth if the stories bandied about are anything to go on." She shifted and flinched just a bit, "Peeves actually sings Marauder praises."

"You okay? Is the blanket not helping?" Without second thought Orion pulled off his bright red, knitted hat and placed it on Pansy's head. "And you're right, my parents did lots of worse things and way more dangerous but apparently that was a different matter and a different time." He made his voice deeper, channeling his Dad and the speech he'd heard more than once.

"I think it's this whole Dumbledore thing that freaks them out." Oh Orion could have bitten his tongue off when he realized what he had just said. Bloody, buggering hell why could he never keep his mouth shut?

She looked at him knowingly, "I won't ask, as I doubt you particularly want to go into details," She took the hat off and tucked it back onto his head, "I'm alright, just being a bit more female than usual is all." She wrinkled her nose at that. She normally loved being female except for that one week out of the month.

"Don't wrinkle your little nose at that, nothing wrong with being female. Without women the world would stop spinning and fall into deepest despair or so Molly's told me more than once." He nudged her in the side gently with his elbow.

She gave him a sweet smile and fluttered her lashes, "Want to try it? With all the joys and pains thereof? I don't dislike being a girl. I'm just a bit uncomfortable with it at the moment."
"I think I would be uncomfortable with it for much more than a moment." Orion replied with feeling. "I think I'll stay as I am and just bow to your greater wisdom instead. Just know that it's okay to feel frustrated or catty or sad or...Well just feel in general. No one minds and we're all here for you to unload on, even Malfoy."

She leaned down a bit and gave him a kiss on the cheek, "I do know that but thank you. Actually if you could ask Lady Malfoy if she happens to have her black cohosh, angelica root, and cinnamon tea mix with her that would be very, very helpful."

"I'll go ask right away, as long as you promise to come inside." He smiled at her, his cheek feeling warm from the simple little kiss. He wasn't a Slytherin for nothing, Orion knew the importance of bargaining.

"Oh to be good or bad," she ruffled her fingers through a loose bit of his hair, "I'll be good and give you a tiny lesson. When bargaining for something like that, you need to specify the time, so I could promise that I would come inside but if you don't specify the time, I could, conceivably remain out here for hours and still hold up my end so long as I eventually go inside." She tapped the end of his nose, "Just a little tip for you but yes, I'll go inside now. However I intend to sequester myself in the kitchen."

"It is a very nice kitchen, and the food in it is even better." He grinned. "And for the other thing, lesson learned...But you wouldn't do that to me, I'm much too adorable for you to screw me over."

Orion winked at her and started running toward the house. "You...Kitchen when I get there, or I will release Dad, Uncle Sev and Molly Weasley on you. How's that for bargaining?" He waved before he disappeared inside the Burrow.

She chuckled. Charming little troll. She did go to the kitchen, more because it was beginning to get too uncomfortable to stand up, and settled to sit at the table and wait to find out if Narcissa had any of the packets of her menstrual tea or not. If she didn't regular chamomile would give a little ease but not quite enough to make her feel balanced again.

It wasn't very long before Orion's head of long, unruly hair poked through the kitchen doorway and he slipped inside, followed by Lady Malfoy herself. Orion was young but if there was something he knew it was potion ingredients. Even he knew what kind of aches tea like that was for and he'd thought it would be more comfortable for Pansy to speak to the ladyship directly. He scurried over to the stove though and put on water for the kettle.

Narcissa went over to Pansy, "Orion said you needed to ask me for something?"

Pansy felt her cheeks heat and she nodded, "I was hoping you might have some of your special monthly tea with you?"

Ice blue eyes blinked then softened as Narcissa began to pet Pansy's hair back, "I'm afraid I don't but I would imagine Molly will have the ingredients about, except the black cohosh. That's not a common ingredient in Britain I'm afraid."

"Ask Ginny." Orion said from the stove. "I can almost guarantee she has something since she lives her with all her brothers and they are still alive. If not then I have black cohosh in my potions cabinet, don't have the other ingredients though." He was still standing with his back to the two women, he didn't mean to intrude or embarrass, he just wanted to help.

Pansy cleared her throat, "I'd um...rather not ask her, if you don't mind."

Narcissa continued to pet Pansy's hair, "Orion would you mind bringing me sixty milligrams from
your cabinet then please?” She gave Pansy's hair one more pat, "I'll go ask Molly for the rest and be right back dear." She moved back to the living room and touched Molly lightly on the shoulder, leaning down to murmur in her ear so the men in the room wouldn't hear, "Molly would you mind telling me where I can find your angelica root and cinnamon? Pansy's female issue is visiting."

Molly's blue eyes grew knowing and sympathetic instantly. "But of course, I'll go get them for you, it will only take a minute." She hurried to the upstairs bathroom and the cabinet they kept most of their health related ingredients in and picked up the angelica root before going back downstairs and to Lady Malfoy. "Here's the angelica root and the cinnamon is in the kitchen, in a blue jar on the shelf next to the stove. I can come with and show you if you'd like."

"Thank you but no. Pansy isn't used to other women around when she's uncomfortable," that was an understatement of exceptionally large proportions.

"I understand, my Gin is the same, maybe because she only has brothers. Go and help the lass feel better, I'll make sure people stay out of the kitchen for now." Molly smiled at Narcissa.

"Thank you. Let Orion through though as he's bringing another ingredient for the tea please." Narcissa gave Molly's shoulder a squeeze of gratitude before going back into the kitchen and finding the cinnamon as well as a mortar and pestle to begin grinding the herbs and cinnamon together.

Pansy rested her head on her hand, her other under the table, pressing on her abdomen, trying to relieve the cramps with massage, "Is Dray very angry with me?"

"Not angry so much as hurt dear, though I imagine your current issue is part of what had to yanking him out the door."

"A bit of I think yes. I'll apologize, when I get the chance to talk to him away from other ears."

Orion came back into the kitchen with a carefully measured amount of black cohosh in a delicate little spice bowl. "Here you are and the water is hot for when you need it." He moved over to a series of cupboards and pulled out a teacup and saucer too so that it would be ready for Pansy when she wanted it.

"Thank you Orion. Now if you'd please be a dear and go rejoin the others?"

Pansy snagged his hand as he went past, giving it a squeeze, "Thank you. Now go jump on your brother and get him to help you squish Ronald for his sins."

"Oh I'll get him somehow, if all else fails then I'll wait and recruit the help of lady Luna." Orion's grin was pure evil. Then he reached out and pulled on a shiny lock of dark hair before tucking it behind Pansy's ear. "You just need to feel better. You're always sweet but I like you lethal." He grinned again and walked out of the kitchen, leaving the ladies in peace and quiet.

Narcissa quirked a brow, "Charming child. Reminds me of his father." She noticed that Pansy was staring after Orion's trail with a very faint flush and her lips twitched. Give it a couple of years and perhaps Pansy wouldn't be quite so lonely any longer.

Orion walked back to the living room, hopeful that Pansy would be feeling better soon. He stopped in the doorway for a moment and watched how his Father was wrapped around his Dad from behind and just how his Dad leaned back against him.

Seeing that made him feel warm inside, he'd hated it before that his Dad didn't have someone, that he went through his life lonely and from his very first meeting with Sirius he'd seen how much the
two of them still loved each other. Orion was so happy that they'd finally worked through whatever issues it had been that kept them apart, no one deserved to be happy and in love more than them.

Stepping further into the room he walked past Blaise who was once again perched in Charlie's lap, telling his redhead about the Christmases he'd spent in Italy as a child. In a corner stood Draco, bracketed by Fred and George who looked blissfully happy. Obviously something had happened there between the three of them to put those grins on the twins faces.

Spotting his target he hurried over to his big brother, luckily Ron was a bit aways, talking to his father at the moment, leaving Orion with an opportunity to speak with Harry without Ron overhearing. "So Scar, I could use some ideas about revenge, a non magical kind."

Harry looked at him in amusement, "Uh-oh. Who's angered you enough you need to seek revenge? And what sort of degree of revenge are we talking about here?"

Orion's eyes gleamed almost golden for an instant. "We are talking toxic vapor of the deadliest degree aimed directly at the airways Scar, that requires a very serious return fire."

Harry groaned and hung his head in his hand, "The fart, right. Okay pup, I might have an idea, or two, but it is to be executed tomorrow okay?"

"Okay but then it's got to be a good plan. The poisonous berk is going to pay one way or the other." Orion's jaw was set. He wasn't unreasonable and he could take jokes and pranks as good as he dished them out but something was seriously wrong with Ron's stomach and his farts were lethal and already infamous.

"It'll leave him smelling like dead fish and turn his hair green. Good enough for you?"

"It's acceptable." He flashed a grin at his big brother. "Though no smell can be worse than the one he lets out."

Harry snorted, "You're talking to the bloke who has to share a room with him all year remember? I know exactly how bad it is."

"You have my deepest, deepest sympathies. I hope you spell his drapes closed tight to keep the stench in." Orion pat Harry's shoulder in silent support.

"I spell my drapes to keep it out but I can't do that here." He ruffled Orion's hair, "But vengeance is for tomorrow. Right now let's just enjoy Christmas."

"Yeah, you're right. It's a rather spectacular day with all the different characters here today," Orion looked around the room again, noticing that his Father and his Uncle seemed to be trading barbs with each other but his Dad was smiling so any comments made couldn't be as cutting as they were capable of. "Have you heard anything from Hermione?"

Harry smiled happily, "Every day. She'll be here tomorrow. She's had a good holiday so far though she says her Mum embarrassed her though she didn't go into details about how."

"I'm sure she'll tell you when she gets here and Mum's can be embarrassing...Well or werewolf Dads who gave birth to you." Orion grinned, he looked forward to seeing Hermione again and he knew how happy it would make his brother to have her there.

"Yeah but we'd be boned in a bad way without them." He eyed Fred and George with Malfoy and chuckled, "I'm glad Malfoy finally seems to be giving Fred and George a chance."
"Mm, me too. Maybe now Fred and George can think of things other than Malfoy and maybe he won't dominate the common room with moans about them." Orion looked over at the trio again, noticing how happy all three of them looked. "I'm glad they can be happy and I really hope it will work out for them."

Harry nodded, "Likewise," he lifted a brow as Narcissa came back in and tapped Draco on the shoulder, flicking her eyes toward the kitchen then appropriating the twins for a conversation while her son headed to where she'd silently directed him.

"Oh good." Orion said with feeling. "They are going to make up." He knew Pansy hated to be out of sorts with the boy who was closer to her than a brother could be.

Draco walked to the kitchen and the girl there with his hands in his jeans pockets. He still felt a little awkward and wasn't really sure what to say.

She looked up then back down at her tea for a moment before taking a breath then meeting his eyes, her voice soft and regretful, "I'm sorry. I have no excuse and even if I did I shouldn't be making one. I embarrassed you, yanked on your hair, and embarrassed myself as well. I'm sorry."

Sighing, Draco walked forward and sat down at the table, opposite of Pansy. "I just don't get why you did it Pans. I would have come outside with you without hair pulling if you'd asked me to and what you said...It made me feel like a slag that strings people on just for the fun of it." He opened and closed his hands in his lap under the table, feeling the strange new sensation of metal against his middle finger where his new ring resided.

"I don't think that and I am even more sorry I made you feel that way. I'm scared for you Dray, scared that you'll lose out on the most wonderful thing you could ever have because you're terrified of winding up like your father or because you're afraid you'll get hurt. I'm scared for you, frustrated with me, and physically hurting so I'm none too stable at the moment and it all got sucked into a vortex and spewed out in vitriol. I was originally going to grab your shirtfront but I didn't want to stretch out your sweater, stupid I know." She sipped from her tea.

Draco honestly didn't know whether to rage or laugh, Pansy really was one of a kind. "I kissed them, both of them." He blurted out, Pansy was the only one he could talk about these things with, fight or no fight.

Her eyes glowed and she set her tea down, "Did you, and how was it?"

"Bloody hell Pans, it was like a lightening strike." Draco flushed at the mere memory of it. "They kiss in completely different ways by the way but they both managed to turn me completely inside out." He tapped his fingers against the table top.

She covered his hand with hers and squeezed gently, "That's good. You need a bloke, or in this case blokes, to turn you inside out with a kiss and I'm glad you've found them." She offered him a smile, "Lucky bastard."

"I'm still fucking terrified though. Once the shiny and new wears off, how am I supposed to keep the interest of two men like that? I'm just me and one of me, I won't be enough." Draco kept tapping at the table nervously. "And you are going to find someone Pans, you're the best catch of our generation and you'll get someone that turns you inside out as well."

"Darling you won't lose their interest and let me tell you I honestly think they're the only ones who could truly handle being yours. You're far too intense for any others and I do of course mean that in a good way. You'll only have to be you to keep their interest." She squeezed his hand again and
then picked up her tea again. "As for myself, well perhaps, he's taking his sweet time showing up however."

"Maybe you're not as ready as you think you are and he'll come around when it's the perfect time." Draco grew silent before a look of loathing came over his face. "Urgh, listen to me...I'm already ruined, sound like some starry eyed Hufflepuff." He shuddered. "My point is that you have time on your side, even though it might not feel like it at times."

"Dray darling you couldn't act a Hufflepuff if I draped you in yellow and hit you with ten thousand cheering charms. I know I've time but sometimes it feels as though I'm standing alone in the middle of a desert waiting for rain."

He reached across the table and bopped her nose gently. "You'll always have me Pans, in good times and bad, for sickness and health, for richer and...Well richer still, I don't do poverty." He smiled at her. "I know it's not the same thing but you'll always be my girl and the offer of marriage still stands. Instead of boffing the poolboy I'll boff two redheads instead....Leaving the poolboy for you to boff."

She rubbed her nose, "Careful with that, it's not much I know but I rather like my nose you cretin." She didn't say anything on the marriage joke because she knew that would never happen now even if Draco hadn't assimilated that just yet. Wild they might be but the Weasley Twins were also the marrying kind and not likely to stomach Draco marrying anyone else so long as he was with them.

"Cretin? Really Pans, I may be a lot of things but cretin is not one of them." Draco put his own nose in the air with a huff. "You were the one pulling hair and screaming like a fishwife." He reached out for her hand and took it. "You almost sounded like Granger there for a moment." He hid his laugh, knowing that would ignite his best friend. He didn't like her sounding so sad.

"Careful there darling," she smiled sharply, "After all I'm still unstable and capable of gifting you with the cause of the instability." She sniffed, "I did not sound anything like Granger."

This time he let his smile blossom. "There's my girl, all shark smiles and deadliness." He squeezed her hand. "I love you fancypants, unstable screeching banshee or not."

"Of course you do. I've too much blackmail for you not to." She squeezed back, "I love you too Num Bum."

"Oh Merlin, I really hate that name you know...Which is why you love using it." He dropped his head on the table top.

She chuckled, "Indeed. Your dear Great-Aunt Leticia's little crup gave me such a wonderful reply for the nickname I gained. I told you not to put those balloons in your back pocket."

"I was wearing velvet short pants, they only had a back pocket. Where else was I supposed put them?" Draco flushed both at the crup memory and at what his mother had seen as appropriate fashion for a little boy back then. It had involved plenty of velvet, ruffles and lace.

"If memory serves you weren't supposed to have them in the first place." She chuckled at the rude gesture he gave her and drained her tea. "Well shall we rejoin the masses then?"

"Please let's, before you manage to bring up another charming and traumatizing memory." He got up from his chair and held his hand out as he bowed gracefully. "May I escort you there Lady Snake? It would be an honor."

She took his hand and got up, "I wouldn't dream of saying no. Now perhaps you can help me
scheme something to assist a certain adorable puppy. He's after avenging himself upon the dhole but as magic is verboten he's a bit limited in ways to do so."

"Revenge on the Weasel, hmmm to help or not help with that...What do you think?" His grin was feral as he led her toward the living room and the others.

"I think you're going to relish it." She gave Orion a smile and a wink as they entered the room before she kissed Draco's cheek, "Go flirt with your foxes darling and ponder, we'll meet up with the pup before time to go."

"Okay, if you're sure." He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Come get me when it's time to be evil, I do love evil time." He swaggered away from her, a sly grin on his face when he noticed two pair of blue eyes fasten on him.

Pansy chuckled at the utterly besotted looks on the two miscreants' faces then looked over at Blaise with his dragon tamer. There was another one of her dear ones who'd found his missing piece and it looked as if it was turning into true and deep love there.

Her gaze found the woman who'd stood more as mother to her than her own and her brows lifted at how almost cozy she looked discussing something with Professor Snape. There was something in the challenged looks on both of their faces and ease with each other that spoke of something deeper than mere friendship just waiting to burst into being. She settled into her chair with a secretive smile, happy that her family was all together, safe and happy for once. She could more than deal with her own lack of a companion knowing that.
Harry bounced his foot in impatient waiting and paused in his assisting Mrs. Weasley every few minutes to check outside and see if Hermione had arrived yet or not. He knew it was silly but he'd missed her so much even though it had only been a week at most since he'd seen her.

Molly chuckled and shook her head fondly at his jitters. "Relax Harry, it's still early." Most of her babies were still sleeping, she was so happy that she had all of them home at the moment and with Hermione coming too all of her brood would be gathered. "Hermione will be here soon. She will not come sooner because you're wearing the floor out." She reached over and ruffled his hair.

He gave her a sheepish smile, "Sorry. I can't help it. I've missed her, silly as it might seem after just a few days." He started kneading the dough for her, "Letters and the communication mirrors just aren't the same. I can't tug her hair or give her a kiss."

"Oh Harry, of course you miss her. When Arthur has to work I still can't sleep until he's home and next to me. Even after all these years." Molly's smile widened when there was a knock on the door. "You go Harry, I can handle the dough, go greet your girl."

He gave Molly a kiss on the cheek then flew to the door, throwing it open and catching Hermione up in a firm hug, "I missed you!"

Hermione dropped Crookshanks in surprise and watched him stalk away with an affronted expression and she wrapped her arms tightly around Harry in response. "I missed you too, this week felt as if it went on forever."

"I know," he buried his face in her hair, "I wish you could have been here yesterday and seen how crazy it got with the snakes here and Bill looking all pouty and lovelorn."

She chuckled as she held on to him. "Oh I wish I'd seen that. Still hung up on Fleur then? I bet he's not very happy that Percy spends his days working with his father when he can't even be in the same country." Hermione had heard of Christmas day and all the Slytherins in attendance she wished she could have been there and seen it with her own eyes...Especially Snape in his Weasley jumper.

"Very hung up on Fleur but I think that's why, at least a good half of why, he's coming back to England, she's working for Gringotts' London branch. Oh, and uh fair warning, don't get in smelling distance of Ron today." He pulled her inside, a wide grin on his face of pure happiness.

Her smile wilted a little. "Why? He hasn't eaten cabbage again has he?" Hermione looked wary. "And it's adorable that Bill is moving back to England for the sake of love. I wish him the best of luck and hope that the bathroom locks are working." She smiled again and reluctantly released Harry to go and drag her trunk inside. Since they were going directly school after break she had quite a lot of luggage.

He moved to help her, he'd put back on a good amount of the weight he'd lost earlier and the potions as well as good rest without the nightmares had him looking mostly back to normal, "No but he let wind in Ri's face on purpose and Orion got me, Malfoy, and Parkinson in on a vengeance scheme. When Ron wakes up and showers he'll find that he's far from smelling like a rose. The locks are indeed working too."

"Oh lord, well Ron should really have known better than to do that to Orion of all people. He must
know it would come back and bite him in his gassy bum. And you, Parkinson and Malfoy helping to plan and execute said payback. I almost feel sorry for Ron, almost." Hermione was ecstatic to see that the bags and dark shadows beneath Harry's eyes were gone and that he seemed both healthier and happier.

He kissed her cheek and chuckled, "Poor Orion though is in a bit of a doghouse himself though. Not too bad but he used Remus and Sirius' dressing gowns to try and attract a hinkypunk in the duck pond late Christmas Eve but dropped them. Moony and Padfoot decided to leave them at the bottom of the pond and just save up for new ones. Orion is grounded until they get the new ones."

"I'm away for a week and look what happens...Pure bedlam." Hermione laughed. "Why on earth would he use two dressing gowns as bait for a hinkypunk. First of all they are in hibernation during the winter months and secondly he would have had much better luck with a thin net made of hair than with a pair of dressing gowns." She shook her head.

He snickered, "Supposedly hinkypunks are drawn to the scent of adult males, I think preferring to lure them into the bogs for drowning more than the ladies." He paused in carrying the trunk and picked her up to spin her around, "We just go to pot without you Mione, you're the sanity in our little crazy world. Or at least in mine."

"Oh you're just a big flatterer." She grinned as her stomach felt full of butterflies as he spun her. "I know I can be an overbearing know-it-all, I just don't seem able to help myself." She buried her fingers in his hair and kissed him.

He returned the kiss with a soft happy sound, one arm wrapped around her waist, the other hand cupping the back of her head tenderly.

"WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS THIS?!"

Harry jumped at Ron's bellow, breaking the kiss as he looked up at the top of the stairs to see Ron standing there, still a little drippy, his hair looking like dying seaweed, his skin a sickly, splotchy brown. "Huh now that's interesting."

Hermione buried her face in Harry's neck to hide her snickering and the scent drifting off Ron really was rancid. "Why Ron, have you taken it up with a lady mermaid behind Luna's back?"

The door to the room Orion stayed in with his parents slammed open and Orion just looked at Ron for a long time before dissolving into laughter, laughing so hard he couldn't even stand up.

"What is this?! And what did I do to deserve it?!!" Ron yanked at his seaweed hair and went to stand over Orion scowling down at him.

Sirius, awakened by the commotion paused in the hallway and just stared at Ron for a moment before leaning on the wall, "Orion."

Orion, still in a giggling heap on the floor managed to pull himself together to the degree that he could meet his father's gaze. "Yes Sirius?"

"Why does Ron look like a creature from the Black Lagoon?"

"Because he deserves it, he farted in my face." Orion answered in exactly the same tone as Sirius used.

Hermione giggled more where she stood, her arms still wrapped around Harry.
Sirius lifted a brow and scratched at his ribs, "With that lethal toxic gas? Well then, Ron you're on your own. Orion take the treated soap and shampoo out of the bathroom so no one winds up collateral damage."

Ron gaped at Sirius, "Oi! You mean you're just going to let me look like this?!"

"That is the plan."

Orion grinned and clambered off the floor. "I'll remove it, I'm going to shower anyway, get nice and clean." He looked straight at Ron and raised his delicate little wolf nose. "Something really smells in here don't you think so Ronnie?" He then quickly high tailed it into the bathroom and locked the door securely, very happy that Ron wasn't allowed to use magic either.

Ron spluttered and looked between everyone, "But...but..."

Sirius yawned, "I might not be so willing to let you suffer if it wasn't for the fact that, as bad as your flatulence smells to me, it's infinitely worse for my son who has a werewolf's senses."

Ron ceased his spluttering and his cheeks went darker.

Harry shook his head, "You forgot about that didn't you?"

Ron shifted uncomfortably and mumbled, "Maybe."

"Uh-huh, so you can stay like that until someone either takes pity on you or gets sick of your stench. Harry you and your lady come see me later and I'll fix it so you don't smell the stink bomb here."

"Sure thing Snuffles. We'll come knocking once we get Mione's trunk stowed."

"It's good to see you Sirius." Hermione smiled and let go of Harry so they could continue in getting her trunk up the stairs. "It's good to see you too Ron, I think I'm going to save the hug for later though." She looked at the closed door to Ginny's room. "Maybe we should leave the trunk here if Gin is still sleeping, I don't want to wake her up."

"Do you think she slept through the bellow? I mean I know she's probably used to noise but that was louder than Parkinson yesterday."

"Oi!" Ron shouted then stomped to his room to find his grunge clothes to wear so he didn't befoul anything he liked.

"Louder than Parkinson?" Hermione raised a curious eyebrow just as the door to Ginny's room opened and the redhead girl peeked outside. "Is he gone?" Brown eyes looked around. "I heard enough to know brother dearest was the source of the stench spreading and I don't want him anywhere near me while he smells like that." She grabbed a hold of Hermione's trunk and helped to cart it inside to the usual place it was stowed at when Hermione visited.

"Yeah, yesterday Parkinson grabbed Malfoy by the hair and pulled him outside to yell at him. I'm not sure why but it was definitely weird." Harry leaned on the doorjamb, "Felt wretched afterward too since she stayed outside til Orion coaxed her into the kitchen and Lady Malfoy made her some sort of special tea. I wonder if she was starting to catch ill before coming here do you think?"

"Oh." There was a world of knowing in that small word and Hermione exchanged a look with Ginny. "I don't think she was ill but she can definitely plead temporary insanity. We don't exactly get along but if I had been here she would have had my full support, still do in fact. Malfoy can
handle a little yelling."

Harry frowned, "Um...I'm missing something aren't I? Is this something I need to know or something I never want to know?"

"Not sure about never, I think it's inevitable that you'll learn about it at some point but it's nothing you need to know about now or even want to know at the moment. We can just put it under female issues for now." Hermione kissed his cheek. "Poor Parkinson though, she must have been so embarrassed."

"Probably but she and Malfoy made up and Orion got her to laugh and smile so ended well," Harry slung his arm around her waist, "Oh and Malfoy, Fred, and George were pretty cozy after he left the bathroom."

"I'm not even going to ask why he was in the bathroom. Good for them though." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I would have thought Malfoy'd hold out a little longer though, until summer at least."

Hermione still thought that Pansy had to have been terribly embarrassed and after having been home for a week she knew embarrassment. First her mother had sat her down for the 'talk' before dragging her of to the doctor to get pills and about a hundred condoms. She'd been mortified and still didn't know how to explain that little luggage to Harry or anyone else if they saw it.

"I think the gift they gave him as well as Parkinson's lecture might have had something to do with it." He looked at Ginny, who was still in her pink sleep clothes and watching them in amusement and not a little wistfulness, "You want to borrow Hedwig to send Neville a long letter Gin?"

"Yes please!" It was an instant and very eager reply. "That would be amazing." She didn't tell Harry but she had over four written pages already, just writing at night, small snippets about what had happened that day and how much she missed him. She hadn't known if she'd ever send what she was writing but she felt a little closer to Neville just writing it.

"Kay just let me know when you're ready and we'll give Hedwig something to do. For now I'm going to get Snuffles' miracle stench blocking set then finish helping your Mum make breakfast," he kissed Hermione's cheek, "Want to come with me or stay and have girl talk with Ginny?"

"I'll go with you now, see Sirius and Remus and get this odor issue out of the way. Besides I couldn't stand to bother Ginny now that she finally gets to write Neville. I'm not that cruel."

Harry chuckled at the kiss Ginny blew his girlfriend and waved a goodbye before going to knock on the door to Sirius and Remus' room before opening it to see Sirius already dressed and Remus just pulling a shirt on, "Okay you mentioned a way to keep from smelling Ron?"

Sirius grinned, "Yup. It's something we came up with back in our youthful innocent," at Harry and Remus' simultaneous snort he laughed, "Okay not so innocent but back when we were terrorizing the school we did pull many pranks involving smell and poor Moony suffered so we came up with a spell that blocks your ability to smell bad things for twelve hours. Ron should have learned his lesson by then."

"I think he'll learn, Ron isn't cruel and what he did wasn't really that bad except for a certain yuck factor, anyone other than Orion would have been able to let it go with a punch to the shoulder." Remus straightened his sweater and looked around for their hairbrush so he could brush his hair and fasten it in its usual ponytail.
"Here Moony," Sirius handed the brush to him, "I'm solidly with our sprog on this one though and if memory serves you had James pink with purple polkadots and smelling like a corpseflower for a day after he did something similar to you." He kissed Remus' jaw, "I'll talk to Orion about toning his payback down a little though."

"James always deserved anything I did to him." Remus grumbled with a smile and took the brush from his mate to make himself presentable. I agree with you though, talk to Ri about fitting the punishment after the crime, his doesn't have to go all out every time someone yanks his tail. Just because our cub is able to turn the world upside down to suit his purposes maybe he doesn't always has to do it."

Sirius squeezed his shoulder, "He's mostly going freedom mad right now I think."

Harry nodded, "He can't really prank around like usual at Hogwarts this year, so he's taking advantage of being able to now."

"Even though he knows that he's been looked after before as well, right now he's feeling trapped and that's really not a nice feeling at all. Orion is trying so hard to be good, to stay out of Dumbledore's radar and now Umbridge's too. Our son isn't made to be in the background with his head down and I think he's having a harder time dealing with it than he lets on." Remus wished he could find a way to make it better for Orion but he had no idea how to do it.

"We'll figure it out Moony. Now, let's get the two lovebirds here guarded from Ron's stench hm?"

"Yes, yes of course Pads. It's your fault you know, keep pulling me back memory lane." He finished getting ready before walking over to Hermione and giving her a hug. "Welcome to the Burrow Hermione, it's been an empty week without you." Remus smiled and walked back to get out what they needed to spell Harry's and Hermione's noses against feeling the foul reeking.

Sirius took up his wand as Remus smeared some minty smelling ointment on the tips of their noses, "Pretty simple incantation. Nihil Odor," he tapped Harry's nose with his wand as Remus did the same for Hermione, "Done and done, now no foul smells for the next twelve hours."

"Thank you very much, this will be like a life saviour in the Burrow today." Hermione breathed through her nose happily as no nasty smellage got through the charm Sirius and Remus had performed.

"Molly is not going to let the Burrow smell like this a whole day, I would be surprised if she didn't find work for Ron outside or in one of the outhouses until whatever you did to him wears off." Remus shook his head.

"Hey I just suggested fish oil and green dye for his hair, blame the extremes on Malfoy and Parkinson." Harry shook his head, "I'm starting to think those two could blow up the world with enough time to plot."

Sirius snickered, "Probably. You two head on downstairs, I'm going to snag Orion for a talk."

"Yes, we're going to let you finish getting ready and go downstairs to help get the breakfast ready. Thank you much for the help again. See you downstairs." Hermione smiled and held Harry's hand as they left the canines bedroom.

"See you at breakfast Moony," Sirius kissed the tip of Remus' nose, "Off to grab our sprog now." He gave a wiggle finger wave and went to locate his son. He found Orion stepping out of the bathroom dressed for the day and put together neatly with bottles in a bag. He ruffled his son's hair,
"Thank you for getting the prank stuff out. If Bill wound up looking like Ron does now he might cry."

"Oh don't talk like that and make me regret I pulled it out...Seeing Bill cry could be the most amusing thing to happen this week." Orion looked up at his Father.

Sirius chuckled, "Come on kiddo. I want to talk to you." He led Orion to the owl shed and pet a fluffed up Hedwig, "I know Ron's gas is lethal kiddo but this is a little excessive."

"I know." Orion found a low box to sit down on and let his legs swing. "It wasn't really supposed to get this out of hand...My first vengeance plan didn't work so I asked Scar for pointers and Pansy and Draco got into it too and the thing just exploded. There's nothing hurtful, harmful or permanent about anything currently on Ron though."

"I know," Sirius sat next to Orion on the box corner and set his hand on his son's head, "It's hard right? Having to keep your head down at Hogwarts when you want nothing more than to turn Umbridge inside out."

"You have no idea how hard it is." Orion ran both hands through his hair. "I don't get it...Don't understand how Dad lived through seven years of school doing it. Taking the teasing, the bullying and the bashing, knowing he could take them apart...literally take them apart without breaking a sweat. I get locked up at seven pm at nights, watched all the time as if I'm just going to slip out and do the tapdance on Umbridge's teacup collection...You have no idea how hard it is."

Sirius refrained from mentioning his stint in Akaban or the time after that stupid arse move with Snape during the full moon during which he was shunned by all the Marauders and kept sharp watch on with the threat of expulsion and worse, being kicked out of the Potter's home hanging over his head like the sword of Damocles. He understood that at thirteen everything felt bigger to Orion and he didn't think anyone understood how it was. He ran his hand over Orion's hair, "No one thinks you'll sneak out to target Umbridge or her belongings kiddo, you promised not to. It's her they're all worried over. People like that will fabricate an excuse, even if it's a lie, and use it to pull you into a detention. No one can control what she does so everyone watches you and keeps you close to step in if she shows up."

"It makes me feel like I can't breathe. I know everyone is do it to look out out for me, them being kind and that just makes it that much worse. Harry comes bleeding after detentions taken in my place and it makes me sick to my stomach and my soul." Orion looked down at his own hands. He pulled his son into a gentle hug, "I know. Everything in you is screaming for you to protect instead of be the protected, to take out the threat and you can't without hurting others and you're having to push down who you are in order to keep your word and keep what's most precious to you safe in the only way you can right now. It's killing you and you itch under your skin and feel like you're going to explode all at once."

That was exactly how he felt. Orion swallowed loudly and hugged his father back. "I'm doing all I can to be good, stay out of the way and not disappoint anyone but I don't know how long I can manage without as you say explode. Just trying to make it through a day smiling is nearly too much for me to handle as it is now."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry you're in this position, that you can't just be you. I wish I could do something to make it better for you." He rocked his son. There wasn't anything he could do or say to make things better right now. All he could do was listen and be there for Orion however he was able.

"I know that Sirius, everyone is doing all they can. I'm doing everything I can. Let's just hope it
will be enough before everything goes straight to hell." Orion smiled at his father, trying to pull himself back together and not have every nerve on the outside of his body. He tried so hard to seem normal every day.

Sirius kissed the top of Orion's head, "What do you say that later, after breakfast, you, Snuffles, and your Dad we all go for a run in the woods?"

"Sounds brilliant, please let's do that yes." Orion couldn't shift form but he loved to run until he forgot the world around him.

He gave Orion a squeeze, "We'll do that then and next Hogsmeade weekend I'll meet you and the others out by the Willow and we'll run through the woods to the house." He knew Orion needed some way to blow off steam and something to look forward to.

"Yeah, let's do that...I'll look forward to it. Thank you Sirius." Orion leaned against him for a moment. "We should go inside shouldn't we? Before those Weasley boys have eaten all the bacon." He was glad that his father had taken him aside and talked to him but he was still a teenager and talking feelings for too long made him uncomfortable.

He ruffled his son's hair, "Now you know your Dad wouldn't let them eat all the bacon. He'd at least save some for you but yeah, I like my bacon hot so come on." He got up and tickled Hedwig's feathers again before walking with his son into the chaos of a Weasley meal. He had a feeling things were going to get really bad at Hogwarts before it got better so Orion was going to need all the runs he could get.
Chapter 42

Harry looked both ways, checking his map, and ruffled Orion's hair before slipping into the Room of Requirements where everyone was gathered along with a few new members of the Defense Association. There were people from every house, even more Slytherins than just Draco, Pansy, Blaise, and Orion, and every year. It was definitely a success even after Edgecombe's resounding rejection through the sign up contract. Cho had been a little irritated about the pimples from hell over her best friend's face spelling out liar but as there'd been fair warning she'd let it go.

It was a good thing that the Room of Requirement could become as large as needed since the Defence Association had become much more popular than Hermione could ever had believed. It showed that apart from a few brown nosers the students really missed a proper education when it came to Defence Against the Dark Arts. She was so proud of Harry for rising up and teaching all of them that were there.

As soon as Harry entered the room everyone seemed to come to attention, even Fred and George who handled the teaching of things Harry didn't know, and nearly bounced on their toes in eagerness wondering what they'd all be learning today. It made Harry a little embarrassed but proud as well and he nudged Orion to stand over with Pansy.

"Evening everyone, sorry I'm late. The toad was sneaking round again." He grinned at the loud chorus of boos. "According to the lesson plans Professor Lupin handed over we're all actually ahead for the quarter so I thought we'd start working on our patronuses, what do you all think?"

A loud cheer came with that announcement, everyone had heard of Harry's feat with the dementors two years ago and the Patronus charm was something everyone wanted to learn. Dennis was almost vibrating in eagerness so Orion had to grab his arm to keep him from toppling over.

Harry was a very good teacher, he took the time to explain so that everyone understood and he never made anyone feel stupid for not getting it on the first try. Orion thought that his brother was just a good a teacher as his Dad and he hoped that it was a career that Harry would at least think about when he thought about his future.

It had become more than just teaching them the spells, Harry had fallen into a habit of explaining the incantations and the spell before teaching it because for some understanding what you're saying and what sort of spell you were casting helped them to cast it better.

"The incantation is a Latin one, Expecto Patronum, and it means 'I summon a protector' and that's exactly what it does. A full corporeal patronus usually takes the shape of an animal and chases dementors away. It can also be used to send a completely secure message as every patronus is unique, identifying its caster, and truly evil wizards can not cast a patronus."

He tapped the walls and had them turning reflective, "A patronus symbolizes what makes you feel safest, secure, and what creates the most positive feelings for you. Mine," he cast the spell wordlessly, a trick he been working on for a while seeing it as just seemed good sense not to give your opponent warning, "as you can see is a lioness. I am alive because of my mother and have since been best protected by ladies my entire life and more the three women who I feel protect me best with were all sorted into Gryffindor. My mum is a bittersweet memory but Mrs. Weasley, who took up guardianship of me, and Hermione, who's been by my side since first year, saved my bum more than once, and who completely owns my heart, just the thought of them makes me happy, makes me smile."
Hermione blushed as a lot of faces suddenly turned on her. She had heard Harry's reasoning before but it wasn't any less humbling hearing it again. She would do anything for him, absolutely anything without him even asking but being in the spotlight even if only a little still made her blush. She was well aware that a lot of girls couldn't understand what Harry Potter of people was doing with her, a mudblood bookworm and most of them were just waiting for Harry to dump her. Hermione wasn't going to let it bother her, she knew what she and Harry had together.

"Um Harry? How do you know what is your happiest memory, what makes you feel safe?" Dennis waved his hand in the air as he asked, face beet red for daring to speak up. "I mean I have a lot of happy memories but nothing as profound as what you're speaking of. My life is just normal...Not even magic except for me and my brother."

Harry walked over and ruffled Dennis' hair, "It doesn't have to be 'profound' though trust me kiddo normal is very much underrated. The happy thoughts are to give you a cushion in the face of a dementor but also when you feel good, you cast better. Not just the patronus but every spell. When you're in a good mood it's easier to cast and direct your magic.

"Magic is fueled by emotion, when we had bursts of accidental magic we were scared or very angry, strong negative emotions tend to cause dangerous, unstable magical bursts but the positive ones will let you cast more powerful, stable, and directed spells. The trick to the Patronus Charm is not to have a memory of profound happiness but to know, from the tips of your toes to the top of your head, to know that you can cast it. You have to be confident in your ability to cast it and that's much more difficult than calling up a happy memory."

Cho nodded in understanding, "When you cast that burst of Patronus light that impressed Professor Flitwick in your third year, during the game, you weren't really thinking."

He chuckled, "I was too focused on doing what I'm good at, what I know I'm good at, to have doubts. I had to catch the bloody snitch and just did not have time for dementors so I shooed them away," he cast a look at Draco, "even if it wasn't a real dementor."

A small smattering of pink spread across high cheekbones. He did regret trying to tease Potter with something he had been really afraid of at the time but he didn't have it in him to apologize now that so much time had passed. He hoped that Potter knew that he wasn't like that anymore though, getting away from his father had caused a lot of things to change. Draco felt much freer now, finally allowed to be his own person. Not that he was some sort of angel, that he would never be. He was still a selfish, mean spirited person but hopefully he wasn't cruel.

Dennis bit his lip, perfect confidence sounded even harder than perfect happiness.

Orion poked him in the side. "Don't worry Den, you can do this, I know you can. Just listen and watch Scar before you whip out your wand and you'll see. Don't overthink it, just do."

"Can we see another Patronus?" Parvati asked, she was fascinated by the different forms and she silently wondered if she and Padma would have the same one.

Hermione nodded and cast the spell having her great lion pace through the crowd, again a soft blush even though not many here knew about Harry's animagus form.

Harry had a gentle blush on his face as well as a wide grin. "According to Professor Lupin, though Mione and I haven't had cause to test it out yet, matching patronuses when cast together are more powerful than on their own too. Now stop staring at my girl you lot. Fred, George mind demonstrating your own patronuses for the crowd," he addressed everyone else, "Myself, Mione, Ron, Luna, Ginny, Neville, Fred, and George all can cast the Patronus Charm so we'll all be giving
Fred stepped forward, brandishing his wand, "Expecto Patronum!" The fox that was his brother burst from the tip of his wand and pranced round the room, and Draco's ankles.

Draco watched the fox indulgently and his smile widened when it was joined by an arctic one after a moment, the two foxes tangled around his feet and almost stroked themselves against him like cuddly cats. Oh what a way to be discreet, not that Draco was embarrassed about his blooming relationship with the twins, he was simply a private person.

"Now I really want to be able to do it aswell." Seamus's eyes were large as he watched to two foxes, "Imagine the messages you can send your cuddlebunnies with it."

Dean whacked him on the back of the head with a roll of the eyes even as across the room Lee Jordan started hooting with laughter.

"Foxes!" Lee cackled, "That's brilliant! And oh so accurate. Pfft!" He continued laughing at his two best friends and partners in crime.

George stuck his tongue out at his best friend. "You can laugh when you've managed to produce one of your own, until then we are kings of awesomeness so feel free to bow at our feet and worship." He turned and winked at Draco who just scoffed.

Lee popped George with a jinx that had a flower growing from the top of his head, "Watch I'll do it easy peasey and you'll be eating your words Daisy."

Fred laughed, "Hey Gred, shall I pluck your petals?"

"Why not? You already took my flower." It was whispered in Fred's ear so no one besides his brother heard it. Then he raised his voice. "I'm man enough to carry off the flower look, if you're good I'll rain petals on you." He grinned at the assembled people.

Hermione snorted, the twins truly were one of a kind, Draco would have his hands full with them, that was for sure. "Well if we're done joking around maybe we can get back to the matter at hand?"

"But of course Lady Str-YIPES!" Fred jumped when a stinger zapped him in the arse midbow and turned to see Harry looking at him archly while everyone laughed, "Now that's not fair I won't be able to sit for hours," he muttered under his breath so only George might have heard him, "or have any fun either."

Harry shook his head at the twins, "Alright let's get to it then. Groups of four as usual."

It was amusing how fast the twins moved to grab for Draco to be in their group, even with a stinging arse, Fred could move quickly for that. Then they waved Lee over to join them as well.

Orion was with Dennis as usual as he tugged his best friend over to Pansy and Blaise. His Gryffindor friend wide eyed at being in a group of snakes, especially two so prominent ones. Pansy Parkinson scared him a little, she was really pretty but her tongue could cut sharper than a scalpel.

Hermione wanted to be with Harry but figured it was better to be in a group who didn't know how to cast the Patronus, it could make the teaching go quicker so she just went to grab three people.

Harry chuckled and did the same, noticing that Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna did as well and as usual, once each group got the hang of the incantation and wand movement he nudged groups
together to help each other until he and the others who knew how to cast the Patronus were roaming the room giving tips here and there. He noticed Orion getting a little wisp of patronus light by his eighth casting and his lips twitched at Pansy's put out expression.

She huffed and narrowed her eyes, "Confident little puppy aren't you?"

"Of course I am, I know my qualities." He grinned at her, showing off slightly elongated canines. The more into puberty he came the more his wolf traits were showing. "Bet you I'll have a full corporal one by the next lesson."

Dennis almost swallowed his tongue hearing Orion being so flippant with the queen of Slytherin.

She sniffed and leaned down just a bit to meet his eyes, "Not before me impudent nibbler." She straightened and put more effort into casting, smirking when a puff of silver came from her wand.

"What do I get if I beat you to it?" Orion met her smirk with an eager one of his own.

Blaise rolled his eyes. He actually felt confident that he could cast a Patronus if he needed to. His complete trust and confidence in Charlie and the bond they had made him know he could do it. He only needed to call on that bond. He did just that and cast the spell, not feeling very surprised but none the less pleased when a dragon burst forward from his wand and circled over their heads.

Harry had to laugh, especially when Parkinson made a moue of disgust.

"Why you evil little sot. I should hex a tail onto you." She spun when a call of delight caught her attention and she saw a swan gliding elegantly around Chang. She actually hissed in displeasure like the snake that represented her house. Tonight she fully intended to work on this in the privacy of her own bed curtains.

Orion chuckled, he liked it when she got all fired up like that. "You never did tell me what I'd get if I beat you to it." He made a stronger sliver of silver mist rise from his wand, simply to prove his point. When he was here and talking to students without having to worry about Umbridge he felt almost like himself again.

"A yank on the tail?" It was spoken in an arch tone though the gleam in her eyes told of it being a tease as she focused and matched him in her own next attempt. "And if I succeed just what do you intend to give me?"

"Hmmm, how about the ear lengthening hex you've been on me about learning?" Orion knew she wanted that hex but so far he'd kept her wanting, holding on to the secret of making ones earlobes sweep the floor.

"You should specify what tail you would yank, if not he might lose on purpose." Blaise smile was dirty as his dragon dissolved into glittery mist before disappearing completely.

Harry just about hit the floor laughing as Blaise was blown back by two Reductos at once, one from Parkinson and one from a red faced Orion.

Pansy tapped her wand against a palm, "Darling don't make me tell Lady Malfoy on you."

"Don't blame me for your own failings in wording yourself." Blaise groaned and got back on his feet, dusting himself off. "And as much as I respect and yes well fear Lady Malfoy, she has nothing on Mummy dearest."

"You really did walk into that one Pants, even Mother would agree to that." Draco said from where
two redheads, were helping him direct his wand movements.

"Unlike the two of you perverted cretins I have breeding enough to not have my mind in the gutter all the time. And speaking of perverted cretins, you two redheads if you don't behave I'll do worse than make a flower grow from your heads." She shook her wand at Blaise with a warning glare when he'd have said something off color.

Fred grinned, "Yeah? Like what? Have Hermione dock points from Gryffindor?"

Pansy smiled slowly, evilly, "No, more like ask Granger to write to your mother."

"Oi, no need to get downright wicked. No need to threaten with mothers." George looked very affronted. "We didn't say anything this time, it was all your boys. Focus all that evil energy on winning your little bet instead of going after innocent, studious people." Mock innocence shone out of blue eyes.

"It has to do more with where your hands are," her gaze dropped to the freckled hands inching closer to Draco's rear, "than what's come out of your mouths. Stop distracting Dray." She turned pack to her little group and pet Orion's hair once before getting back to work.

Fred grinned unrepentantly but took his hand off Draco, "Much as I hate to do what she requests," he sighed heavily, "She is right Greddy."

"Ah yes, sadly she is. I suppose we have to save the squeezing for later, though not much later." He held up his hand. "My hands gets locked in this weird claw like position without luscious dragon bum to grope."

This time the hex came from Draco's own wand as he felt as if he was burning up from embarrassment. "Potter, I want to switch groups."

"Go right ahead Malfoy, pick your poison. Fred, George stop goofing off and help the others, if Malfoy needs help Luna will help him," a warning look came from the bright green eyes. He didn't mind the twins playing around and bringing light hearted jokes to the lessons but there was a limit and it had been reached.

Fred grimaced. Okay maybe they'd been pushing it. Before Draco slipped away he squeezed his shoulder and murmured an apology, "Sorry. We're sort of touch drunk." He squeezed again then went to help a group of firsties.

George apologized too, looking miserable as he pinned Draco with sad puppy eyes before he went to help a group of third years who looked to have trouble with their wand movements.

Draco wasn't really pissed but it had been too much, even though he wanted to be with them he didn't want dirty talk in public, that wasn't who he was. He walked over to his cousin and let her help him and guide his movements, glad to feel a cool impersonal touch.

Pansy shook her head. The two terrors already had an apology to render and it looked as if she'd need to talk to them. Joy. Looking over at Orion's Gryffindor friend she lifted a brow, "I don't bite you know little lion." She crooked her finger to get him to step out from behind Orion.

"You sure, I've heard you have a magnificent set of fangs." Dennis did creep out from behind Orion. He'd only managed the tiniest little whisp of smoke rising from his wand but at least it was something. He looked over and saw that Colin hadn't managed anymore and that made him feel better.
She tapped him on the nose, "I only bite when asked, or when angered and I'm not that easy to anger. Just treat me with the same respect you would Granger and we'll get along fine." She exchanged a look of challenge with Orion then got back to business.

-----------------------------------------------

Harry frowned as he climbed the final flight of steps to the Astronomy tower. Dumbledore had sent him a message at breakfast about a 'matter of great importance' he needed to discuss with him. Needless to say Harry was skeptical.

Dumbledore stroked his beard before turning with a kindly smile, "Harry my boy thank you for coming. I do apologize for pulling you away from your studies." He studied the boy, noting that he'd recovered somewhat from Dolores' detentions and though they had resumed with slightly less frequency Harry wasn't as frail as he really should be in his ideal plan but plans could be adjusted and subtle poisons could create frailty easily. That was for later however, right now he needed to bring Harry back to his side in the first place.

"It's fine sir. Your note said you had something important to tell me about?" Harry subtly avoided Dumbledore's grasp and moved so his back was to an open window.

"Yes my boy, it's to do with Lord Voldemort and the best way to defeat him for good."

Harry nearly rolled his eyes. That tired old ploy? Well he had a role to play in this and Dumbledore did dispense truth along with his lies. "Really? Er won't he just be taken care of when the Ministry catches him?" Not that they would, they were too busy covering their own arses.

"I'm afraid not my boy. You see Tom dabbled in arts darker than even the ritual to return him to a body, including one that enables him to survive beyond simply losing his body through ordinary death."

Harry felt his stomach ice over, "What do you mean sir? Didn't you once say there's no way to bring back the dead?"

"Yes but you see that's only if the soul is sent to the other side along with the body dying."

"I don't understand."

"There is a dark art Harry, that splits the soul. One that uses a ritual involving cold-blooded murder of the foulest kind to rend the soul and then put a piece of it into an object," he barely glanced, barely flicked his gaze up to Harry's scar, just enough for Harry to catch the direction of the gaze before he smoothed his expression into serious, kind lines, "or a being."

That glance should plant a seed in Harry's mind that he would nurture and use once sprouted to bring his plans to fruition. "So that even if the main body is destroyed the one who split his soul can still live on, in the sort of life Voldemort was existing in before the end of last year."

On the north staircase Minerva covered her mouth in sickened shock, barely able to fathom that she was hearing Albus say these things, that he was telling Harry of Horcruxes.

Harry began backing toward the south staircase. That glance made him feel ill and more he remembered the locket and Lady Malfoy's remarks. "Sir I don't think this is something you should be telling me."

"You need to know my boy," Dumbledore stepped forward quickly, catching Harry's arm in slight fear of him escaping and truly losing his weapon, "You must know. The only way to defeat
Voldemort once and for all is to destroy all of the pieces his soul has been split into. You have to learn about the Horcruxes!

Harry yanked on his arm, "No! Tell the Ministry about this suspicion of yours but leave me out of it!"

Stepping up from the south staircase Umbridge wore a great Cheshire cat smile as she tapped against the open palm of her other hand. The purple flower that was as big as her head wibbled on the collar of her hot pink robes in excitement.

"Yes Albus dear, why haven't you come to the Ministry with this information. Withholding something like this is quite the crime as I am sure you know, being former head of the Wizengamot and everything. Not as big a crime as trying to lure a student into the Dark Arts of course, which was what you were doing. Luckily I put a recording charm on my wand the second I heard what you were talking about plus a Pensieve memory from me should be rather interesting, don't you think so?" She indeed looked like a toad who'd swallowed a big, fat fly.

Harry managed to tear his arm from Dumbledore's grip and flee to the other side of the room well away from the insane old man and more the evil woman. From the look on Dumbledore's face and the utter glee Umbridge was displaying he had a feeling things were going to get uglier at the school very soon. He nearly jumped a foot in the air when a hand came down gently on his shoulder and he turned to see McGonagall, her face a study in heartbreaking betrayal, staring at Dumbledore.

"Albus this...how could you?"

"Minerva, my dear lady, it is for the greater good."

Umbridge didn't give a rat's arse about Potter but this was an absolute golden opportunity and she would use every angle she could to get rid of Dumbledore, Potter could come next.

"Yes Albus, how could you. First of all keep the Horcruxes a secret, if you had told what you knew then He who must not be named could have been beaten for good before his latest return. Not only that but you tried to put the responsibility of something this big on the shoulders of a fifteen year old boy. Horcrux is the Darkest Arts you can do and you want a boy to chase after them and destroy them? Really Albus, this is not to be had. The Minister and the school board will hear everything about this...Not to mention what the parents will say when they hear what you are teaching the students."

Harry honestly didn't know whether to cheer for what was going to be the very public downfall of Dumbledore or curse for the fact that he knew Umbridge was sure to slip into his post. No matter what Dumbledore was getting sacked and he might as well stick the knife deeper to keep it that way, "Was it you?"

"I beg your pardon my boy?"

"There was a bind placed on my magic, one designed to drain my magic away once I went through my inheritance. The entire time I was at the Dursleys not a single witch or wizard went anywhere near me and after there was no where I could have been put through a binding ritual without my knowledge. Was it you who did it?"

Minerva felt her knees go weak at the dark shadow that went over Albus' face and that was all the answer she needed and apparently all the answer Harry needed as well as she felt his shoulder stiffen under her hand. She squeezed Harry's shoulder, "Come Mr. Potter. I think you should return
to the common room for the time being."

"Yes Professor McGonagall, the Aurors have already been called and no student needs to be
witness to the Headmaster being taken away." Umbridge was beaming, this was like birthday and
Christmas rolled into one. "Potter probably doesn't have to witness since I have the recording and
am very willing to give the pensieve memory."

Dumbledore's career was over and she felt like up and dancing a jig of happiness, she couldn't wait
to floo the Minister and tell him the good news. "You will be taken into questioning about the
Horcruxes, how many they are and where their location is. And of course about you trying to
corrupt a student with the Dark Arts of course."

Dumbledore gave her a smile that set Harry's teeth on edge, "My dear Madam Umbridge, I'm
afraid that considering the issue with Voldemort, I can not indulge you in that matter."

Harry's jaw dropped as Dumbledore clapped his hands together and Fawkes appeared in a blaze of
flame before in the same blaze he and the old buzzing nuisance disappeared.

McGonagall's jaw tightened and she carefully coaxed Harry down the stairs and toward the
Gryffindor commons as she heard Umbridge's exclamations of dismay.

Outside the painting of the fat lady Harry paused and turned to look at her, shocked to notice that
he was only a centimeter shorter than she was. When had McGonagall shrunk? "Professor?"

"Yes Mr. Potter?"

He studied the stern lines of her face and saw that she was keeping herself together by sheer will.
He then did something that shocked even the painting in front of them. He hugged her. "Thank
you." Then he gave the password and scrambled inside, leaving a teary eyed Transfiguration
professor there to walk back to her office to compose herself.

The usual little group was sitting in the common room waiting for Harry. Hermione was gnawing
on her bottom lip until she could taste blood, fidgeting and letting her leg jump nervously. The
moment she saw Harry enter through the portrait she scrambled to her feet and walked to meet
Harry.

"What did the Bee want with you? He didn't cause you any trouble did he? No attempt at a new
binding or such? If he did touch you in any way I will hex him, no matter the consequences." She
looked him over as if checking for injuries. She knew that even though he tried to appear the
pleasant twinkling grandfather of them all, Dumbledore was shrewd and had formidable power, it
wouldn't be wise to underestimate him, especially after what he'd done to Orion.

"Hermione," Harry caught her wrists and met her eyes, aware that he had everyone's attention in
the common room, "Dumbledore is gone."

There was a lot of wide eyes and dropped jaws at those worse.

"G-gone? What do you mean gone? How? Why? What on earth happened?" Hermione was
gobsmacked and couldn't believe she'd even stutter. This was epic news but Harry didn't look
happy so it couldn't be all good news.

"He was going to be arrested by Umbridge so he left. Fawkes flashed them both out of the school," He
looked around at everyone who was staring in disbelief, "I have a nasty feeling Umbridge is
going to be taking his place as Headmaster." He pressed his forehead to Hermione's, "I'll tell you
the whole story later. I have a feeling that, if they're not Aurors in Umbridge's pocket, the Aurors
who come to investigate will want to talk to me so it's best to wait til we can visit Myrtle later."

"Oh Harry." Hermione wrapped his arms around him tightly and held him close. Even with Dumbledore gone, the curse on Orion was still there and things wouldn't get better with Umbridge in charge. "I'll stay with you if you want, when you speak to them I mean." Her mind was running all over the place, trying desperately to folder everything that Harry'd told her into their proper places and failing miserably, it was just too much to take in.

"What I don't get is why a noble creature such as Fawkes is on Dumbledore's side, helping him." Ginny leaned back against Neville's chest, blowing bright red bangs out of her eyes.

Neville tucked her hair back better, "Well he is his familiar. It's possible Dumbledore wasn't always so...you know and once a phoenix chooses to be someone's familiar they're his or her familiar for the lifetime of the witch or wizard."

Ron nodded, "According the the book Skeeter wrote with Bagshot's help he was really close with Grindelwald, like Fred and George close," he ignore his brothers' cries of dismay from the corner where they'd been scheming an apology to Draco, "but seems like Grindelwald was just using him. Seems to be that's make someone turn rotten don't you think?"

George nodded slowly. If he were to find out that Fred and now Draco never really loved him but had only used him it would break him, literally shatter him beyond redemption. "It is no excuse for how he ended up but it is an explanation for what was his turning point. Whatever that was good in him has eroded away though and left only this greedy, fame hungry shell. It is good that he's been outed from the school but it's very bad that Umbitch is still here."

Fred pointed his wand at a skulking Romilda Vane, "Try to squeal our opinions Vane and you'll be literally squealing for the rest of your life, as a pig." Oh the small petty satisfaction he got from her squeak of fear and retreat to her dorm. "Very bad yeah but also, if she takes Dumbledore's post then she'll be too busy to really be as big a cow as she's been. I don't know about you but I really don't see McGonagall taking on the paperwork and mess for Umbridge as she's done all this time for Dumbledore."

Harry gave a light chuckle, "No I can't imagine she will." He looked up as the portrait door swung open and McGonagall stood in the frame.

"Mr. Potter one of the Aurors would like to speak with you about the incident."

He kissed Hermione on the forehead, "I'll be okay Mione, I've got McGonagall watching my back. Do me a favor and get everyone together for a Myrtle visit for me?"

"Of course, we'll be waiting for you there when you are done." Hermione kissed him shortly before going back to the group to gather them and get them to the Chamber.

"Can we use your office Professor McGonagall, to keep things private?" The Auror twirled her spiky electric pink hair around her index finger as she spoke. At McGonagall's nod she smiled and the three of them made their way to the vice Headmaster's office. "Good to see you again Harry, on your feet this time. I only wish it was under better circumstances." Tonks held out her hand for Harry to shake.

He made a short little laugh and shook her hand, "Yeah brilliant. You know I'm starting to think I'm destined to run into you when I deal with Aurors. You blasted a hole through my wall did you remember that?"
"Did I? Must have been a weak wall then, usually they only crack a little." She sent him a broad grin and fiddled with the row of piercings travelling up her delicate little ear. "And of course you deal with me, I'm the best they got." Another grin, a joking one this time.

"Now to be serious, I'll try to keep things short since I'm sure that the last thing you want to do is rehash this." She brought out a slightly glowing crystal from one of her pockets. "Do you give permission to record this conversation?"

"Yes Auror Tonks, I give my permission to have this interview recorded in the presence of my Head of House as I am still a minor." He gave both ladies a crooked smile.

McGonagall settled over in a corner to be unobtrusive, a silent observer.

"Thank you Mr. Potter." Tonks slid in to her Auror persona as well, nothing of the joking, clumsy girl showing at the moment. "So would you mind telling me in your own words what transpired between you and Albus Dumbledore at the top of the Astronomy Tower this afternoon?"

"I got a note from Professor Dumbledore saying that he needed to see me on a matter of great importance and to meet him in the Astronomy Tower after classes. When I got there he started talking about Voldemort and saying stuff about how he performed a dark art to split his soul and put it into different things. Weirded me out truth be told."

"Well that's not strange, I think anyone would be weirded out by talk like that." And a glimmer of the usual Tonks showed as she wrinkled her nose. "How did you respond to Mr. Dumbledore as he spoke of these things to you, a minor? And did he ever mention what this soul splitting spell was called?"

Tonks had to ask, it was an open and shut case truth be told since Dolores Umbridge had left a Pensieve memory but she had to follow protocol since the Ministry wanted to cover their arses and have no one able to question their treatment of Dumbledore.

"First I told him that I didn't think he needed to be telling me about it and then I told him to leave me out of it and tell the Ministry. I'm not sure if he said that it was the name of how you did it or not but he said I needed to learn about the Horcruxes." He shuddered.

Tonks gave a matching shudder, the fact that someone could even consider performing such an act as to split your soul made a part of her own soul freeze to ice. "Did Mr. Dumbledore tell you anything else? Say anything else?" She knew from Umbridge's Pensieve memory that, that was when she'd interrupted but she still had to ask. "Off the record you did the right thing Harry. No one has the right to come to you with things like these and try and make you do something." She gave the boy a kind smile.

"No he didn't. Umbridge and Professor McGonagall showed up before he could say anything else," he returned the smile crookedly, "And thanks. You're one of the few who seems to get that."

Minerva looked at him and remembered all the times Albus had put aside her protests about Harry being allowed to get away with such dangerous stunts. Now Harry's comment as well as today's events made her wonder if Harry had been directed to do exactly those stunts for Albus' greater good. It hurt even considering that but the cold truth was Albus had shown himself not to be the good, honorable man she'd admired since her youth.

The boy, for that was precisely what Harry was still just a boy, sitting in her office being interviewed had been pushed through things she'd quail and quake having to face and had shouldered a burden heavier than the world could understand and none of it had been his choice. It
saddened her.

"Okay, then I think we're almost done here. If you'll just touch the crystal here," Tonks motioned to the end of the recording crystal. "It's nothing dangerous, just an assurance that you're telling the truth. Sort of like that oath American muggles says in all those crime shows." She grinned at him crookedly. Her dad was obsessed with old crime shows, she'd grown up with them. Those old cop shows was probably part why she'd wanted to join the Auror Corps.

Harry leaned forward, aware that he was trusting an almost perfect stranger but there was something about Tonks that put him at ease, a sort of honest air, and tapped the end of the crystal. He watched it stop glowing and Tonks tuck it away. "That's it then?"

"That's it." Tonks agreed. "Even if Dumbledore is apprehended and it goes to trial you have done your part now and you shouldn't have to be called to testify." She looked one extra beat of time so that the recording crystal wasn't recording before she turned to McGonagall and opened her mouth. "Seriously though, if anyone is to take over this school it's you Professor, not that pig in a dress."

The stern line of McGonagall's mouth twitched just a hair before resuming its usual appearance, "Auror Tonks please, do attempt to maintain a good impression of the Auror office in front of the youth."

Harry grinned, "She has Professor. Thanks to her I don't believe all Aurors are stern, paranoid, Fudge puppets."

"See, I'm a role model." Tonks fluttered her lashes coyly. "Nah I should get going, file this before said pig has a heart attack from the excitement...Though that might not be the worst thing to happen." She grinned again as she got up from her seat. "If you see that stuffy cousin of mine, tell him hi from me and watch him freak." She bowed to Harry. "Thank you for your time Mr. Potter."

"Thank you for being decent. Here's hoping our next meeting is under better circumstances and between you and me, Draco's not as stuffy as he used to be," he gave her a wink.

"Oooh, has someone waved their magic wand at him and unstuffed him? Cool." Tonks' grin widened. "Ah dang it, I really have to get back, before Kingy comes looking and if that happens no one will be happy...He's so snappy after sunset. I think it has to do something with his digestion." She continued to blabber to herself as she walked out of the office and down the hall to slowly make it off Hogwarts grounds so she could apparate.

Harry grinned and turned to McGonagall, "I like her."

"Somehow Mr. Potter that does not surprise me in the least. You'd best return now, before Ms. Umbridge comes by."

"Right. Um, Professor? I know it's probably a bad time to ask but since you're the Transfiguration expert I was wondering, do you know anyone qualified to teach Transfiguration who doesn't bear ill will toward werewolves?"

"This concerns the school you've been built I presume?"

His jaw dropped, "How'd you-"

"Know? I keep my ear to the ground Mr. Potter. I will ponder the matter and get back to you."

"Uh okay...er thanks." He left the office with a baffled look still on his face. It remained there until he arrived in the girl's lavatory and poked his head in to see Myrtle reading a book with the stand
he'd given her before Christmas, "Hey Myrtle. How's the book stand working out?"

The ghost positively beamed. "It's wonderful Harry, I cannot thank you enough. I'm slowly but surely making my way through the library, Hermione is nice enough to bring a new book every time she comes by. This one I'm reading now was published after I...Well expired so I'm very excited about it."

"I'm glad. I'll let you get back to it. I've a pack down there who're all antsy to hear what's happened."

"Mmm, yes. There was a terrible noise as they made their way downstairs. Your girlfriend was especially nervous from what I could see." Myrtle was already sinking back into the plot of the newest book she was reading.

He chuckled and said goodbye before heading down to make sure Hermione knew he was unscathed and tell everyone the whole sorry tale. He paused in the doorway of the library and quirked a brow at the three extra Slytherins in there, Fred and George both not quite cornering Draco as they spoke softly, with gentle expressions. Still groveling then.

Pansy and Orion sat playing chess and eyeing the twins in amusement and Blaise was absorbed in one of the books on dragons. He shook his head and wondered when his pack had really, truly acquired the other snakes exactly. Probably over Christmas. He saw Hermione pacing, Luna snuggled in Ron's lap, Ginny in Neville's just watching her and so he stepped right in and wrapped his arms around Hermione from behind.

Hermione immediately sunk into his embrace, giving a loud exhale of relief that Harry was there. "How did it go? What did they say? You don't have to go to the Ministry do you? They treated you right, right?"

Orion couldn't help but grin and exchange a look with Pansy at Hermione's bullet rain of questions.

"Went fine, just took a statement, no, and yes I was treated fine. Same Auror that was there this summer, well same girl Auror, who's apparently the same one who blasted the hole in the townhouse wall, and she says hello by the way Malfoy. Something about being your cousin."

"Oh Merlin." Draco groaned. "Still don't understand how they could let that nutcase into the Auror Corps." He didn't really know his cousin very well since his mother and her sister didn't get along but he had met her on occasion and she never failed to freak him out.

Hermione still fretted and turned around in Harry's embrace so she could pat him down and she and feel for herself that he was fine. "What will happen now?"

Harry let her do as she pleased, "Well they'll start hunting Dumbledore down, hopefully catch him," that was spoken very dryly, "and Umbridge looks to be Headmistress for the rest of the year. Since the toad gave a Pensieve memory and I verified my statement I won't have to appear at any trial if they catch Dumbledore. Basically we've traded one evil twat for another."

Pansy took Orion's queen, "Oh joy. We shall simply have to redouble our efforts to get Umbridge sacked."

Orion looked tense. He was well aware that his parents didn't know that he knew about Dumbledore but he did and he wondered what the old man would do now that he was under pressure. If he would try and use his parents in some way. He wasn't really worried about himself.

"We'll find a way to get rid of her." George sounded more confident than he felt. "Together we
have the brightest minds in school, we need to figure out a way to get rid of the hag from hell."

"We could always send her into the forest, right in the direction of Hagrid's brother. Maybe he'll think she's a tasty toad treat and gobble her up?" Fred rubbed the back of George's neck in understanding.

Harry snorted and tugged Hermione to a chair, mimicking the other couples in the room, "She'd give Grawp indigestion."

"There are worse things that Grawp in those woods." Luna played with Ron's fingers. "Someone's bound to take a bite out of her, though they might get food poisoning." She didn't really mean it, she was very protective of all the creatures in the forbidden forest. Known or not.

"Look she's an evil bint and we do need her gone but how did Dumbledore get sacked?" Ron brought Luna's hand to his mouth and kissed the backs of her fingers.

Harry sighed, "He tried to tell me about Horcruxes, or at least that Voldemort created some." He explained what had happened, telling them everything that had happened aside from the glance Dumbledore had made at his scar. That he'd share only with Ron and Hermione.

Neville sucked in a sharp breath, "That's...who would do that? Voldemort obviously but...it's just..."

"It's insane, inhuman but then again Voldemort has never been able to claim humanity has he?" Hermione was very upset. She couldn't even have imagined that horridness like this existed despite everything she'd read. "Dumbledore should get sacked, well for everything he's done really but absolutely for trying to put this weight on you. We're talking Horcruxes in plural form from what it sounds like...Imagine tearing your soul apart over and over again." She shuddered violently.

He ran his hand over her hair and pressed a kiss to her temple, "It's sick. In more ways than can be explained."

Ron nodded, "I have to ask though, there should be something in this library on them right? More specifically how to destroy them."

Fred hopped over to the index and flipped through, "Let's have a look and see Ronniekins?"

George chuckled at the two fingered salute their little brother sent his twin and looked over Freddie's shoulder to see if his brother would find something in the index.

"Do you think it's down here that Voldemort learned about Horcruxes?" Orion looked up from the chessboard. "If it is then I think Salazar Slytherin is turning over where ever he's buried. I don't think he ever intended for such a monster to work his horror in his name."

Harry looked around at the books, "Maybe not learned about it down here but he'd probably have added a book or two as he did with others."

Pansy rolled her eyes and pulled her wand, "Accio books on Horcruxes." One book flew down off the shelf and clapped into her hand and she lifted a superior brow at Fred, who stuck his tongue out at her. She opened the book and hummed as she flipped through the pages. "Mm interesting...fascinating...oooh nasty. Ah here we are."

Orion grinned in open admiration at Pansy. She was one of a kind. He tilted his head to look at the cover of the book, seeing it was a book on countering evil and dark magic. "What does it say Pansy?"

"Well it states that a Horcrux in an object can not be destroyed by normal means. The object must
be destroyed beyond repair even beyond magical repair. For that there appears to be only two methods listed, Fiendfyre which really I don't suggest. That has a nasty habit of setting its caster on fire if said caster doesn't have a steel will and perfect control."

Harry rubbed his chin on Hermione's shoulder, "And the other?"

Pansy smirked and lifted her eyes from the book, "Basilisk venom."

"Well Scar, that is one thing you have isn't it?" Orion looked up at his brother.

"There's still the question of finding them though, not to mention finding out how many of them there are." Hermione sunk deeper into Harry's lap, kind of sad being the downer once again but it had to be said. "Are we going to look for them?"

Harry kissed her temple again, "Well we've already got one I think and I think I destroyed another. What else does it say about them Parkinson?"

"They're capable of possessing someone who gets too close to it. Not close physically but emotionally. When they're destroyed they scream and 'bleed' black. It also has a note about living Horcruxes."

That made Hermione tense up, she absolutely didn't like the sound of that. Nothing about the Horcruxes sounded nice and bleeding black sounded downright scary but nothing made her blood run as cold as the mentioning of living Horcruxes. Not really thinking about it, she took Harry's hand and squeezed it tight.

Harry squeezed back, a chill going up his spine, "Living Horcrux?"

"Yes. It's when a living being is used to store the bit of soul rather than an object. It's a bit of folly to create a living Horcrux though if you're going to according to this. Any way to kill the being normally will destroy the Horcrux as well. You could chop off its head and succeed. No special means to destroy it needed." She turned a page in the book.

"Then Voldemort's created at least two, and if the locket in the desk is one, three. His snake I think was one and the diary was absolutely one."

"I think the locket is one for sure." Draco wrapped his arms around himself. "It sucked out every ounce of happiness from you just from being close to it and it gave me the willies." He didn't like the thought of his mother having handled the locket if it turned out to be a Horcrux and Draco was almost sure it was.

Hermione held on to Harry's hand, fighting the lump that grew in her stomach. "If he made the locket of Slytherin into a Horcrux it would make sense if he went after the other founders relics as well, wouldn't it?"

Ron frowned, "Maybe but maybe not. I mean Slytherin is his bloodline, maybe he chose Slytherin's locket because of that if it's a Horcrux?"

Harry hummed, "That's a possibility."

Hermione nodded, that made sense but she wouldn't dismiss the other thought either. Right now they were fumbling around in the dark though, not really knowing anything and she hated that feeling. Not knowing was among the worst feelings in the world.

Fred grumbled, "Seems to me there's a lot of possibilities. The old snake could have made a used
hankie a Horcrux if he wanted. Not to mention who knows how many he made."

Neville frowned, "But how many pieces can a soul be split into though? There has to be a limit before it breaks your mind so badly it also breaks your magic."

"That seems to be one of the things we need to find out before we do anything else. Before we even try to go after a Horcrux we need to know everything we can about them." Ginny nibbled on the ends of her hair nervously.

"I can owl the bookshop I used in France, the one that I've used before. France isn't as strict when it comes to label Dark Magic, they could have some information." Hermione sounded unsure.

"Do you think your Dad knows something?" Blaise turned and asked Orion.

"I have no idea. If he does he's never mentioned anything but I suppose there's no harm in asking." Orion shrugged.

"Hermione no and Orion double no," Harry shook his head, "just telling someone of Horcruxes is beyond illegal from the reaction everyone had. Can you imagine just what the Ministry would do if they even suspected we were looking into this? If Remus was suspected of looking into it? No, just no. I don't think even France would be lenient on this one Hermione. Not only is it magic damaging to the soul but it requires cold blooded murder to enact. That's evil on any level you look at it."

"Potter is quite correct," Pansy turned the page in the book, "Not to mention that there is a way to identify a Horcrux if you have a suspected object in your possession."

"So...We're just supposed to scour the country without knowing how many or where they are and identify them as we go? If we suspect an object to be one? Yeah, that sounds efficient." Blaise stretched his legs out and looked around the room.

Hermione fidgeted. "I can't do nothing Harry, you know I can't. If there's even the slightest chance that anything I can do can help then I will jump on that chance."

"I'm not saying to do nothing Hermione but that? No. Really I'm thinking we should just destroy the locket and leave the rest of it to the Aurors for now." The Gryffindors in the room nearly exploded, arguing at him and yelling all at once. He shifted Hermione down into the chair and stood, shifting quickly to his animagus form and letting loose a roar to quiet the room, leaving everyone staring at him with wide, shocked eyes.

Pansy clapped slowly a few times, "Well said Potter. He has an excellent point little lion cubs. We are all already dealing with Umbridge, the now missing Dumbledore as I am certain he'll seep back into Potter's life like some oozing slime mold, and our own educations as we are all still just fifteen and under," she flicked a glance at the twins, "aside from Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum over there. We are still children and Potter's got enough on his shoulders at the moment don't you think?"

Hermione turned absolutely miserable. She hadn't meant to put more weight on Harry's shoulders at all. She just wanted to help him, protect him. Of course she didn't want to burden him further.

"Pansy is right." Orion caught Harry's eye. "Dumbledore is still out there and now that he's going to lose the public's support he's going to do anything and everything he can to at least get away, flee to another country. He's going to use every resource he has." Orion knew what that meant.

Harry padded over to Orion, giving him a lick on the cheek before returning to sit beside Hermione's chair and rub his head over her knees, purring to comfort her. He was staying in lion
form for the time being though. He'd had enough of discussion between them all at the moment.

Ron nodded, settling down, "He'll try and get at Sirius and Remus. Oi Malfoy, think you and your Mum could stand another two, three over the summer, residents wherever Harry's stuck you?"

"That's Potter's decision but the place is certainly large enough." Draco had no idea why Dumbledore would go after Sirius and Remus but he saw that it was making Orion sad and like it or not he had grown close to the little spawn over time. He was a fellow snake and he knew the boy was important to Pansy.

"Any dirty work he has he's going to make them do because he knows they can't refuse and it's all my fault." Orion nodded, trying to keep his eyes from tearing up.

Pansy reached across the board and ran her hand through his hair in a repetitive, soothing stroke, "Don't you dare say that Johnathan Orion Black. You'll do enough over your lifetime to take blame for and many times none of it on purpose so don't take on a heavier weight by taking the blame of others. No one but Dumbledore is responsible or at fault for what he holds over your parents heads and most especially not you," she'd read the little journal Potter and his lions had been making and her own blood had boiled hearing about that foul ritual, "who were an infant not even a month old at the time. Understood?"

He nodded slowly, leaning into her touch like the puppy she called him. He didn't want his parents to get hurt though, not now when they were finally happy together. With Azkaban and experiments they had been through too much as it was.

"We'll find a way to keep them safe Ri. We can do as Ron says and hide them away, where it's unplottable and Dumbledore can't find them." She didn't say what they were all thinking, that Dumbledore could still decide to use the power he held over Orion just out of spite or in an attempt to lure Sirius and Remus out. Hermione scratched through Harry's mane.

Fred nodded, "Yeah kid there's no way we're letting the kings get used by the joker."

Harry purred harder under Hermione's touch before licking her hand and moving over to Orion again, nudging him up out of his chair and toward the door.

Pansy checked the time, "Ah, curfew for the puppy." She glanced at the great lion in curiosity before draping her arm over Orion's shoulders, "Come along dear let's get you back to the common room before Professor Snape has a conniption shall we?" She looked back at Blaise and Draco, "Coming boys?" Her raised eyebrow turned it into more of an insistent request than question.

"Apparently we are." Blaise replied with a lazy smile as he unfolded his slender body out of the chair he was sitting in and got to his feet. "Say goodbye to your lover boys now Peter and let's be off." He waved his hand toward Draco who was glaring pure death at him.

Fred exchanged a confused look with George before brushing his fingers over the back of Draco's hand, "Mind if we walk with you to the split?"

"As long as there's no groping I don't mind." Draco was still pissed at Blaise for the Peter remark. Blaise had promised not to mention the whole rabbit thing in any way. He should have known better.

"Hands above the waist, promise." George held his hands in the air to show where he would keep them as long as they were allowed to spend a little more time with their dragon.

Fred nodded, "We'll behave." He moved to flank Draco with his brother as they followed the other
snakes out.

Neville gave Ginny a gentle squeeze, "We should probably go as well. I don't want Vane 'reporting' us."

"Mmm, that bloody Vane." Ginny actually growled out the name. "Tomorrow she will find a twin to the pimple I hexed on her nose...A big oozing, painful one." She got off Neville's lap so her boyfriend could get up. It had been a chaotic day with everything that has happened and Ginny admitted to herself that she wouldn't mind a little time alone with just Neville, curled up in a corner of the common room before it was time for bed. Plus she needed to finish her potions essay that was due the day after tomorrow.

"I need to go as well." Luna kissed the tip of Ron's nose. "I've promised Cho to clear her mind of Wrackspurts so she'll have a clear head come Quidditch practice tomorrow."

Ron was about to offer to walk her to her common room when Harry padded back in and looked at him. Even in lion form he recognized that 'we need to talk' look so he gave Luna a soft kiss instead, "Okay. I hope your dreams are just as sweet as you are."

Harry gave Luna an affectionate head butt as she left, careful not to over balance her then once it was just him, Ron, and Hermione in the chamber he returned to human form, "I left something out around the others," he went and picked up the book Parkinson had summoned and went through the pages to find the spell to identify a Horcrux.

The ill feeling in the pit of her stomach returned with a vengeance and Hermione bit her bottom lip until she could taste blood as she watched Harry look through the book Parkinson had Accioed. She hated the suspicions that were creeping up on her and she wanted nothing more than to be wrong. She felt close to be sick and Hermione could only imagine what Harry was feeling at the moment.

Ron clenched his fists, watching Harry go through the book, combined fury and fear creeping through him like ivy consuming a house. "Harry?"

Harry looked up and met the blue of Ron's eyes, "I don't know. Dumbledore's hints and whatnot aren't exactly trustworthy but while he was telling me about Tom splitting his soul using murder to rend it he flicked a look up to my scar. Just a quick glance and I'm sure he meant me to see it so...I don't know. It's possible."

The claws dug into Hermione’s stomach even tighter. She got up from where she was sitting, her knees trembling as she walked forward and wrapped her arms around Harry from behind, burying her pale face between his shoulder blades. Hermione had no idea what to say to make things better but she wanted to be there for Harry so she just held on tight.

Harry smoothed his hand over one of hers. He couldn't say anything in comfort as he didn't have anything but suspicions and fears and if they turned out true then he still didn't know what he could say to make her feel better.

Ron sank into a chair, cold terror forming an icy fist in his gut and his mind racing to figure out a thousand different solutions, none of which would work. "It's probably just a scheme mate, something to get you to fall in with his plans."

"We'll find out in a minute," he'd found the page on identifying Horcruxes and pulled the box holding the locket out of the desk, opening it then squeezed his girlfriend's hand, "Hermione I need you to cast the spell."
She nodded and released her grip on him. It made her sad that Harry was doing his best to comfort her when she was the one who was supposed to comfort and support him. At least Hermione could do this for him. Spell casting was something she could do. She released her swollen and bleeding lip and she pulled her wand from its holster and mouthed the spell. “Testarevelrae.”

Ron held his breath as the spell created cloudy white light that swirled around both Harry and the locket in the box before dissipating from around Harry while the light around the locket slowly turned a vile green that darkened gradually until it was almost black. He studied Harry as the bright green eyes and relief washed over his face.

"So that means the old bastard was just playing with your head like always right?"

Harry nodded, the tension sweeping out of him as he opened his eyes and lifted a hand to Hermione's cut lip, "Hermione, love, would you stop doing that to your lips, they're too pretty to bleed."

A ragged sob tore from her throat and Hermione dropped her wand to the floor and she threw herself into Harry’s arms. “Who cares about my lips? You don’t have a part of the bastard’s soul inside you…I was so scared for you Harry.”

She peppered his face with light kisses, making sure no blood from her lip transferred to him though, the lip wasn’t badly cut and it would heal in no time. She was aware that it was a bad habit to nibble her bottom lip but she had always done it and now she didn’t know how to stop. Right now she couldn’t care less, she was just relieved and so happy.

"I happen to care about your lips thank you very much, and the rest of you too." He ran his hand up and down her spine as the sound of Ron's joyful whoop rang through the library. He kissed the top of her head, "I was pretty worried myself there for a moment love."

Ron slumped into a chair, "Okay so you're not a living Horcrux, thank Merlin. I do have a question now though." Off Harry's look he continued, "Why do you get visions and stuff from him. You are connected to him in some way but how?"

"Ugh kill the happy why don't you Ron?"

Hermione chuckled despite the serious issue Ron brought up, Harry’s expression was priceless. “Maybe it just has to do with the curse he threw at Harry, like an echo. I honestly don’t know and we have to find out what the connection is but for now I’m just overjoyed that you don’t have his soul inside you.”

She looked around the shelves of the library, as much as she had read there were still hundreds of books she hadn’t gotten to yet. “Perhaps there’s a book in here that can tell us about this too, I mean since there was a book that mentioned Horcruxes.”

Harry hummed, "Maybe but we'll look into it later." He closed the box holding the locket and put it back in the desk. "For now though we should head back as well. I don't even want to see the toad's face again today."

Ron stood up, a distracted look in his eyes, "Right let's go." His mind was on Hermione's comment about the curse Voldemort tried to kill Harry with as an infant and the connection. Seems there was something he remembered about that in the lessons on magic traditions and laws his mum lectured them all about before Hogwarts.

Hermione gave Ron a searching look but she wasn’t quite nosy enough to ask him just what he was
thinking about to give him such a concentrated expression. Instead she bent down and retrieved her wand, tucking it securely into her holster again as Harry brought out the map.

She could definitely understand Harry not wanting to run into Umbridge, she didn’t either. The toad would be in full gloating mode at having managed to get rid of Dumbledore and she would be drunk with the new power she had now. Who knew what she would do just because she could if she ran into Harry who she absolutely didn’t like? Hermione did not want to know the answer to that. “Lead us home then Harry.” She smiled at him.

He smiled back and did as asked.
Chapter 43

Once more Snuffles was out and about with Remus on their errands, practically skipping and happy. Even if tall, blond, and perfect showed up it wouldn't have ruined his mood, especially not with the Three Broomsticks up ahead. Rosmerta had taken to tossing him meatballs when they went by and it was a highlight of their outings though arriving home was always best.

Remus laughed quietly at the trotting Grim next to him, tail held high and ears perked forward. It amused him greatly that Snuffles could still look and behave as a puppy. Remus was glad that Sirius could come out with him, even if it was in dog form. At least his lover got to breathe some fresh air and Remus had company.

He could already see Rosmerta poised in the doorway of Broomsticks, waiting with a bowl of meatballs. Apparently Snuffles saw her too, or smelt the meatballs if his happy bark was something to go by.

Remus covered a yawn behind his hand as Snuffles darted forward to get his treat. He was tired all the time lately. Perhaps he was coming down with something since his stomach was rolling too, had been for days.

Rosmerta laughed at the giant dog, as always delighted by the playful nature hidden by the fearsome looks and she tossed him a few meatballs, looking up and over at Remus. Her head tilted in slight concern. She was aware of Remus' status as a werewolf but the man had never been anything but kind and polite to her and he always paid his tab in full so it didn't bother her the least.

"Are you alright Remus? You look all done in."

“I’m fine Miss Rosmerta, thank you for asking though. I think I’m coming down with a bug or a cold but it’s nothing serious. A spot of hot tea and I’ll be fit as a fiddle again.” Remus liked Rosmerta, she had never treated him any different because of his condition and he appreciated that.

Snuffles' turned his head and whined, nuzzling Remus' thigh in concern as if asking if he was being honest and not just fibbing for Rosmerta's sake.

The woman studied him a bit closer before nodding, "Well if you're sure then love." She smiled down at the dog at Remus' feet, "You just make sure this big brute takes care of you then."

The dog made a yip and a huff that translated into 'Of course I will.' just as the back door to the kitchen opened as one of the kitchen boys tossed out the garbage and let the vile scent of steamed broccoli waft out, making Snuffles sneeze.

‘Oh crap!’ The smell of the steamed broccoli stung his sensitive nose and it made his stomach roll even worse. This would not end well. Remus barely had time to run around the corner into the alley behind Three Broomsticks before throwing up violently. He was just relieved he hadn’t been sick on Rosmerta's glittery heels. His stomach cramped and he threw up again, it felt as if it would never stop.

As soon as Remus had stepped away Snuffles had been hot on his heels and now he was standing helplessly beside Remus, whining and nuzzling his shoulder. Only the click of high heels coming into the alley kept him from transforming to hold Remus and get him out and away to safety.

Rosmerta stared, eyes wide, at Remus for a moment before going to lean down and scoop his hair out of his face as he heaved. She'd held many a man's head as he sicked up the brew from the night...
before so it wasn't off putting. Concerning though. "Bit more than a simple little bug there I'm thinking."

Remus nodded helplessly as he waited for the stomach cramps to finally be over. He had only felt like this once in his life and that had resulted in Orion. His mind was whirring and if Rosmerta hadn’t been there he might have let his knees buckle from shock. Could it really be? Remus had never even had a thought that it could happen again.

Snuffles leaned gently against Remus, letting him know he was there as the heaves lessened and finally stopped. He watched as Rosmerta conjured a damp cloth and handed it to Remus to wipe his face and mouth. When his Moony straightened he gave a little lick to his cheek and whined in worry. As far as he was aware werewolves only got ill near the full moon and last night had been the new moon so Remus shouldn't be sick at all. Sirius felt his gut twist in worry.

“Thank you.” Remus vanished the damp cloth after he’d used it and then did the same with his sick. He could not and would not leave a mess on Rosmerta's property. His heart was still pounding and his mind racing.

“I don’t mean to be rude and be sick and then run but I have to get home. Please excuse me and thank you again for your kindness and your help.” Remus couldn’t think, he was in shock but he knew he had to get home, home where he could finally freak out.

"Think nothing of it Remus. You just get home and take care of yourself. And you," she pat the dog’s head, "you make sure he gets there and come get me if he doesn't."

Sirius yipped once, nuzzled her hand in gratitude, and then padded closely beside Remus as they made their way home. Once inside the house, the door locked, Sirius transformed and caught Remus' face in his hands, "Remus?"

“Fuck…” This time Remus’ knees did buckle and he sunk to the floor in the hallway of their home, looking up at Sirius with wide, startled eyes.

“I’m not twenty-one anymore and Dumbledore is still out there.” One hand went to his flat stomach, palming it gently.

Sirius fell to his knees in front of Remus, scooping him into his arms, missing the protective gesture Remus had made with his hand as he held him close, "Moony what does that mean? What's wrong? Why did you sick up in the alley, you never get sick this far from the full moon."

Everything in him was jumping and scared and worried. He'd just gotten his lover back, if some sort of rare werewolf disease took him away he would be completely lost.

“It means you’re still an over-fertile bastard.” It was said without heat though; Remus was still too stunned to feel much of anything besides surprise and worry and it wasn’t Sirius' fault, they were two people in bed. He leaned his head against Sirius’ shoulder, his head swimming.

“I need to speak to Severus…I’m going to need the pre-natal potions again. Should probably be to a healer as well but Severus will have to do.” Now he was babbling helplessly.

Sirius' jaw dropped, would have clanged if it'd been made of metal, and he stared at his lover as he havered away. His mind stuttered to a halt, spluttered as it tried to kick back in and then finally did, as evidenced by the high pitched squeak that escaped him, "Huh?" He shook his head as if trying to shake everything back to where it should be then placed his fingers over Remus' lips, stilling the babble, "You're," he looked down at the flat stomach, "p-p-p-pregnant? Are you sure?"
If he hadn't been so shocked himself, Sirius' gobsmacked expression and stuttering would have made him laugh. "Well I can't be a hundred percent sure without a check up but yeah...I think I'm pregnant. It feels like it did the last time with the fatigue, sensitivity to scents and let's not forget the throwing up. Most likely there's a cub in there." Remus took Sirius' hand and placed it on his tummy.

Sirius smoothed his hand hesitantly over the flat, toned stomach, his expression shifting from shock, and vague panic, to awe, "Wow. I guess I'm gonna have to learn to cook edible stuff now won't I? You know, so I can spoil you with actual good healthy meals you don't have to cook yourself."

Remus rubbed the tip of his nose against Sirius' strong, beautiful neck. "I'm pregnant, not an invalid. I can do everything I normally do, at least for the first seven months." A sliver of happiness and excitement started to work its way through the worry. A baby. A little brother or sister to Orion. Remus only hoped he would be allowed to actually enjoy this pregnancy in freedom and with his beloved one there at his side. "We should probably floo Severus, the faster he can come and check me out the faster we'll know for sure."

"Can't floo remember? Harry said the toad has them watched, even in the professors' offices and quarters. I bet the hedgehog was royally pissed off about that too." He checked the time, "Orion should be putting his books away in his dorm right now so we'll call him through his communication mirror." He kissed the tip of Remus' nose. "Tell him you need to talk to Mr. Prickly."

Remus nodded and got off the floor to get the communication mirror, proud that his hands were only shaking slightly. He called on his son, smiling when Orion's precious face filled the mirror. Remus chit chatted with his cub for a while before asking Orion if he could bring the mirror to Severus, waiting while Orion did so.

Sirius slipped up behind his lover and wrapped his arms around him from behind, catching glimpses of the Slytherin dungeons as Orion played messenger. He nuzzled Remus' hair with a fond smile, smelling the plain shampoo he used.

Severus quirked a brow at Orion and took the mirror without asking, knowing where it was from then the brow rose higher when he saw the two cuddling men in the mirror's face, "Remus I presume there is an emergency of some sort?"

"Well yes, in my world it classes as an emergency." Remus replied, leaning back against Sirius and soaking up the warmth and strength the other gave off. "We really need you to come visit us as soon as you possibly be can. And if you can bring a diagnostic kit and if you have any brewed maybe some pre-natal potions." The last sentence came out in a rush.

Severus' other brow joined the first and he sighed, "I will be there in an hour. With both the pre-natal potions," he caught sight of Orion's eyes going wide, "and, should the pre-natal not prove necessary, some contraceptive potions."

Remus flushed red. "Yes that would probably be best." Oh Merlin, he felt like a schoolboy again, caught mid-prank by McGonagall. "Tell Orion we will speak with him as soon as we know for sure either way." It was certainly not ideal for their son to find out like this and second hand too but what could they do? Remus hoped they could make it up to him later.

"I am rather certain he heard you himself," Snape slid a look over at the boy nearly bouncing with excitement, "Eat something while you wait," he terminated the call and handed the mirror to Orion with a raised brow, "Go on, get it out."
A bellowing, ear shattering howl echoed through the dungeons. "They have no self control apparently but WOOHOO anyway!!" Orion danced on his toes, looking almost spastic. "I'm going to be a real, live big brother...Imagine all the things I will be able to teach this cub." He grinned widely at his uncle, looking more wolfish than ever with his pointed corner teeth sticking out behind his lips.

Snape placed a hand on his head, "If your mother is indeed pregnant. There are other possibilities to whatever symptoms he may be experiencing. I do however have an order for you, involving some day in the future when you find a girl or boyfriend."

"I won't forget the protection spells or contraceptive potions, promise. No wish to be a teenage father...Or mother." Orion shuddered at the mere thought of that. He wanted a family some day but he wanted to live first. Maybe that was selfish of him but that was how it was. "And I bet you Dad's preggers, how can he not be with the way they've been going at it? Can't even keep their hands off each other when it's visiting weekend."

"I did not wish to know that Orion." Snape's eyebrow twitched. "Go, find Potter and the rest of your band of miscreant friends but keep this to yourself until your parents wish to tell others understood."

"Understood." He grinned again and saluted in uncle in mock seriousness. "Give my parents my best and be sure to congratulate them for me when you confirm there is a squiggle nesting inside Dad." Orion bounced off with a cheeky wave, pulling out his copied map so he would be able to avoid any Toads in his path.

Harry watched Orion bounce down the path in front of them like a demented rabbit as they made their way to visit Remus and Sirius. He looked at Hermione and Ron, "Any idea what's got him acting like there's a chocolate cake just for him waiting at the house?"

Ron shrugged, "No idea mate, I suppose we'll see though won't we?"

"Come on then, hurry up! Want to get there before the day is over." Orion turned and bounced in place as he waited for the older teens to catch up to him.

"How does he do it?" Hermione asked no one in particular. "Puppy has more energy than the strongest PepperUp potion." She hurried her steps though and walking with the bouncing ball of a teen until Sirius' and Remus' little house showed.

Harry shook his head and waved as the door opened, Remus standing in it looking at his son in amusement. He was surprised that Orion didn't give Remus the usual tackle hug, he was certainly hyper enough to, but rather walked up and hugged him gently. They made their way into the house and Harry shook his head as he saw that Orion had tackled Sirius in a wrestling match as soon as he'd come in. This was just a little odd. he smiled at Remus, "Hey Moony."

"Hello Pup." Remus hugged him tightly and ruffled his hair before doing the same to Ron and Hermione, well, Hermione was spared the hair ruffling since she had pulled her unruly locks into two braids for the day. "Come in, come in. Pads and I actually have some news to share." Remus helped them put away cloaks and scarves before they headed to the living room where his mate and son was rolling around on the floor, laughing and growling playfully.

Ron flopped into a chair, "News? What sort of news? Everything alright in Marauder land?"
Sirius barked out a laugh, "Hey I like that one Moony! Marauder land, we're our own country." He tickled Orion's ribs and narrowly missed being racked.

Harry shook his head, "Sirius your head is already big enough to be its own country." He waded in and grabbed Orion, hauling him back. At the play growl the younger boy made he looked down, "Bite me Ri and you'll be under lion bum for the rest of the visit."

"Aww, spoilsport." Orion pouted. "Still I'll behave because this visit will be too awesome to be pinned under Harry-hairy-arse." He let Harry put him on his feet and rushed over to the couch where his Dad was sitting. "Tell them, tell them...I'm almost bursting here." Pleading puppy dog eyes were firmly in place.

Remus chuckled and exchanged a look with Sirius before shifting in his seat. "Well, we can't have our son bursting now can we? So as I said we have some news." He reached out for Sirius' hand. "Pads and I...Well...We're going to have a baby."

Orion whooped very loudly again even though he already knew.

Ron, who'd hand his feet up on the coffee table, made a loud clunk as they hit the floor. "You knocked Moony up again?!"

Harry covered his face in his hand, that comment penetrating even his own shock at the announcement, "Lovely Ron. You are absolutely the King of Tact."

"Ron! I know for a fact that Molly's raised you better than that. Just when I think you've evolved, you slide right back into caveman mode again." Hermione glared at him before turning to Remus and Sirius. "Congratulations, I'm very happy for you." Sure it was a bit of a shock but that was no excuse to be rude.

"Thank you Hermione. It wasn't exactly planned but we're happy." Remus still held onto Sirius' hand.

"Of course we're happy, I'm going to be a big brother." Orion bounced in place once again. "Still, irresponsible of you...My role models and guides in how to act in this world forgetting both contraceptive charms and potions." He tsked playfully and shook his head.

Harry looked up in utter confusion, "Those exist?" When every face and head in the room turned to him, he could feel his face heating with embarrassment. "Never mind, just ignore me and my utter lack of knowledge."

Remus looked at Harry carefully, amber eyes warm and caring. "No, no I don't think your lack of knowledge should be ignored. It's nothing to be ashamed of that you didn't know about the charms and potions, who would have told you? I think you should come with me though, let's go to my study you and I."

Orion's eyes were wide as he looked from his Dad to his brother and then comprehension hit. "Oooh I recognize that face and the going to the study. Scar is going to get 'The Talk'. I got it before school started this year."

Sirius shook his head as Harry got up, face burning red, and followed Remus out of the room, "Announce it to the world why don't you Orion. No that was not a challenge."

Ron bust out laughing, not at all sympathetic to Harry's plight as he'd had both his parents, Bill, Charlie, the Twins, and even Percy give him 'The Talk' one right after the other in various different versions. His dad had stuttered through the whole thing, his Mum had been red as a tomato and
used mostly metaphors and euphemisms to explain how things worked, Percy had blushed, stuttered, and made a complete muck of it, Bill had been embarrassingly graphic, Fred and George had been terrifyingly informative about everything *but* the basics, really out of the whole lot only Charlie had been of any use. So he was far from commiserating with his best friend and loud about it.

Hermione didn't at all feel ashamed over the extra strong stinging hex she sent at her laughing friend. For laughing like that he deserved everything he got. Her own talk and visit to the doctor was firmly in her mind and she knew how mortified she had felt. She was not laughing at her boyfriend.

"Hey Sirius," Orion looked up at his father. "What's going on in the study must be a prime example of do as I say and not as I do right? Because clearly you or Dad have no clue about which charms or potions you should use." He smirked a little, the same smirk he'd seen his uncle use all his life.

Sirius gave his son a slow, kind smile, "When you find your mate and the hormones really kick in I'm going to remind you that you said that Orion because guess what, it only takes *one* time. Just one time forgetting because you're so-"

"Oi!" Ron was still rubbing his arm where Hermione's hex had hit, "I don't want to hear about what you and Moony get up to."

"No please, for once little Red over there is right." Orion had turned a little red. "It's enough that I'll have a little sister or brother, I really don't need the details about how it got inside Dad...*Really* don't need it. It's as awkward as if Uncle Sev would sit down and talk to you about his adventures in the bedroom."

"Just remember next time you want to tease me or your Dad that we both bite back." Sirius got up, "I'm going to get the kettle on and *maybe* I might, I just might, be convinced to bring out the good biscuits."

"Jaffa cakes?" If Orion had had wolf ears they would have perked up. "Tell me oh great and wise father mine what exactly can convince you to bring out the Jaffa cakes?"

Hermione smiled, the puppy was obsessed with his Jaffa cakes, always mourning the fact that the store bought biscuits weren't available at school. She hoped Harry and Remus would be done soon...Poor Harry.

Inside the study Harry didn't feel as awkward as he had out in the living room, in front of his girlfriend. Still plenty weirded out but not so much awkward. "So...how embarrassed am I going to get here by the time we're done?"

"Probably some." Remus conceded. "I'll try to keep the embarrassment down as much as I can though. You do know the basics right? What goes where and all that?"

"Yeah, not exactly easy to keep ignorant about that in a dorm with Sean actually. He runs off at the mouth and Dean indulges him in listening."

"Ah yes, that was dorm life with Sirius and your father as well. Both encouraging the other to tell all, not possible to remain ignorant even if one wanted to. It's good though, that means we can leave the actual physical deed out of our talk. That should cut down the embarrassment a little. The most important thing when you actually do get intimate is to keep both of you safe, it's not always an easy feat with hormones raging and feelings running high." He placed a hand on his own stomach at that statement, he should know that better than anyone.
"The contraceptive potions you will have to buy at an apothecary or talk to Poppy about getting some. Snape is not allowed to distribute to students since the school board likes to pretend that no teenagers have sex while at Hogwarts." Remus rolled his eyes. "The charms are easy to learn and they are more about protection against viruses and such, they are contraceptive as well but not as safe as the potions."

Harry tilted his head in curiosity, "Why's that?"

"Magic always has a will of it's own and as you learned this summer it wants to please you. When you're in the middle of...Well being intimate with a person you really want it can get confused about your true will and as such not be as safe as you want it to be." Remus answered Harry's question to the best of his abilities.

He didn't completely get it but if he really wanted to know he could always poke his head in and ask Madam Pomfrey and save both him and Remus some embarrassment. "Okay so the potions, um both take them or just one?"

"Well that sort of depends on your relationship and how you do things." Remus felt his own cheeks turn red. "For a boy and a girl then only one of you are needed to take the potions though it doesn't hurt if both of you do it. If you're in a same sex relationship and you...Um...switch, then both definitely need to take them to be safe."

"Well that one's not something I really have to worry about. No offense to you and Padfoot but I'm not at all inclined in that direction." Harry found it amusing that Remus was more embarrassed than he was. "So the potions, are they daily or hourly or what?"

"It would be kind of rough if you had to take it hourly. It's not Polyjuice potion." Remus smiled. "Just a small sip every time you're going to...be intimate. That's why they are so easy to forget in the heat of things."

He flushed a bit thinking of when he and Hermione might be ready for that step but nodded, "Makes sense. Okay so what are the charms?"

Remus pulled out his own wand and led Harry through the incantations and wand movements. None of the charms were very complicated or difficult to learn. They were supposed the be able to be cast even in the heat of the moment after all...As long as you remembered them.

Harry got them down pretty quickly and tucked his wand away, "So that's it ri-" He jumped at the yelp that came from what was probably the kitchen.

"Bloody hell Hermione what was that for?! All I asked was how Moony was going to handle his time of the month! I didn't mean it as a joke so why'd you hex me?!"

Ron's voice was loud and had Harry tilting his head, "Um okay I'm sort of with Ron, besides how could it be a joke? I know a lot of the blokes at school made comments about it last year and the girls always hit them for it. I've a feeling I'm missing something again." He looked at Remus who was a bright red, "Er Moony? You alright there?"

"Fine, I'm fine." Remus had never thought he would have to explain a woman's monthly cycle to someone. He was certainly not an expert at the subject but he knew first hand how mean Lily got a few days out of the month...Well meaner than usual. "Do you know anything at all about a woman's menstrual cycle? Every month their uterus builds up a place to receive and shelter a fertilized egg. When the egg isn't fertilized the blood used to build up the place is expelled from their bodies, causing them to bleed for about a week. During this time there's a larger amount of
hormones for them to deal with as well as...Pain, cramps and such."

Harry's eyes went wide and his face turned as red as Remus' as a few things fell into place. "So er that's why Hermione's so out of sorts round the twenty third every month?" It was like clockwork. For a few days close to the twenty third of every month Hermione went from her usual studious self to biting off people's heads for the smallest things. It'd always mystified him.

"Most likely yes." Remus nodded, he could of course not be sure of which date it happened for Hermione but usually it was quite clear due to behavior. "I only have one advice and that is to tread very carefully during those days."

Harry snorted, "Already do. Last month she hexed Ron for sitting too close." He tilted his head as he remembered Hermione's understanding of Pansy's Christmas actions then shook it to clear his head of that suspicion. He didn't want to know about it, he really didn't. "Okay and with that expanded talk, we're done right?"

"We're done." Remus nodded and let out a relieved breath of air. "We're done and we both survived. Time for tea and something with chocolate in it, don't you think?" Smiling Remus got up and ruffled Harry's hair as he opened the door to his study and led Harry outside, toward the voices that could be heard in the kitchen.

"Nothing but abuse, even when I'm being good I swear I get nothing but abuse," Ron was standing, leaning on a counter with a pout on his face as Sirius was setting the tea cups down in front of everyone else who was sitting down. "Ask one innocent little question and I get the stinger hex from hell in the bum. All I wanted to know was how Remus handles his furry problem while having a bun in the oven."

"The baby lies in sort of a magical bubble, my transformations doesn't affect it as it stays protected in that bubble. The only thing that happens is that even with the Wolfsbane potions I need to be further away from humans. A pregnant werewolf is extremely protective and will go after anything it sees as a threat." After what had happened the last pregnancy, Moony was even more protective and vicious since he'd spent the last time in captivity.

Sirius reached out and snagged Remus' wrist as he sat down, pulling him into his lap and cuddling him. "Moony was even a bit iffy about Padfoot last time but we've worked it out." He nuzzled Remus' jaw.

Ron smiled at the former professor, "Thank for explaining." He gave Hermione a glare, "Without hexing me I might add."

Harry went to sit next to Hermione as a plate of biscuits was floated onto the table, "Stop glaring at Mione. You chose a really bad way of wording it the first time I'm thinking."

"Extremely bad." Hermione agreed with an edge to her voice. "And with your laughing fit from before I'm still not sorry for either of the hexes."

"Orion, one at a time, put the others back." Remus looked at his son and his fistful of biscuits. "Dear Merlin, it looks as if you never get fed at school and as if you actually have been raised by wolves. Where are your manners?"

Blushing, Orion placed most of the biscuits back on the plate, looking longingly at them though. They were his absolute favorites.

Harry laughed, "It's like me and treacle tart, no self control at all."
"C'mon Moony you can't blame him, it's chocolate covered biscuits." Sirius slipped something from his pocket with a smile and put it in front of Remus, a large bar of his favorite chocolate. "The main weakness of the wolfish."

Beaming happily Remus snagged the chocolate bar and hurriedly tore the paper off to bite a large bite out of it. "I do understand," He finally said after chewing in bliss for a while. "and I'm not saying he can't have more than one, just that he takes one at a time instead of grabbing nearly all of them. He's not alone at the table and more people than him might want more than one biscuit." Remus made himself more comfortable in Sirius' lap, humming softly under his breath in contentment.

Harry grinned and caught Hermione's hand in his, "You and Ri both have the exact same expression when faced with chocolate you know Moony? Guess it runs in the family."

Ron's head shot up from where he'd buried it in his tea cup, "Say what mate?"

"Er...the love for chocolate runs in the family?" Harry looked at his friend oddly as he began muttering and pacing, well limping in circuits really, and leaned in to murmur to Hermione, "Any idea what's got himself in a tizzy?"

"No idea what so ever." Hermione shook her head as she watched Ron with curious eyes. "Though I almost never understand what he's up to so this isn't very different." She continued to watch Ron limp-pace, obviously trying to work something out. "Hopefully he will tell us when he figures it out, whatever it is."

Harry hummed and took a sip of tea just as Ron spun and pointed at him.

"You're Voldemort's family!"

Tea was spewed across the table.

Five pair of eyes looked at Ron as if he'd gone around the bend completely and Orion who had managed to swallow his tea down the wrong throat from the shock was coughing madly.

"What are you talking about Ron?" Hermione sounded utterly confused for once.

"The connection! Okay remember what I told you about right of conquest Harry?"

Harry nodded cautiously, "Yeah. I killed the snake so it became mine what does that have to do with Voldemort and me?"

"Okay well in the case of animals the carcass is yours but in the case of sentient beings right of conquest means all that they have is yours, body, magic, possessions, that sort of thing. You follow?"

"Yeah," it was hesitant because Harry wasn't certain he wanted to follow this line of thought.

"Alright well as a baby Voldemort tried to kill you, basically threw all his magic at you, and died instead. Yeah it was cause your Mum sacrificed herself for you but still, by raising his wand against you it created an immediate contest according to the laws of magic. When he died that time but you lived, because he doesn't have an heir right of conquest made you his magical heir."

"But...he didn't really die." Harry scrubbed his fingers over his scalp.

Sirius sucked in a breath as he caught Ron's train of thought, "But he was defeated, his body died.
According to magic's law a magic wielding sentient doesn't have to die at the hands of another for right of conquest to take place, only certain defeat. For example if someone tries to kill you and you defeat them but don't kill them you've won right of conquest by not only defeating them but also showing mercy by not killing them. If you understand the right of conquest you have to verbally claim it but if you don't or if you're too young to even speak magic bestows it on you automatically."

Ron nodded, "Magic made you his magical heir but because he cheated death and came back it creates a connection between you, that connection was actually strengthened when he used your blood in the ritual to give him a body again."

"Er...how?"

Remus looked very uncomfortable as he thought of how to word what he was going to say. No matter how he worded it though it wouldn't exactly be good news. "Well, for all intents and purposes that ritual with your blood made you his...Mother, magic wise. He didn't take back all his magic, you have it too and like a mother passes on some of her traits to her child...So have you, to him."

Orion was gaping. "You do know how incredibly freaky this all sounds right? Does Voldemort know that Scar is his 'mother'?"

Harry made a groan and his head impacted with the table, "Don't say that, please, please, please don't say that."

Sirius grimaced, "I doubt Voldemort understands it actually. Right of conquest and ramifications are usually taught only to those raised by pureblood parents or who might start working with rituals as a living."

Harry looked up, "And Tom was raised in an orphanage. Oh, yay. So what does this mean for me?"

Ron picked up his tea cup again, "Not sure, except for even after we do finally kill him for good you'll still speak Parseltongue and probably pass it on if you ever have kids. Not only are you his heir but he basically chose you to be his mother. Since he was 'born' just last year that means magically you have some authority over him for the next," he did a little figuring in his head, "fifteen years give or take a month."

"Again, what does that mean for me?"

"It means that you can use the connection to redirect his magic if you choose." Sirius rested his head on Remus' shoulder, remembering the times his mother had done the same to him when he'd try and heal Regulus of injuries, turning a healing spell into one that caused harm and pain.

"Though redirecting his magic is not something you should try before you absolutely know what you're doing. Things can go wrong, I've heard horror stories about mother and children's magic being stuck and tangled together so none of them can cast even the simplest spell without the other...We don't want that to happen." Remus looked concerned, this new knowledge could be both an advantage and a setback. "Just as with Occlumency, Severus can teach you how to navigate the connection between the two of you safely, and how to block unwanted thoughts and dreams sent by your magical child."

Hermione still held Harry's hand and he squeezed it comfortingly.

"I've already got the block down so long as I have time and energy to re-enforce my Occlumantic
shields." Harry pulled his glasses off and ran a hand down his face. "Okay, okay. It could be worse, much worse. I can deal with this just....EUGH! Related to Voldemort."

Ron chuckled and gave Harry a pat on the shoulder, "If it's weird it'll happen to you mate."

A snort, "Yeah. Joy." He looked over at Hermione after putting his glasses back on and squeezed her hand with a wan smile.

She leaned in and kissed his cheek. "You're right, it could be worse and we can handle this. Once he's gone for good none of it will matter anyway. Who cares if you have some of his magic? It's all yours now, a part of you, no one elses."

Remus leaned into Sirius, he wondered silently why these things always had to happen to Harry? He couldn't come up with an answer but he would continue to do what he could to make it a little easier for his oldest cub.

Sirius hugged Remus gently and kissed the edge of his jaw. It was an unexpected complication but nothing they couldn't handle. He just hoped nothing else happened anytime soon.
Dolores Umbridge strode down Hogsmeade’s mainstreet, wrinkling her nose at the small shops. This was all terribly substandard but then again she wasn't here to shop. She was here because a few of her most loyal students had said that the Hogsmeade shopkeeper actually sold the students of Hogwarts books on solid defense against spells and hexes as well as amulets and weaponry. These were things no student of hers needed. They should all sit down, be quiet and stay out of the way. The Ministry knew what was best for them and would act accordingly. Sadly she didn't have authority to shut the shops down but she could enforce a contract that stated that they weren't allowed to sell anything unapproved to the school children.

She scoffed loudly at a display of a dragonhide armor in a window but turned her head quickly when she saw the reflection of a man in the glass of the window. A scarred man with light brown hair. It only took a few moments for her to recognize her lost werewolf. She'd lost a lot of data at his escape, not to mention that her experiments had been shut down afterwards, at least officially. She'd had so many plans for that wolf and his offspring.

Her lips curled as she quietly used a disillusionment charm on herself as well as a charm that masked her scent before following him. Dolores was not a forgive and forget kind of woman. It had been years but oh, she was going to make the little wolf pay. What on earth made him think he had the right to walk tall between actual humans? Behave as if he was one of them? Well if she had her way he wouldn't be one of them for long, he wouldn't last long at all for that matter. Good riddance for trash like that.

Snuffles felt something ruffle his fur the wrong way, a bad feeling and looked behind himself and Remus, sniffing the air and growling when he didn't smell anything. Every instinct he possessed was warning him of danger even if he couldn't see or smell it. He drew close to Remus and gently nudged him past the path to the Three Broomsticks. Whatever was wrong he wanted to get Remus home as quickly as possible and away from what was putting him on edge.

Remus gave Snuffles a surprised look, it wasn't like Snuffles to pass on the chance for meatballs or other goodies that Rosmerta had for him. He didn't really mind though, something felt off, most likely it was just his own hormones due to the pregnancy but he still wouldn't mind to get inside his own house. Where he could have Sirius' arms around him.

Dolores followed the wolf and his big brute of a dog all the way to a small house on the edge of the village. The wolf actually lived in a house here? So close to the school and her students? Learning this it only made her more determined to go through with her plans. Before he had time to walk inside she rushed forward, still under her charm and yanked a tuft of his hair. It would be all she'd need to activate the poisoning spell lying dormant in his blood.

Dolores never left anything to chance and now she would clean up the mess from years ago. She vaguely wondered what had happened to the spawn, if the wolf had lost it but she didn't pause to dwell on it. She apparated to the gates of Hogwarts the moment she'd yanked the hair and once she was in her office she would activate the poison in the wolf's bloodstream. It would be a slow, painful death and she would delight in knowing she had rid the world of another monster.

Sirius yelped when Remus made a pained sound and his hand lifted to his head then nosed at him in concern, whining. He still couldn't see or smell anything but something had attacked his lover. His eyes scanned the scenery, a low worried growl rumbling in his chest. What the fuck had just happened?
Rubbing at the stinging patch in his scalp, Remus looked around wildly, all senses on high alert but he couldn't sense, see or smell anything out of normal. Someone or something had definitely pulled out a tuft of his hair though, a large tuft. Feeling scared and extremely uncomfortable he hurried inside with Snuffles, closed and locked the door as well as set the wards so no one could approach without them knowing it. He rubbed at his head again as his other hand went to his stomach protectively.

In an instant, probably the fastest transformation he'd had in his entire life, Sirius went from dog to man and drew Remus into his arms, eyeing the missing patch of hair in worry. "We should call Snape. I can't go out there and cast tracking spells and until we know what the hell just happened you're not going out there either."

"Wasn't planning on it." Remus shook his head as he grabbed the back of Sirius' shirt and just held him close for a moment. "We'll call Ri again and hope he is in a position to get to Snape quickly, the tracking and identification spells need to be cast within the hour, otherwise they'll be useless." Remus was scared for the first time in a long time he was really, truly scared. "I couldn't sense anyone out there Pads. What would anyone want with my hair? I'm not exciting enough to Polyjuice."

"I don't know baby." He pulled the mirror out and called for Orion, hoping he was close to Snape. "Come on please pup, answer quick."

"Yeah?" Orion looked flushed, he was just walking back to school after having had his Care of Magical Creatures lesson. "Calling on me already? We just saw each other this weekend?" He slunk to the back so he could talk into the mirror without anyone noticing.

"Orion we need you to get Snape, as fast as you possibly can please." Sirius kept his tone even, not wanting to scare Orion.

Orion had started to run before his father had even finished the sentence. He could see in the mirror that something was seriously wrong. His father's eyes were shadowed and he was deathly pale. He hoped that nothing had happened to the baby or his Dad. He couldn't waste time asking about it though, not now when Sirius said he needed his Uncle.

He ran as quickly as he could and prayed he wouldn't run into a teacher as he entered the castle and practically flew down the stairs to the dungeons, bursting into Severus' study without warning. Panting roughly and handing him the mirror.

Severus knew an emergency when he saw one and just took the mirror and nudged Orion to sit down, "What's happened?"

Remus looked over Sirius' shoulder so he could look into the mirror as well. "You need to get here Severus, as quickly as you can."

Sirius nodded, "We'll explain when you get here, just get here."

"I'll be there in five minutes," he handed Orion the mirror, "Go find Potter or Parkinson and stay with them. I will come get you as soon as I return."

"I do manage to tie my own shoes and such, I could handle being on my own." Orion grumbled. He was testy and scared, knowing something had happened to his parents. He really wanted to come with Severus but he knew that was impossible. "I'll go to Pansy, her charms class lets out now so she should be back in the common room shortly."
Snape nodded sharply and swept out of the room, cloak billowing behind him as he ran, startling a few of the students into shocked stares, to the gates, apparating as soon as he was able. He knocked perfunctorily on the door to Remus' home and stepped in when it opened, seeing Black, wand in hand, still standing and holding Remus, having used magic to open the door, "What's happened?"

"Honestly, we don't know." Remus' voice was a bit shaky. "We were walking home from our errands when something started to feel off, I thought it was just hormones. We’d just come up in front of the house when something rushed me and pulled out a fistful of my hair before disappearing again. There was no scent trail at all." He looked up at Severus. "We need to you to run tracking and identification spells before the time runs out. There must be a reason why someone would want my hair."

Snape felt a chill skitter up his spine. There were several uses hair had in a potion or spell that he knew of and not a single one was good. He turned and went outside immediately, casting the spells, narrowing his eyes at the disillusionment and scent blocking spells whoever pulled Remus' hair out had used.

He dug deeper beneath them until he could see and record the signature beneath the concealments. The frayed end of the trail meant whoever it was had disapparated, making tracking a bit more complicated but in the end he could tell it led back to Hogwarts. His eyes narrowed, his lips tightening in anger. There was only one person he knew of within Hogwarts' walls who could bare Remus true ill will the sort of which would require the need for a bit of him to cast a spell.

Remus and Sirius were looking through the window, noticing the thinning of Severus' lips. After all these years it wasn't difficult to recognize the signs of seething anger in his friend. "This is not good Pads, whatever he's found it isn't good."

Sirius recalled seeing a younger version of that expression on Snape's face many times after a bullying from the Marauders and he nodded, "No it isn't." He stroked his hand over the back of Remus' neck, played his fingers through the short tail of hair, and hoped that whatever Snape had found could be resolved before anything bad happened.

He tried to relax into Sirius' touch as his lover's fingers ran through his hair but he was much too wound up. His heart was pounding in his throat as he imagined all the things that could be wrong. Was it Dumbledore who had done it for some reason? They hadn't heard so much as a whisper from the man since he'd disappeared from the school. Remus couldn't understand why the old wizard would go after his hair but one never knew for sure.

It could be just one of those werewolf hating fanatics who wanted Remus to know that he could be gotten to but Remus doubted it. The ill feeling had felt more serious than that somehow. He steeled himself as he saw Severus returning to the house, hopefully their friend could tell them either way. At least then they would know.

Sirius met cold, black eyes as Snape stepped inside, "Well?"

"You never did learn patience did you Black?"

"Not when it concerns the safety of someone I love more than life no. Spill. Who took Moony's hair?"

"Umbridge," Severus didn't sugarcoat it, he wasn't the sort to ease people into bad news, "unless there's someone else up at Hogwarts with a grudge against Remus, which I sincerely doubt."

No, now that Severus had said her name, Remus knew it was her. He should have recognized the
creepy foulness he'd felt as her signature. Flashes of uttermost pain and humiliation went through his mind and he tensed up even worse than before. He knew! He knew firsthand how horrible and dangerous she was and he'd still lulled himself into some sort of false security, going as far as getting pregnant again. Allowing himself to be happy about it when he knew what she would do if she found out. Cold sweat pricked his skin and he took two steps to the left and threw up in the flowerpot.

Sirius felt ill himself as he went to stroke Remus' hair out of his face, running a hand up and down his back. He didn't have any words that would comfort, only his presence and as things stood that probably wasn't worth much.

Severus watched his friend heave and shake and his jaw tightened. This was too far. Her presence in the castle and the way she treated the students was pushing it but this? Too far. He met Black's eyes and saw comprehension behind the cloudy gray before the man gave a short nod and resumed lavishing attention on Remus and Snape knew Black had seen the lethal intent in his gaze.

Remus finished heaving when there simply wasn't anything more to throw up. Part of him wanted to grab his loved ones and run, run as fast and as far away as they could but there was no point in doing so. At least not for him. With his hair Umbridge could do what it was she wanted to do to him no matter how far away from her he would run. "She doesn't know about Orion though right? That's the most important thing."

Snape shook his head, "No I don't believe she does. If she did she would not have bothered stealing your hair."

Sirius pulled his lover into the circle of his arms protectively, "He's right. If she knew about Orion she'd have used him as bait to lure you in instead of concealing herself and stealing your hair."

Nodding slowly, Remus reached for his wand to aim a month cleansing charm to get rid of the foul taste in his mouth. "You're right, the both of you. If she'd found out about Orion she wouldn't even have bothered with me. Werewolves aren't too hard to find after all. A hybrid though, whom she was already experimenting on before he was born...That's another thing completely. The only way I would ever interest her now is if she was to find out I was pregnant again."

"If she did she'd have to get through me to get to you again," Sirius growled, "and that'll happen over my dead body."

Remus turned in Sirius' arms and wrapped his own arms around his lover. "You are wonderful for saying that but we both know that's not possible. If and I do say if something truly bad should happen then I need you to hold yourself together, not go crazy or rush ahead without thinking. No matter what happens, Orion needs one of us."

Sirius tightened his arms around Remus, "Don't say things like that. You're friends with one of the most frighteningly brilliant and deadly bastards on the face of the planet, if something bad happens I have no doubt that his Hedgehogness could save you."

Snape twitched in mingled surprise and trepidation. The world was surely ending if Sirius Black said anything complimentary about him.

"Good heavens Pads, I think the sky is already falling." Remus reached up and rubbed his thumb along Sirius' cheek as he smiled at his lover. He knew that Sirius had thawed around Severus but a freely given compliment, that was truly something, a date to note down in your notebook. He was going to say something more when his entire body seemed filled with liquid fire. It hurt so much. Remus could hear himself screaming before everything went black.
"Remus!" Sirius caught his lover as he collapsed after convulsing with that terrifying scream and sank to the floor with him.

Severus hissed a curse, "Black keep holding him and use your magic to keep the baby stable!" He spun and went to the closest he'd secreted a kit away in.

Sirius' hands shook as he pulled Remus close, cradling him against his body. He placed his hands over Remus' abdomen and sent his magic into him, eyes closed to concentrate on feeling his way to the baby. It was still just a little collection of cells, no thought or anything like that but already so precious.

He also felt the magic that created the bubble protecting it wavering violently and slipped his own magic to settle it, calm it and keep it from disappearing. He registered the sound of Snape coming back and crouching beside them, casting diagnostic spells but his focus remained on keeping the baby safe.

Severus cursed roughly at the diagnostic results. Some sort of magical blood poisoning of a kind he'd never seen before. He pulled out two syringes, one he used to get a sample of Remus' blood and the other he filled with a stasis potion that would suspend the poison for a time. He had to fight Remus' unconscious flailing to do it, making it difficult, but he understood. Even unconscious Remus recognized injections and blood drawing as hostile and normally he'd not have done either but time was of the essence here.

Sirius brushed Remus' ear with his mouth, "Shhh it's alright Moony. It's just Snape, you're hurt and he's trying to help. I promise he's not going to hurt you or the baby."

"Black," Snape waited until the gray eyes opened then used a scalpel to slash a cut across his cheek much to Sirius' shock.

"The hell Snape?"

"Silence!" Severus covered a finger in the blood and exposed Remus' flat belly framed by Sirius' hands to paint runes in the blood on it as he muttered incantations.

Sirius recognized runes of protection and stabilization though the language Snape spoke in was unknown and when he was directed to he sent his magic into the runes, charging them until they were a shimmering red that was no longer blood but a permanent magical construct.

Umbridge hummed happily to herself as she nabbed another pastry from the plate she'd had the elves bring up. She was having the most wonderful day, she smiled at the kitten on her teacup before taking a delicate sip. The potion she had done with the wolf's hair to activate the poison had glowed satisfactory, making her know that it had succeeded and that the wolf would be dead within days.

Grabbing a handwritten register she looked at the names she'd gathered, a lot of them having been crossed out and that only made her smile wider. Umbridge tested the blood from everyone who'd used the blood quill and she had uncovered more creature blooded students than was comfortable. She'd managed to find a way to dismiss plenty of them from school by making up rules and reasons but too many were still here. Like that smirking, slinking Incubus boy. He had no business being among normal, honorable students, infecting them with his loose ways. It irked her that she hadn't found a way to get rid of him yet.
Still, this was a day of celebration and she wouldn't let what she hadn't been able to do yet to take away from the accomplishment she'd done today.

Finishing her tea and pastries she got up from her desk and moved away from her office, it was time for one of her daily monitoring walks around the school. Umbridge couldn't believe her luck when she came upon the elusive Mr. Moonstar, alone in a corridor and wand out and a flesh colored string running from his hand down toward the teacher's lounge.

"Well, well, well Mr. Moonstar, what are you doing in a faculty corridor? Listening in on your teachers’ conversation if I am not mistaken." She eyed the flesh colored string, recognizing one of those horrid extendable ears she had been confiscating throughout the year.

Orion didn't have much to say for himself, she'd seen his ear. He was just so worried, something was wrong at home and he wanted to hear if any of the teachers knew something about what had happened. If his uncle had called on one of them. He looked down at his feet, cursing himself madly for letting himself be caught.

"Detention Mr. Moonstar, in my office directly after dinner. Be there." She pinned him with a glare and almost skipped away in evil glee.

Pansy was losing her mind and also cursing herself for letting Orion out of her sight. He'd managed to pout his way into going to the lavatory without her waiting outside and yes, alright a little bribery might have been involved and then, after far too much time had passed for even Blaise to be in the lavatory, she'd barged in and promptly lost the bottom of her stomach as Orion had disappeared.

Being the intelligent sort she'd immediately sought out Potter to demand he look for Orion on his map and the sight there had chilled her blood. Orion with Umbridge. Right now she was running alongside Potter, not even caring that her hair was a mess or she'd heard one of her heels crack and it was certain to fall off with much more abuse, and they were her favorites too. Her focus was on getting to Orion.

Harry turned the corner, vaguely impressed with Pansy's speed, especially considering the ankle-breaker heels she wore, and saw Orion standing in the hall, looking like a kicked puppy and Umbridge nowhere in sight. "Ri!"

Orion looked up at Harry and Pansy, not really in the mood to admit his stupidity and the detention news. He was still all squirming inside with worry. Severus hadn't returned yet and if it had been something simple that he could fix then he would be back now. Looking at Pansy's disheveled appearance and Harry flushed from running to find him only made him feel worse. Not only had he managed to cause trouble for his himself but for his friends too, the people he really cared about. "I'm sorry."

Pansy tripped her heel snapping even as that apology and the look in his eyes went right to her stomach, making it clench. "Please tell me that apology is just for sneaking off."

Harry swallowed as Orion avoided their eyes and closed his, "Shite."

"I really am sorry...I have detention immediately after dinner." Orion looked down at his scuffed shoes, feeling wretched about everything. "I can't stand this! Uncle Sev isn't back yet and Dad and Sirius are not answering their mirror. You didn't see how Sirius looked in the mirror when he asked for Uncle Sev...Something really bad has happened. I just wanted to hear if any other teacher knew what it was." He held out the extendable ear so they could see.
Pansy stared at the ear and saw Potter's jaw clenching as he apparently searched for control not to snap and then looked at the miserable boy in front of her. She shucked her shoes and walked forward to envelop Orion in a hug. Did she want to nearly strangle him for his folly? Absolutely but it would do no good and only hurt him. "Nothing much we can do now but for the rest of the school year you are staying plastered to my side."

He nodded and wiped angrily at his eyes with the ball of his hand as he hugged her back. "Promise, I'll even let you collar me if you want to." Orion wiped at his eyes again. "I know the detention is bad...I know that but I can't bring myself to really care. I just want to know what's going on at home."

She pet his hair gently and quirked a brow at Potter as he pulled out his own mirror.

Harry called for Molly. He'd left her one of the mirrors due to the Weasley clock, understanding that if he couldn't get a hold of one of the family who had a mirror the clock would know if they were safe or not. "Mrs. Weasley?"

"Harry?" Molly peered into the mirror, flour on her cheek and her hair up in a messy bun. "What can I do for you? Has something happened?" Blue eyes seemed to look him over as much as she could through the mirror, trying to see that he was all right.

"I'm fine but I need a favor. Snape had to go to Remus for some sort of emergency and Orion's worried. He's not getting any answers to his mirror calls and it's been a while. Could you or Mr. Weasley go and check on Remus please?" Harry didn't like this. He didn't like that Orion had been pushed by worry into a situation where he wound up getting a detention and he didn't like that Moony wasn't answering mirror calls.

"Of course. Arthur is working late at the Ministry, after Dumbledore's fall, Fudge has gotten hubris." Molly's tone made it clear what she thought of the current Minister. "I'll apparate over to Hogsmeade and check in on them and call you as soon as I have any news. They are probably just busy working on something, you know how both Remus and Professor Snape gets when they have their mind meetings." She did her best to comfort Harry.

"Yeah," he gave her a smile, knowing that's what she'd been angling for, "Thanks Mrs. Weasley. Just call me on Moony's mirror when you find out what's going on please?"

"Will do, I'll just grab a sweater, get Arthur's dinner out of the oven and under a stasis charm and I'll leave. I'll should be there in about ten minutes. Keep your mirror close." Molly smiled at him again and ended the call to get ready.

Harry tucked his mirror back in his pocket and went to ruffle Orion's hair. "Mrs. Weasley'll check on things for us. For now though we'd better brew some murtlap essence and dittany until dinner." Orion was going to need that. Fortunately his hand wouldn't scar after just one detention, not with the murtlap and dittany but it was going to hurt. His jaw clenched. It was time Umbridge was kicked out, past time, and he had a line to an Auror who would actually investigate her use of the blood quill. He just needed to get a letter out.

Orion nodded, still drooping but beyond grateful that Harry had spoken to Molly, that she would go check out his parents house and see what was going on. "Again I'm sorry...As long as I have a lab I can brew the potions with my eyes closed." At least that was something he could do, potions were easy. Under his uncle's watchful eye he was already brewing seventh year level potions.

"I know pup." Harry squeezed his shoulder. "I'm sure the devious duo won't mind you using their lab downstairs."
Pansy picked up her shoes and kept her arm around Orion's shoulders, "Then let's find them and inform them. They're likely watching Dray practice for the upcoming game between Slytherin and Gryffindor. And Potter, do try to remember to lose gracefully after that game."

He snorted, "It's nice you've got impossible hopes of winning Parkinson, gives you an almost Hufflepuff glow."

"You take that back!"

Orion smiled, loving his friends and their bickering. Of course he should have gone to Harry directly instead of his eavesdropping expedition but it was easy to be wise after the fact. Now he would brew the needed potions and wait to hear from Molly or even better his Dad or Sirius who would tell him that everything would be fine.
Molly looked up at the dimly lit house and wrapped her cardigan tighter around herself as she moved to walk up the steps. She could feel that she was triggering the wards but she wasn't concerned about it, both Sirius and Remus would recognize her signature. She hurried up the steps to knock on the door.

Up in the bedroom, where Sirius was practically curled around his unconscious lover, Snape looked up from where he was examining the blood sample he'd taken from Remus then glanced over at Black. "Who would that be?"

Sirius tilted his head and felt out the wards frowning in confusion, "It's Molly."

Snape lifted a brow, made a notation and got up. "I'll answer the door then." He made his way down the stairs and checked the identity of the woman on the stoop before opening the door. "Mrs. Weasley."

"Professor Snape." Molly bowed her head in greeting, feeling a lot more worried than she had let on to Harry. Especially now when it was Severus Snape opening the door. "You know I've told you repeatedly to call me Molly. I'm here because Harry mirror called me. Apparently he and little Orion had tried calling here several times with no one picking up. They are worried."

Severus stood back and let her in, looking around the kitchen to see the mirror Orion would have been calling lying on the floor. It must have fallen there when Remus collapsed. "We've been occupied unfortunately." He went and picked up the mirror, turning it round in his hands. "Remus is in a bad way I'm afraid."

"Oh no." Molly's hand came up to cover her mouth as she gasped in fear. "What's wrong? What's happened? Is there something with the pregnancy? Can I help in any way?"

"I hope you might be able to, once I can unravel the poison in his blood." He rubbed his temple, "This has its roots back when Remus was held by Madam Umbridge during his first pregnancy. There was some sort of blood poisoning spell hidden in his system. Earlier today I believe Madam Umbridge concealed herself and ambushed Remus, pulling out some of his hair."

"What?" Molly turned paler than the ghosts at Hogwarts. "Blood poisoning spell...Back in the really, really dark days. Long before Voldemort that was the fashionable, popular choice to execute a werewolf. As long as they have had contact and set the spell in place it can be activated by the caster anywhere and anytime as long as you have a piece of the victim to add to the triggering potion. Back then they thought it was funny watching the werewolves blood boil, see them go feral without transforming and watching them try to chew the aching limbs off before dying." Molly's voice trembled. "It's been forbidden for over two centuries, even Voldemort has never used it."

His head snapped up, "You know of it? Of the details of the spell?"

She nodded. "Before I got pregnant with Bill, these were things I was studying. Old spells and curses. You can't learn if you don't know your past, horrible as it might be. In our class we were trying to find a counterspell or an antidote...We never did though. From what I know, there's only..."
one way to stop this spell from running its course."

Severus lifted a brow, "And that is?"

Molly swallowed loudly and met Snape's eye. "To kill the caster. Kill the caster and the magic and poison of the spell dies with him or her."

"As much as I savor a challenge and enjoy doing the impossible, I'm not about to risk Remus' life nor his unborn child's to do so. You know I am far from a good man Molly."

"I know you're a better man than you yourself know." She held his gaze. "I'm a middle aged woman, I knit, I'm a wife and mother and not at all dangerous. I would kill for anyone in my family without a second thought or a smidgen of regret though. If I could, I would take down that bitch myself." Usually smiling eyes were hard as stone. Molly meant every word she said.

"Molly Weasley nee Prewett you are honestly one of the more dangerous women I know of precisely because you are a loving wife and mother." He began making his way back up to the bedroom, "I need to brew something before I return to Hogwarts." A rare poison that was undetectable by all means both before and after consumption. He handed her a card, "If you would please, go to the apothecary and pick me up three measures of Solenodon venom. Tell him I will pay him in person when I next am in Hogsmeade."

Molly nodded. "I'll go right away, then I'll call Harry when I get back. I promised I would be in touch so I need to keep my word." She tucked the card into her pocket and moved toward the door. "Oh do give my best to Sirius, it must be so hard for him right now." She bowed her head and stepped out, running to the apothecary as quickly as she could.

Severus made his way up to the room and answered Black's questioning look as he began putting the blood sample and such away, "I've sent Molly to pick something up for a solution to our problem. Something Remus will not be ingesting but rather the cause of this mess."

Sirius just nodded in understanding and went back to petting the damp hair back from his lover's paled face.

Luckily since it was so late in the day there weren't a lot of people in the village's apothecary and she got assistance almost immediately. As soon as she had the Solenodon venom she returned to the house as quickly as she'd left. This time the door was unlocked and Molly hurried to give Snape what he needed and placing a hand on Sirius' hand in silent support before stepping out of the room and leaving Snape to work in peace. Molly walked downstairs and pulled out her mirror, calling Harry.

He answered, looking more than a bit frazzled, and smiled, "Mrs. Weasley. We're on our way to dinner. How are things with Remus? Is he okay?"

"Is there somewhere you can talk in private Harry?" Molly knew someone back in school had to know that Remus was very, very sick but she didn't want Orion finding out this way.

Harry glanced up ahead at Orion and Pansy bantering with the twins and caught Fred's eye, gesturing at the mirror and to the side to let him know he was making a small detour. He slipped into an empty classroom and then cast the shielded privacy spell. "Okay, it's just me in the bubble. What's wrong?"

Molly looked grim. "Remus is very ill. Professor Snape is doing everything he can to help and we're hoping he will succeed but there are no guarantees. Remus' blood is poisoning him from the
inside and it happens very quick. Professor Snape has given him a stasis potion to slow it down as
he works to make Remus better. Sirius is with him, that's why they couldn't answer when Orion
called."

Harry's knees went weak and he grabbed the back of a chair with a free hand to keep from falling
flat on his bum. He had to remind himself that though Snape was far from warm and cuddly, he
was brilliant, if anyone could save Remus it would be him. The pregnancy though, might be
another story, "The baby?"

"Alright for now, Sirius has pushed his own magic into the bubble to keep in stable and there's also
protective runes on his stomach now. I can't say how anything will turn out though." Molly wanted
to reach through the mirror and hug him, both she and Harry could use a hug right about now.

He nodded, "It'll be alright." He had to believe that, had to grip tight to that belief. "What should I
tell Orion though until Snape pulls the irons out of the fire? I don't want to lie to him but I don't
want to upset him with the whole truth either." Especially not since Orion was already upset.

"Just tell him that Remus is sick, you don't need to tell him how serious it is. He's sick and
Professor Snape is brewing potions and helping him get better and Sirius is there as well. No need
to scare him more than he has to be before we know more and really, it's not a lie, he is sick and
Snape is helping." Molly's heart went out to this wonderful, brave boy who always seemed to have
burdens not his to carry. "I don't want you scared either Harry but you deserve to know what's
going on."

He gave her a crooked little smile, "Don't worry about me. I'm starting to think that if I didn't have
something I was scared or worried about then the world would collapse, and wouldn't Mione just
smack me into next week for even thinking that?"

"She would and I might just help her." Molly smiled back. "I do worry though Harry, just as with
all my other babies, that's a mother's job you know. This will end well, I have faith in that. Then
school will end for the year and you'll come home so I can fatten you up a bit again. From what I
can see you need it."

"You know I never say no to your food. Thank you, for checking up on Remus for us. I wish I
could just make it so the only things you'd be worrying about with me and the others is if we're
studying hard or not."

"Oh dear boy, that has always been the least of my worries. I'm sure I could and can find other
things. There's the whole can of worms I could open regarding sex, safety of sex...Are my babies
having babies while they still are babies. How far have any of your relationships gone? Will my
oldest boy ever win his little veela girl? Will Arthur ever be able to live down having Lucius
Malfoy in the family in any way? You see I have plenty of things to worry about that doesn't
involve toads or evil bastards trying to take over the world and that's just as it should be."

Harry's cheeks went pink at the mention of sex, "I can't speak for the others but I don't think Mione
and I are going to go beyond kisses for a good long while."

"Oh Harry, don't be too sure. Things have a tendency to happen whether you plan for it or not."Molly's eyes crinkled in the corners as she smiled. "You are a good kind boy and that's all that
matters. You'll do what you'll do when you are ready. As long as my babies are happy I don't care
what they do. Fred and George are my sons you know...Of course I've always known what those
two are up to. It's love, love is never wrong as long as you're not hurting someone else. Go eat
now. Someone will be in touch as soon as there's any news. I'll stay here if Snape will need any
kind of help."
Harry grinned, "I'd love to see the looks on their faces when they realize you knew all along. I'll let you go. Make sure Snuffles eats something? Cause he'll just stay right by Remus and not move."

"I'll do my best, that Black boy is stubborn though. I'll make something easy that he can eat there. Take care Harry." She smiled again and ended the mirror call, going to the kitchen of the house to see what she could make for Sirius and Severus, both of them needed to eat.

Severus tucked the bottle of clear liquid into his sleeve and walked up the stairs to Umbridge's office, knocking on the door. As soon as he'd arrived Miss Parkinson had informed him of Orion receiving detention and his hand being a bloody mess, and as he was certain of what Umbridge was doing with the blood drawn from students, he realized time was very much out. The poison was ready to be slipped into her tea and the only regret he had was that she wouldn't suffer. It was a quiet death.

"Come on in." Dolores had just finished the analyzing spell on Mr. Moonstar or Mr. Lupin perhaps. Oh it was better than she could have imagined. Her little wolf hybrid had been in front of her nose the whole year. There should still be traces of the the spells and potions she'd used on his 'mother' in his blood too, making it easier to re-establish a link to work out from.

She grinned when she thought of all the things she could test on that creature, she could discover the answer to eradicate the creature gene completely, this pup would probably die in the trials but that was a small price to pay with everything she could learn from it. She looked up at the tall black clad man. "Can I help you with anything Severus?" She was a little short in tone with him, none of her seduction attempts of him had worked.

Snape knew precisely where her interests lay and he was well versed in how to manipulate and, as he wasn't about to come anywhere close to kissing this hag, he'd appeal to her other passion. "As a matter of fact yes. Mr. Zabini earned a detention from me tomorrow but as I've received an urgent order for bone-knitting potions from Poppy I am unable to oversee it," he set a sheet on the desk in front of her, making certain his hand passed over the teacup at her elbow as he withdrew it, dribbling the poison into the steaming liquid, "I was hoping you might know of a professor who has the time."

A fire lit up behind murky brown eyes and she nearly licked her lips in anticipation. With Zabini's blood she could develop a way to block that blasted matebond he had. If the incubus boy went feral from starving and tried to feed off of other students, then they would have to let her kick him out of school at the very least. Maybe even worse.

"I'm always willing to help one of my professor's in need. I can take on that detention for you, give you time to finish your brewing for Poppy dear." Dolores barely restrained from rubbing her hands together as she spooned an extra teaspoon of sugar into her tea and stirred daintily before taking a sip. This was a very good day indeed.

"Thank you." Severus sketched a short bow of respect that turned his stomach. The poison would take effect in a few minutes and he would prefer to be out of the office before that happened, less chance of him being accused of anything no matter what wasn't found in Umbridge's corpse, "I will take my leave of you and let you get back to your business this evening." He straightened and swept out of the room before heading to the second floor girl's lavatory. He wanted to check up on Orion and knew his nephew would be in the Chamber library with the rest of Potter's 'pride'.

Dolores took another sip of tea after Snape had left her office and went through her papers of the creature blooded again, having added Orion Moonstar to the list and hopefully after tonight she
would be able to add Zabini as well. Mid hum of her favorite Celestia Warbeck song her body just shut down all at once and her head smacked against the desktop as it hit it. Unseeing eyes stared out at the leftover tea leaking all over her papers, staining them brown and washing away the ink and the happy kitten frollicking across her teacup. It was a very unremarkable death.

The next morning found Minerva McGonagall in a very foul mood. She truly loathed Umbridge but if the woman was so insistent upon taking over the Headmistress position then she needed to see to the responsibilities accompanying it. Such as making certain the kitchens had the menu for the day so the elves could set out breakfast for the many students now complaining of grumbling stomachs and keeping Peeves from sending the Gray Lady into a flap.

She didn't bother to knock on the woman's office door, still getting a petty pleasure out of the castle refusing her access to the Headmaster's office, and instead simply threw it open. "Madam Umbridge this is mo...st...oh dear."

Minerva had seen death before, many times as a matter of fact, and recognized it in the glassy, unseeing eyes of Dolores Umbridge now. She studied the scene before her and saw no signs of foul play but she was not an Auror. So the best thing to do was to close off the room and call for an Auror to investigate an unattended death. She backed out of the room, careful to step in her own signature then called an elf to stand guard at the door and keep the students away before going to call the Auror office. After that was done she went down to the kitchens to give the house elves the menu for the day. The business of the school had to continue no matter who may have died within it.

Sirius was still awake, not having slept the entire night, and still cradling Remus. He'd nibbled at what Molly had brought him to eat but he couldn't eat, not until Remus woke up or...no he couldn't think of that. He stared out the window at the morning light and kissed Remus' brow. "You need to wake up Moony and see the beautiful morning waiting to greet you. See me waiting to kiss you," a few tears began escaping him beyond his control and he leaned his head against his lover's as the silent, salty drops continued to fall, "Please Remus, please wake up for me."

"D-do...n't cry...You k-know I...h-hate to see you cry." Remus blinked his eyes open, trying to lift his hand to Sirius' cheek but failing spectacularly. He was so tired and his body felt as if it was made out of lead right down to the smallest molecule but the searing, burning, unbearable pain was gone. He tried to remember what could have happened but everything was a blank one moment he had tried to joke and the next it had only been pain, pain, pain. Suddenly his eyes widened in panic though his body still refused to obey him. "B-b-baby?"

Sirius trembled as he pulled Remus even closer, more tears falling with seeing him awake and aware. He kissed his brow again, the relief surging through him staggering. "Shh, the baby's fine. Still safe and sound in here," he laid one hand on Remus' abdomen, "it was touch and go for a moment but the Hedgehog came through for you and our little one." He pressed tender kisses over Remus' face wherever he could reach without letting him go.

This time he refused to take no for an answer and struggled with his unwilling limbs until he managed to get an arm up so he could cup Sirius' face. "Shh, no more tears love, p-please." Even speech came easier the longer he was awake and slowly, inch by inch regaining control of his body. He still felt bone tired but he didn't want to close his eyes again. "What happened?"

"That fucking cunt," the word was snarled just as savagely as any Remus made during the full moon, "triggered a blood poisoning spell on you." He shook in mingled fury and remembered fear, "You screamed like...nothing I've ever heard before, not during the moons or even in Azkaban,
then just collapsed. Snape had to inject a stasis potion into you to stall the poison as he worked out a solution while I held the baby stable then he painted protection runes over where our little one rests," he took Remus' hand and stroked it over the runes, very slightly raised as if tattoos, "they're kinda sparkly and kept the poisoning spell from getting near our baby. Since you're up and not in pain," he met the warm amber eyes, "you're not in pain are you?"

"No, no pain." Remus hurried to assure him. "Tired though I apparently have been asleep for over half a day. I feel heavy but it's getting better by the minute and absolutely no pain. This is a cake-walk compared to the day after the moon." He did his best to give his mate a grin, to comfort him. "Just how was the poisoning reversed then? Severus is brilliant but how could he find a cure in such short time?" Remus rubbed his fingertips over the protective runes, eternally grateful that they were there.

"Right well since you're not in pain I'm guessing he succeeded in...whatever he did. He didn't go into details, just brewed something then swooped back to the castle. Molly's here, been bringing food up and checking on us every so often." He kissed the attempted grin, nuzzled the stubbled jaw, feeling his own unshaven chin rasp against it. "I have never, never been so scared in my life though Remus," he cradled his lover as if he was the most precious, breakable thing to exist, "You absolutely can not leave me and Orion to our own devices, we'd wind up ending the world on accident."

Remus nuzzled Sirius back, his hand going back to Sirius' face and his hair, just touching lovingly and petting. He had been scared too, still he'd gotten off easy losing consciousness. It was always much harder being the one awake and worrying. He was still scared, there was more to the story than Sirius told him. Something about brewing and leaving that made his not there fur stand on end.

"Molly's here?" Remus' brows furrowed. "Why?" There was so much that had happened that he wasn't aware of and as much as he just wanted to curl up with Sirius he couldn't, there were still so many unanswered questions. "How's Orion? What about Umbridge? Will she try again?"

"Molly's here because Orion tried mirror calling us but got nothing so Harry called Molly and asked her to check for him. From what I understand our son has been told that you're ill but not the details. As far as he's aware it's a very nasty flu or a doxie bite." He ran a hand down Remus' hair gently, "As for the cunt, I don't know. We'll have to ask Snape when he returns."

"Good, not about Umbridge but Orion, I'm glad he wasn't scared. At least as scared as he would have been if he knew the truth." Remus was still really, really concerned about Umbridge but something felt different, he just couldn't put his finger on it. He leaned into Sirius' touch and didn't even notice that Molly had opened the door to their bedroom until she gasped.

Molly looked at the awake man on the bed with both surprise and joy. She knew how bad it had been, how close and just what it meant to see Remus awake, aware and pain free. "He really managed to do it." She mumbled to herself, feeling a wave of uttermost respect for Severus Snape.

Sirius looked up at her, lifting a brow. His hearing was by no means werewolf sharp but he'd heard her. He let it pass though, because now that Remus was awake and okay, his stomach let out a loud, protesting growl at being empty that made his cheeks go red. "Er, morning Molly."

"Good Morning, it is so good to see the both of you." Molly's beaming smile was nearly blinding. "Oh Harry is going to be so happy and don't think that I didn't hear your stomach grumble Sirius Black. Maybe now you can actually eat the food I've made for you." She walked out of sight of the doorway and returned quickly with a covered tray. "It's enough for you too Remus but you should eat light for the moment, at least until Severus has looked at you. There's some yoghurt there, with
Remus nodded but inside he drooped to be having yoghurt when he could smell Molly Weasley's special sausages. "It's good to see you Molly. Have you been here all night? Arthur will come and demand his wife back." He smiled at her.

"Oh Arthur can survive a night without me, especially when it comes to caring for family." Molly smiled back. "And it's good to see you too Remus, you have no idea how good."

Sirius opened his mouth to ask what Molly knew that they didn't but then the communication mirror on the bedside table chimed and two, arguing voices came from it.

"Orion we can tell them tomorrow or later or Snape can tell them. It's early, just after breakfast, and I'm pretty sure your Dad needs his sleep."

"He can go back to sleep after. Dad needs to know this...And I need to see him."

Remus' heart ached when he heard the lost tone in his son's voice that he was trying to hide. He motioned for Sirius to get the mirror from the bedside table since he couldn't quite reach that far yet. Once Sirius held it in front of them, they activated the mirror on their side.

"What's all this cub? What's got you so hyper this early in the morning?"

"DAD!" Orion's voice was so loud it echoed through their house even through the mirror.

Sirius chuckled and murmured to Remus, "You're his faaaaavorite. Mine too come to think of it," he kissed Remus' temple before looking into the mirror seeing an excited Orion with a hassled Harry just behind him rolling his eyes, "Good morning to you too pup. What's so urgent that it couldn't wait until lunch then?"

Orion was bouncing from one foot to the other making the image in Sirius and Remus' mirror jump and shake. "Ding Dong, the wicked witch is dead!!! Someone dropped a house on her...Not really but she's GONE! The place is swarming with Aurors." More jumping took place, once again making Orion resemble a demented rabbit more than a wolf.

Sirius' jaw dropped, "Say what?"

Harry appeared to snatch the mirror from Orion, ruffling shaggy dark hair when he pouted, "This morning Umbridge was found dead when McGonagall went to see why she'd not given the elves the menu for the day. From the whispers we're hearing she was found at her desk, no signs of foul play. It's looking like everything just...stopped working. According to what the Aurors keep muttering when they pass us in the hall."

Oh what had Severus done? Remus exchanged a look with Sirius before looking over at Molly who suddenly found something on the floor intensely interesting, so interesting that she couldn't look up and meet his eyes.

"Umbridge is dead?" He'd heard what Harry said but it was still a lot to take in. Remus noticed a flash of white in the mirror and narrowed his eyes. "Orion, what's wrong with your hand?"

"Oh...Um...Well...I caught by The WW, wicked witch that is, yesterday. I got detention. But it's fine, I'm fine."

Remus felt the breath woosh out of him, imagining all the things that could have happened if Umbridge hadn't conveniently kicked the bucket.
"Breathe Moony," Sirius kissed the top of his head, "It's fine now. Nothing's going to happen."

"You're more right than you know Snuffles." Harry let a positively Slytherin smirk cross his lips, "First Aurors on scene were Shacklebolt and Tonks and they found a lot of, we'll call them interesting, documents and correspondence and plans in her office. A couple of Aurors were dispatched to Amelia Bones' with all the papers and another one was sent to get the kids Umbridge expelled. Tonks and Shacklebolt handed the investigation of Umbridge's death over to someone called Scrimgeour and they're now going round interviewing all the detention victims. Lot of mutters about conspiracy against the creature-blooded flying about and Fudge's name is being dragged through the mud."

"Somehow I don't think I am going to lose any sleep over that." Remus knew it was petty but damn it felt good to know that Fudge would have to face some consequences of his actions. Umbridge was appointed by him as she had been so fond of pointing out.

"Are you feeling better today Dad?" Orion's face peeked into view as he practically clung to Harry's back.

"I am, I'm much better today. Your Uncle fixed me right up." Remus was going to have a long conversation with Severus about what he had done and then no matter how uncomfortable it would be for the both of them he was going to give his grumpy friend a hug for saving Orion.

"Harry wipe that smirk off. it's scary on you." Sirius rested his chin on Remus' shoulder, relaxed now that the overt threats to his Moony were gone. "When you see him pup, tell the old Hedgehog I said thanks." Off Harry's shocked look he shrugged, "He made my Moony all better. I can at least thank him."

"Umbridge dropping, Fudge getting his arse in trouble, Moony feeling better, you thanking Snape, all we need is one more sign of the apocalypse and then it's the end of days." Harry shook his head then saw bright pink hair enter the corridor and head for them, "Oh, looks like it's our turn to be interviewed. We'll have to talk to you two later and Moony don't worry, I'll be right there with Ri, I know how you feel about Aurors."

"Thank you Harry." Remus smiled gratefully at his older cub. "Thank you for everything."

"Bye bye parentals. Talk to you later." Orion's hand waved madly in screen before it turned back to what looked like normal mirror again.

"That right there, that's where my gray hairs come from." Remus shook his head at his more wild than tame son but his tone was dripping with love and adoration. "Can you believe this Pads? It almost seem to good to be true, maybe I'm still unconscious and just dreaming this."

"Hmm," Sirius leaned in and nipped at Remus' ear sharply, getting a yelp and a glare out of him, "Nope not dreaming. It is wonderful though. If I wasn't content right where I am I'd get up and dance, oh and sing too. 'Ding dong the bitch is dead, which old bitch? Fudge's old bitch.'" He laughed at the weak swat Remus made at him then winced as Molly's hand whacked him on the head, "Ow."

"You know better you mangy mutt." Molly had turned on her Mum glare. "No matter how horrible and disgusting the person was when alive, a life has ended. If you can have respect for that then at least have respect for the ones still alive." For the one who made it happen, went unsaid but it was very clear in Molly's tone and in the look in her eyes.

"Be nice." Remus added in a weak chiding tone. "And no leaving to go dance, I'm very content to
have you where you are. You make an excellent pillow."

"Eat now, before it goes cold. I'll stay a little longer and clean up but then I have to go home and make sure Arthur hasn't burnt the Burrow down attempting to make toast." It was clear in her tone that she missed her husband though and that she couldn't wait to see him.

"Molly," Sirius looked at her, "I can handle the clean up when Moony takes a nap. You've done more than I'd have asked and it's all appreciated. Go home and snog your husband."

"Are you sure? I don't want to leave you in the lurch." Molly looked concerned but from the two determined stares sent her way she could tell they were very sure indeed. "All right then, just call on me if you need anything. Take care of each other and promise to take it easy for at least today."

She walked to the bed and hugged them both goodbye before walking out of the house so she could apparate home. She wondered if she had a sweater she could send Severus. He wouldn't appreciate her hugging him but that man needed something warm and cozy around him...Maybe she could ask Harry to get a message through to Narcissa, Molly had seen the way the two of them had looked at each other at Christmas.

Sirius shook his head then looked down at Remus, "Hmm speaking of snogging," he caught his lover's lips in a slow, soft kiss that he felt right down to his toes, putting every ounce of relief and love he had in his heart into it.

"Mmm." It was a soft, utterly content sound as Remus moved his lips against Sirius'. This kiss woke his body up like nothing else could ever do and instead of the heavy numbness he'd felt, replacing it with the warm tingles he always felt when Sirius touched him, "I love you Sirius."

"I love you too, so much that when I think about it, really sit and think about how lucky I am and how incredible you are, I can't breathe I'm so awed that you love me back Remus." He shifted them so Remus was stretched out on top of him and they were pressed together collarbone to toes with him nuzzling and kissing Remus' face.

"Oh love, I could go on forever about how I'm the lucky one but I don't want to have an argument about anything today, not even this. We are lucky to have each other and you are all I'll ever want, all I've ever wanted." Sirius' body underneath him was warm and deliciously angled and hard. He squirmed into a more comfortable position on top of his lover and pressed small nipping kissed to Sirius' jaw and neck.

Sirius' hands stroked lovingly down Remus' back, feeling the dips and rises and hard planes of his back as he tilted his head to give Remus better access to his neck. "Not an argument but I'll say this. It's one thing to love and be loved back, amazing though it is," his hands sunk into Remus' hair and he met the warm amber eyes, "It's something more profound and infinitely more humbling to be forgiven." He kissed Remus again, "Thank you."

Remus' hid his face against Sirius' neck. "You forgave me too, we both made mistakes and both are to be blamed for our choices. So thank you too. For everything, for reaching out in friendship when we were eleven. For accepting my secret the way you did. For training so hard to become an animagus so I wouldn't have to be alone. For seeing me when no one else did. You have been my life for so long, always will be and I can never thank you enough for it."

Sirius gave a little shake of his head before nuzzling Remus' hair. He knew that part of Remus felt guilty for Azkaban but he also knew that down at the core, past the trappings of humanity where the wolf lived, Moony knew he wasn't at fault and didn't need forgiveness. That was a little different than himself, thrice he'd caused his lover, his mate, unimaginable pain and he had no one
to blame but himself for it. To be forgiven that was a bit of a different kettle of fish. "You've
owned my heart from the first second I met those pretty amber eyes, just stole it right out of my
chest without so much as a by your leave."

Remus chuckled lowly and nipped the skin underneath his mouth. "You're one to talk...I thought
you were an angel. I didn't know boys as pretty as you existed. Of course I quickly found out that
you were far from angelic but you were still so pretty. I was enchanted by your looks and then
well...The rest of you grew on me, like fungus."

"That's me, just a persistent mold." Sirius grinned but the nip really made things below the waist
react when Moony was far too worn out to be playing like that. His stomach saved them though,
when it grumbled loud enough to rattle the windows. "Well that's a mood breaker."

"Mood shifter maybe, not breaker." Remus stayed where he was just a little bit longer, relishing the
closeness between them before rolling off Sirius and lie down next to him instead. "I suppose we
really should pay some attention to the breakfast tray. It wouldn't surprise me if Molly has some
way of knowing if we actually ate it or not." Remus reached out and lifted the lid off the tray.
"Mmm, yoghurt." Sarcasm dripped from his voice at the sight of the bowl with white goo.

Sirius swirled his finger around in it then lick a dribble off, "I'll share the sausage if you eat all the
yoghurt and don't tell Molly," he held his white coated finger out for Remus with a smile.

Remus eyed the white coated finger before grinning. "Well this looks sort of familiar." He bent his
head down and sucked Sirius' finger into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it before releasing
it with a pop. "I am a slut for sausage..." Remus turned redder than a tomato. "Oh that didn't come
out right, the point is you have a deal."

Sirius laughed in delight and swooped in to share the taste of yoghurt that lingered in Remus'
mouth, "Hell with it, we'll share both. I'm a fan of sausage myself." His eyes twinkled as he used
the innuendo on purpose before smearing white creamy yoghurt over Remus' bottom lip and
licking it off. They might not be able to have the full meal this morning but nothing was wrong
with a little appetizer fun. "We'll have to do this again when you're given the all clear. I can think
of so many ways to play with the yoghurt or maybe," he nuzzled Remus' chin before pulling back
to pick up a link of the sausage, "chocolate mousse."

"Oooh, bringing out the dirty talk...Tell me more...Something with chocolate you said?" Remus
eyed the sausage hungrily, he still wasn't a great fan of yoghurt but it was rising on his list rapidly.
This time he reached into the yoghurt bowl, smearing a line down Sirius' jaw and neck and licking
it up afterwards. "It does taste better on you but then again everything does."

Sirius hummed and held the sausage out for Remus to have a bite, "Chocolate mousse, or pudding,
dribble it on the favorite bits then lick it off nice and slow." He caught Remus' hand with the bit of
yoghurt on it and demonstrated what he meant.

"Oh you just make me hot all over, perhaps there could even be chocolate...sauce?" Remus said it
as if it was the dirtiest word in the world before scooping a spoonful of yoghurt into his mouth and
then covering Sirius' lips with his own.

A soft moan opened his mouth and Sirius tangled his tongue with Remus' sharing the light, sweet
flavor of the yoghurt between them in a messy kiss. "There could be whatever you want there
Moony, so long as we're licking it off each other." He licked away a dribble of white that had
seeped out of the corner of Remus' mouth.

"Mmm, I like the sound of that, licking and nipping and tasting...I promise I will lick you all over,
taste every inch of you." By now Remus was starting to forgetting about the food, finding the thoughts of what he would do to Sirius much more tempting.

And he wasn't the only one, Sirius was a hair away from just pouncing on Remus. "So long as I get to return the favor this meets with my approval," he leaned in and licked at Remus' collarbone, nipping it very gently, a tease that brought a groan from his lover.

"Obviously Molly has left otherwise you would not be so appallingly unaware of your surroundings." Severus' voice was a cool, snarky drawl that made Sirius growl out a curse that would have had Molly twisting his ear off.

The look Remus sent Severus looked more like a deer caught in the headlights than a feral wolf. "Um...Hello Severus." He would stand by his silent promise and hug the other man but not right now...Severus would kill him if he went anywhere near him with the problem he was now sporting. Remus pointed to the tray. "Breakfast?"

"I think not considering what you were previously doing with the food. I am gratified to see that you are feeling better however."

Sirius' shoulders started shaking. He was hungry, tired from no sleep, emotionally exhausted after seeing his lover nearly die and waiting for him to wake up, and so hard it hurt and it was all just too much for him right now. The first bubble of laughter that escaped sounded unhinged even to him but it was followed by others, one after the other until he was laughing hysterically and crying at the same time.

Remus quickly gathered his lover into his arms, cradling him as he stroked his hair. He looked up at Severus over Sirius' head. "Thank you Severus, thank you for what you did. For me and for Orion. I will never be able to thank you enough, you saved my family." He kept holding Sirius close, pressing small kisses to his temples and forehead.

Snape could have cleaned Las Vegas out with his poker face and toneless, "I am certain I don't know what you are referring to Remus. A few potions and runes are quite little in the grand scheme of things."

He lifted a brow at the rise in hysterical laughing Black made then rolled his eyes before clipping over and tapping the back of Sirius' head with his wand, the incantation for a sleeping spell dying on his lips. When Remus gave him a look he explained his reasoning, "That fool, from what Molly tells me, refused to sleep. He always was far too emotional and lack of sleep does not make it better."

"Poor Pads." Remus shifted his lover so he was lying comfortably against him. "Thank you again then and you can be as prickly and aloof and as confused and unknowing as you like...Thank you."

Remus could understand that Severus would never want to talk about it but he still wanted to make sure that Severus knew that Remus knew and how grateful he was. "I have to warn you though, sometime, when you don't expect it...I will hug you, like a real hug. So will Orion, several times if I know him."

"I have already been assaulted by your son's version of gratitude this morning, accompanied by Potter's suspicious gaze, something which I will likely have to suffer once more during this evening's lessons in magical control. Thank you so much for suggesting me as tutor once again," the dry sarcasm was spot on as Snape pulled a chair to sit beside the bed, "Due to Madam Umbridge's mishandling of the school and the investigation of it, classes were shut down for the day. It appears the Board of Governors is leaning toward placing the Headmistress position upon
Minerva, as should have been done at Dumbledore's flight."

"I won't argue with that. Minerva is made for the Headmistress position. Maybe now you can get the Defense class if you still want it." Remus ran his fingers through a sleeping Sirius' hair. "A day without classes and no Umbridge...I'm not sure the castle will still be in one piece when you return. I'm afraid Orion will go mad. And yes, you are most welcome to be suggested as tutor once more. You were the best person for it and you know it."

Severus' brow twitched, "I am not as enamored of the Defense position as so many seem to think. Whoever Minerva gets to fill that position, it will not be me. Orion will not have much opportunity to go mad so Hogwarts will remain relatively unscathed I do believe." He drummed his fingers on his arms, "Miss Parkinson refuses to allow him out of her sight, at all. I believe it is a combination of concern over the Aurors investigating Umbridge's untimely death and vengeance."

Remus' lips quirked upward. "Good, Ri needs someone who can hold his leash, teach him heel and sit and stay. Wait a few years, then she won't let him out of her sight for a different reason and he won't want to leave either. It's early I know but Orion is choosing his mate and he doesn't even know it. I didn't know either, until this berk found it fit to point it out to me." He petted Sirius' hair in adoration.

"You had to have Black point it out," Severus shook his head, "I watch Orion and Miss Parkinson and it reminds me frighteningly of when the idiot you're cuddling with and you were together in your early years when Potter and the rat were not in the vicinity."

"That's what I'm telling you, I don't need my werewolf senses to be able to sniff out where those two are heading." Remus' smiled. He loved Sirius, loved him with everything he was but he couldn't deny how nice it was just talking to his best friend and Severus really was his best friend, the very best friend anyone could wish for.

"Just more incentive to get Orion or Draco trained as a Potion Master as I refuse to be in Hogwarts to deal with the next generation." He nodded at the food on the breakfast tray, "You should eat Remus, you and the baby need the nutrition."

Remus eyed the breakfast tray again, a faint blush creeping up his cheeks at the memory of what was going on when Severus arrived. "Do I really have to stick to yoghurt and berries?" Remus would deny his puppy eyes to the day he died but he might have tried to use them on his friend.

"Is that what Molly suggested?" Severus crossed his ankles, immune to the pleading gaze, and spoke only truth, "Of course not. Unless you feel sick to your stomach you're free to eat whatever doesn't turn it as the smell."

"Evil Molly." Remus grumbled as he tore into the sausages with gusto and poured himself a nice big cup of tea. He promised himself he would treat Sirius to something delicious when his mate woke up. Then he held out his teacup to Severus. "Would you mind reheating this for me? My magic still feels a little wonky, like it needs time to settle."

Snape tapped the edge of the cup with his wand, heating the tea casually, "It will likely take a week for your magic to settle in actuality. Your body will recover much more quickly than your magic. Hence the reason the runes are anchored with Black's magic and it is his keeping your magical womb stable until your own magic is up to the task again." He nodded at the shimmering red runes showing above the waistband of the sleep trousers, "Blood protection runes."

Removing his free hand from Sirius' hair for a moment he ran his fingers over the runes. "Thank you, I'm guessing that's the cause of the cut on Siri's cheek, actually I'm sort of hoping that's the
reason because no other option I can think of is a good one." Remus traced the runes again before returning his hand to Sirius and his petting. It calmed him when they were connected in some way. He drank his tea and continued to gulp down the sausages. "Are you sure you don't want anything? I promise we never touched the tea kettle or the toast."

"No, thank you. I am quite well fed and watered. Yes the cut is from the blood runes. I, or I imagine Black, would have healed it but we've been a bit preoccupied." He waited until Remus had eaten his fill, chit-chatting and whatnot, then, "Orion's hand won't scar. Due to being half werewolf he heals faster and better naturally than we puny full humans so the murtlap essence and dittany dressings will have his hand back to normal by the end of the month. The same," he folded his arms and his foot swept lazily back and forth like an agitated panther's tail, "can not be said for Potter. There is no lasting damage to the tendons of his hand but the blood vessels had to re-route themselves to avoid completely severing and the thin muscle, flesh, and skin will always carry the scars. It was not just Orion he stood in front of but many others whose hands would be in worse condition than the barely skin deep scars they now bear had he not stepped forward."

"That boy, it wouldn't hurt him to be a little more selfish but if he was he wouldn't be Harry." Remus was both proud and sad. "I wish I could protect him, protect him from everything. Even if there was a way I could though, he would never let me." Remus looked down at his own scars. "For doing that to him, to all of them but especially Harry...I hope she burns in hell."

"I'm hoping more for Limbo myself. I'd hate to be faced with her again in my own afterlife thank you. One almost year spurning her advances is bad enough, eternity whilst I also have red hot pokers shoved where they ought not be is far from desirable. Then again hell is supposed to be about eternal torment."

"You are not going to hell Severus, you may argue that point all you want but you're not. As far as hell go I think you and I and Sirius here...We've lived through our hell, you're still in it with your need to lead a double life. And if against odds and against everything that's fair you would end up in hell then I would too, so I'd be there next to you then, we'll suffer eternal torment together." Remus looked into the dark fathomless eyes of his best friend, making sure that Severus knew he was completely serious.

"You have a skewed sense of what is and is not good at times Remus." That was all he said on the subject. "Fudge will not last out through summer as Minister. There is already enough evidence in correspondence between him and Umbridge to place him in one of the lesser prisons for conspiracy charges. Minerva will be sending letters to the expelled students to bring them back, their second wands will be funded by the school and they'll be kept over summer to help them catch up to where they should be. You might find it interesting to know that Kingsley Shacklebolt and Nymphadora Tonks both have joined Albus' little Order of the Flaming Turkey."

"Well, just because the founder of said Order turned out to be a troll turd, doesn't mean that the Order itself is a bad idea. A resistance is needed and I guess the Order of the Phoenix is what's out there. As far as Aurors go those two are a lesser evil at least." Remus looked over at Sirius, remembering how proud he and James had been when they'd been accepted into Auror training, it seemed like a lifetime ago.

"I'm glad Fudge will be gone, I hope he has to leave in complete shame but still, who will step up instead of him? I do hope this will not be a case of better the devil we know." Remus didn't think anything could ever restore whatever little faith he'd ever had in the Ministry.

"There are two candidates, Amelia Bones and Rufus Scrimgeour. Bones is preferable over Scrimgeour due to her calmer nature. Scrimgeour tends to leap first and ask questions later. He's
very interested in advancement but it pulls about equal with his desire to bring the Death Eaters to justice. Bones is more of the sort who advances solely because it enables her to better protect. I would say that that for the war itself Scrimgeour is the best person to lead the Ministry but after it Bones would be a better Minister."

Severus pulled his sleeves down to straighten them, "The Order, you might be further interested to know, has been told of Black's innocence and to keep an eye out for a fat rat with a silver paw sneaking round and the orders are capture. I do have this sneaking suspicion he is attempting to get an advantage to make Harry feel grateful to him."

"You're most likely right about that. He must be desperate now, Harry is his only chance to get back in the public's good graces. I also have the bad feeling that he's still not done with his plans for Harry, no matter how things have gone pear shaped for him."

Remus placed the palm of the hand he didn't caress Sirius with on his stomach, something he was doing more and more often these days. "In my opinion Bones would make the better Minister but Scrimgeour could jump ahead. I think people are looking for a take charge leader, someone who doesn't hide behind the backs of his people while they fight."

Snape snorted, "Then they should go ahead and hand the bloody position over to Potter now shouldn't they?"

"If they could, then they probably would and do the same Fudge has done to them. Hide behind Harry's back while he fights for all of them. Not much different than now in other words."

"The majority of the world are cowardly sheep you know that Remus."

"I do know that Severus. Guess I'm hopeless though, keep hoping it will change, that one day people will step up and show their true worth." He looked at Severus with a half smile. "Guess I've just gotten spoiled with the people around me."

"No you're simply an incurable optimist. It's that Gryffindor nature." He gave Remus a good natured smirk before nodding at the breakfast try, "Done?"

"Yes, very much so, couldn't force another bite down." Remus nodded and pat his stomach with the hand he had there.

"Hmm," a flick of his wand had the remaining food transferred onto a single plate that was levitated to sit on the nightstand and banished the rest to clean itself in the kitchen. Then he pulled a small vial with shimmering lavender liquid from his sleeve and placed it next to Remus, "Pain and nerve repair potion and I would suggest sleep after you take it. The more rest you have the better your body will recover and no magic use for a month. None." He met Remus' gaze sternly.

"A month?" One look at Severus' expression let the wind out of his sails, after what his friend had just done for all of them, Remus couldn't argue with him. Especially not about this. "Fine, no magic use whatsoever for a month, it's going to be difficult though. Think I will have to lock up my wand not to do it automatically before I can remember myself."

"I am certain Black will be happy to assist you in that endeavor. One month without magic use and one week of bed rest, argue with me on that and I will get Poppy down here," he continued when Remus opened his mouth a protest in the amber eyes.

Remus puffed his cheeks out but managed to hold back his protests. As bad as Severus could be,
Poppy was much worse. If she got involved he might actually find himself restrained to the bed if he as much as tried to leave for the bathroom. "I'll be a good little wolf...Can I at least entertain myself in bed then and yes, I'm asking what you think I'm asking."

Severus' brow twitched, "No penetration, aside from that," he lifted his shoulders in a careless shrug, "Do as you please with the emotional lump plastered against you."

It was juvenile but Remus almost smiled at the fact that he had made Severus twitch, it was actually more difficult to achieve than you might think. "Thank you, I'll do him good then."

Another snort came from the other man, "Spare me the details. I would suggest you join him in actual sleep, not the previous poison induced coma for now. And do keep the mirror nearby as I am quite certain your son will be annoying you through it soon enough."

"I will, both sleep and keep the mirror close. If Orion calls now, I promise someone will answer him." Remus could only imagine how worried their cub most have been not to get an answer from any of them, he didn't want to put his son through that again. "When you leave, may I ask that you lock the door and set the wards? I really wouldn't want any uninvited company right now." Remus felt a little bit paranoid but he felt he had a reason for it.

"It is not even a question you need to ask Remus. I've no desire to lose one of the few people I actually like." He stood smoothly, "Now rest with your emotional lump." He left the room, setting a few extra warning wards along the stairs and halls that would be triggered at the presence of anyone but the occupants of the house. Once he locked the door he set and strengthened the wards as well as adding a few of his own along the perimeter of the property that would prevent anyone from concealing themselves from Remus or Black. Then he headed back to the castle, secure in the knowledge that his friend was safe for the time being. Now to the task of teaching Potter how to control another's magic and walk through a mind.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY NEW YEAR YA'LL!
Chapter 46

Harry sat in the cushy chair at the desk in the Chamber staring at the box that contained the locket and thinking while the quiet sounds of his friends studying or, in the case of Malfoy and the Twins especially, gently flirting. He knew what he'd said about destroying the locket and leaving the rest to the Ministry but how could they even find out how many Horcruxes Voldemort had created.

It was doubtful he'd let them capture him and dose him up with Veritaserum so they could learn about them. Even if they knew how many he had, how would the Ministry learn of their location. He tapped his finger on the desk. It might be his entrenched habit of believing that he had to end Voldemort and what he'd created but he knew he'd never be able to leave the Horcruxes to the Ministry. It wasn't in him.

"I don't think even you can make that box catch on fire just by staring at it." Hermione spoke in a low tone as she walked over and leaned against the chair Harry was sitting in. She'd noticed Harry sink deeper and deeper into his own thoughts and if he hadn't looked so troubled then she wouldn't have bothered him. She hated to see that troubled expression on him though, he always got that one when there was one more burden for him to bear. "Are you okay Harry? What's on your mind?"

"Voldemort and the Horcruxes," he paused and shook his head, "Merlin that sounds like some sort of demented band name." He snagged her hand and squeezed, "You know me, I can't just leave it alone when it comes to him and it's been a month since Umbridge died."

In that month the nutrition potions and final blood replenishers as well as complete rest and full meals had gotten him back to his healthy state before the school year had started so he was operating on all cylinder once more so to speak.

"I do know you Harry." Hermione had known all along that Harry wouldn't be able to leave this Horcrux hunt to the Aurors, it just wasn't in him to do so. "It's as you say, it's been a month since Umbridge died and nothing has really happened. It seems the Ministry is turning all its attention to the inner politics going on with booting Fudge out and choose another Minister. No energy is being put into Voldemort and the Horcruxes or in capturing Dumbledore."

It frustrated her to no end. With Umbridge's death it was like the whole investigation against Dumbledore had been put on ice, no one seemed to care. "Don't you dare going after a single Horcrux alone though, I mean it Harry."

"Hermione if I even thought about it you'd turn me into a kitten and keep me in a cage." He kissed the back of her hand, "I promised you once I wouldn't go on any adventures without you if I could help it and I don't break my promises."

"You would never break a promise, I know that." Hermione really couldn't explain the fear she had inside her when it came to Harry and all the things he had to face down. She couldn't talk about it without seeming both crazy and super clingy so she kept it to herself. As much as she loved Harry she never wanted to weigh him down and that was another of her fears, that she was too controlling, that she held him back. Still, she couldn't let him go into danger without her.

Harry smiled up at her, "Anyway I was thinking of a way I might be able to find out at least how many Horcruxes there are and maybe even what and where they are."

Pansy looked up from her book on the Borgias hearing that, "Really now. Do tell Potter."
Ron, who had Luna in his lap, much to his blushing happiness, as they both read a book on rare water creatures, studied Harry's expression and murmured to his girlfriend, "I have a feeling he's about to say something none of us will really like."

Luna nodded. "The primpieplumps are already leaving the wrackspurts behind and moving out. Harry's head is full enough without inviting new things in there." She closed the book they were reading and kissed the top of Ron's ear before looking over at Harry to hear his answer at Pansy's question.

In fact the whole room had turned eerily silent and everyone's attention was on the boy at the desk. Not even Orion was chattering or bouncing for once.

"Alright well you all remember what I told you about the connection between me and Voldemort," he tapped his scar and remembered the absolute horror that had crossed Malfoy's face when he'd told everyone, followed swiftly by sickened pity. It hadn't been good for his ego but it was nice that Malfoy felt something close to compassion for him at least. "I've been learning how to manipulate other's magic with Snape and how to...well it's not quite legilimacy, I couldn't do it with everyone, just Riddle, it's more like mind walking I guess."

"Oh no, no mate I know where your head's going now and you're barking." Ron shook his head, "Going into the mind of the crazy bastard who sent you nightmares from hell? Hermione talk sense into him!"

Hermione chewed her lip as emotions warred inside her. Of course she was scared for Harry's sake, it really was a crazy plan and it could go horribly wrong if Voldemort somehow found out and managed to turn the tables. "Actually, I think it's the best chance anyone will have to find out anything about the Horcruxes. Harry has been training to handle this exact thing and I have faith in him, that he can do it."

Every single set of eyes in the room turned to stare incredulously at her while Ron spluttered in pure shock. Even Pansy was startled. Over protective tigress Granger not keeping Potter from doing something risky? Either Voldemort's days were truly numbered or the apocalypse was absolutely coming.

Harry tugged Hermione down a bit to kiss her cheek and murmur in her ear, "Thank you, my own personal Athena." He didn't call her that only for the wisdom and intelligence she had but also because Athena was the goddess of law and justice and just warfare and he knew of no one who fought for what was right and just better than his Hermione.

"Really Granger, whoever thought you had something like that in you?" Blaise looked at her from where he was sprawled in a wide, plush wingback chair. He hadn't had a chance to see Charlie in over two weeks and even with the bracelet he was getting hungry and very much testy. "I didn't think you knew of the words risk or excitement. I mean with all the cheek kissing and handholding...You and that boyfriend of yours are like brother and sister, not a couple...But hey, good for you...OWWW!" He stared down at Orion who had inched over and bitten him hard in the leg.

In reply Orion only growled at him dangerously.

Pansy sighed, reaching over and grabbing the short tail of Orion's hair and yanking him back to glare into his eyes, "Orion if you bite either of my idiots again I will hex your mouth shut for a year." Then she looked up at the now smirking Blaise, "Oh don't you start looking pleased either you little bastard, I said absolutely nothing about him not pranking you worse than he did Draco when he first began attending. I realize you're hungry and crabby and missing Big Red but that was
Blaise sighed deeply. "I know and I apologize, I'm taking out my blues and blue balls on everyone else and it's not fair." He stood up and hissed when the bite on his leg stung. "I think I'll go back to the dungeons and take a nap, I really am sorry, I didn't mean to attack anyone or pass judgement." Blaise nodded to them all and slipped out of the room.

Harry shook his head. He'd not hexed Blaise because he did understand where the sniping had come from but he'd still planned on a long talk with him. No so much now. "Orion, as much as I appreciate your defense, your Dad would be really disappointed about you actually biting Blaise, especially now that the fangs are coming in."

Orion tongued a fang, testing its sharpness. "If he hadn't spewed shite like a complete arse fountain then I wouldn't have bitten him." He looked at both Harry and Pansy defiantly.

It wasn't the whole truth though. The truth was that every day was a bit of a struggle these days. He wanted to test himself in everything, fight everyone. He could actually feel himself growing from day to day and instincts assaulted him in everything he did, driving him mad and it was so, so hard to resist the callings of the wolf blood in him. Puberty was hard enough without being half wolf.

Harry stood up, brushing the back of Hermione's neck with his hand, and went over where Pansy was meeting Orion's defiant gaze with a narrow stern one of her own, not backing down a single little bit.

Pansy curved her hand around the back of Orion's neck, not gripping or squeezing but pulling him closer so their noses were just a centimeter or so apart, and bared her own teeth. "You listen to me, you may be naturally dominant creature and Blaise a submissive one but he is older than you and he is my friend and has been a friend to you too."

She might not be creature blooded but she understood the rules and she was naturally a leader herself. "And you just hurt him for something he can't completely control. As a future alpha you're supposed to protect and take care of ones like Blaise, to control your own urges to help your pack settle and deal with theirs," quick as the snake of her house she nipped the tip of Orion's nose hard, surprising most of the people in the room, "You're being a bad dominant and a bad friend." She let him go and turned her back, proceeding to ignore him as she went over to where Draco and the twins were, striking up a conversation with them.

Harry noticed the shocked and upset look on Orion's face and changed his path to get a book instead of going to speak with him as he'd planned. Them ignoring Orion when he so thrived on attention would work better than a lecture, as much as it hurt to do that to his little brother. He met the eyes of the others in the room and cut a glance to Pansy before going back to sit in the chair with the book.

If Orion had had a tail it would have been curled between his legs. Suddenly he felt smaller than a flea and he had to forcefully keep the whine that wanted to escape his throat in. He wasn't a complete idiot, he knew Pansy was right in everything she'd said and he knew what they were doing now but that didn't make it any easier to handle. He wished he had someone to talk to about the blood burning inside him. Orion loved his Dad more than anything but Remus had spent most his life repressing the wolf inside him.

Hermione threw a glance over at Orion who stayed where he was, looking down at the floor like a scolded puppy. Of course it hadn't been right of Orion to bite Blaise but if she was completely honest she was glad that someone had shut him up. She knew Blaise wasn't himself but that didn't mean that what he said didn't hurt. She tried to shake it off and concentrate to going back to what
they had talked about in the first place but it was still there, like a stubborn splinter stuck underneath her nail, stinging at the slightest touch.

Harry glanced up at her expression and stood again, catching her wrist before looking at the others in the room, "Be back in a little bit," he tugged gently on Hermione's hand until she was following him out into the main chamber then into one of the unexplored tunnels for privacy. He cupped her face in his hands, "Hermione?"

"Yes?" Hermione looked down at Harry's neck and chest. She really didn't want to unload a new batch of insecurities on Harry, not now, not ever.

"Hermione, love, look at me," when her gaze lifted to his, he rubbed his thumb along her cheekbone, "tell me what's whirring in you head."

"Nothing, it's stupid." She sighed and really looked at him. "Honestly, it's very stupid and you shouldn't worry. I've never been the popular girl, the one boys look at and I don't know anything about being a girlfriend. What if I'm doing it...wrong?"

He tilted his head, "Hermione..." he pondered what to address first and decided to take it in order, "First of all, if it bothers you then it's not stupid. If it bothers you I want to know so I can help you feel better. And as your boyfriend it is my right and very happy duty to worry when you get that upset look on your face."

He rubbed her nose with his, "Second, I may be the Boy Who Lived and all that rot with the giggling, stupid, vapid star-chasing twits following me around like hormone doused ducklings," here he shuddered remembering those moments, "But I don't know anything more about being a boyfriend than you do about being a girlfriend so I'd say that what we're doing and how we're doing it is just right for us. Zabini is a different fish from us love, he's got incubus magic and hormones annoying the piss out of him to be with Charlie intimately as fast and as soon as is possible. You and me, we're lucky, we can take our time feeling our way through this." He brushed his lips over hers, "There's no 'doing it wrong' love."

"See, I told you it was stupid." Hermione took a small step closer and wrapped her arms around his neck. "You're right about everything you said there and I know that, I knew that before too and then...I just sort of crumble under self doubt and worry and it's so silly and I hate myself for doing this." She hugged him. "I promise I will let it go, it just takes a little time."

He ran his hands up and down her back, "Hey I repeat, I want you to share your worries and concerns with me. Don't just share your joy and triumphs but your sorrow and very rare failures. I love everything about you Hermione, even what drives me round the twist, and I don't want you to ever feel like you have to hide something from me okay?" He dropped a kiss on her head, "You're so strong Hermione, of heart, mind, magic, and spirit. I know you could carry all your worries on your own but I don't want you to have to. I want to share in them okay?"

"Okay." Hermione agreed, nuzzling her face against his shoulder. "I love you, you're my very best friend and so much more. I made you promise to share your worries with me so it's only fair I'll do the same...Even when they're extremely silly." She hugged him tighter. "Thank you Harry, for being you."

"And thank you, Hermione, for being you. Even when you're being silly." He nudged her back a little bit so he could brush his lips over hers, "I love you so very, very much."

"Same here, love you so, so much." She kissed him back lightly and smiled. Okay so she wasn't very flirty or hands on or a perfect snogger but it was okay. What the two of them had together was
perfect for them. Hermione wouldn't want it or Harry any other way.

He leaned his brow against hers for a few moments, gave her a gentle squeeze, then kissed the tip of her nose before pulling back, leaving their fingers laced together, "Come on and let's head back so I can finish arguing the point with Ron." He walked with her back into the room and settled in the chair, fingers still linked as he met Ron's eyes while his best mate proceeded to argue against him poking into Voldemort's mind.

"You might see things you never wanted to in your worst imaginings Harry, or all the times he's killed, everything he's done to make him the bloody Dark Lord of the century. And worse what if he notices you and tries to take over your mind?"

Fred nodded and added his two cents, one of his hands playing with the strands of white blond hair that framed Draco's face, "Ron's got a point. If you can mind walk into his head, he can do the same can't he?"

"Not quite. Because I'm now his magical 'mother'," Harry shuddered just a bit as it still creeped him out, "and aware of it, my mind's wishes take precedence over his so if I don't want him in my head, he can't come in. Just like if your Mum were to tell Ron to eat his vegetables then her word is more important than his hate of brussel sprouts."

"Oi, those things are foul mate!"

Neville spoke up, getting everyone's attention, "It's risky and crazy and more than a little frightening but Harry's well aware of the risks right Harry?"

"More than yes."

"He's aware of the risks and as Hermione said it's our best chance to find the Horcruxes and more, are you forgetting that Harry fought off an unknown bind on his magic that was trying to kill him without any training whatsoever?"

Neville pet Ginny's hair affectionately, her head on his shoulder, "With only instinct and stubbornness Harry broke a bind placed on him by one of the most powerful wizards in the world while it was trying to suck all his magic away. No he more than broke it," Neville frowned, remembering Harry's description of what had happened, "He took the magic creating the bind and made it his own, basically claiming a big piece of Dumbledore's magic for himself. And did it without training. I'm pretty sure Harry can handle walking through Voldemort's head."

"Can't believe I'm saying this but in this issue I'm actually in Potter's corner." Draco looked down at his nails. "If I've learnt anything through the tears it's that Potter does what he sets out to do. And I've heard about that bind Potter broke too. I don't really know if you understand just what an achievement that is, how few fully trained and much older wizards would have managed that. Potter is sickeningly stubborn and lucky to the point of loathing. If anyone can do this it's him. And you who protest, come up with a better plan yourself and I might listen. For now I'm with Potter."

Harry looked at him in surprise, "I can't believe I just heard that but...thanks Malfoy."

Ron grimaced, "I can't believe it either. Would everyone stop trying to end the world? We're breaking seals here left and right." He sighed and rested his cheek on Luna's shoulder, "You know I'm with you if you're determined to do this mate. I'm just worried. Voldemort's a slippery bastard. And bloody hell Fred do you have to do that in my view?"

Fred lifted his head up from where he'd taken Draco's hand to kiss the palm, "I suppose not but do
you have to bring attention to it?" He let Draco pull his hand away, "I like it when my dragon gets all superior and knowing little brother, I just can't help myself."

"I'm always knowing and superior, well...In this group that's not so hard to be." Draco smirked happily at Weasley's outraged stare. He liked that there was still one redhead's chain he could yank and get a reaction. His smirk got even wider when he heard George moan lowly in his ear. His two deviants really had some strange kinks.

Hermione swallowed her snort and just shook her head instead. It was almost comforting to see that in spite of agreeing with Harry, Malfoy was still Malfoy. The world was changing enough as it was.

Ron made a growl, "One day Malfoy you and I are going to have a chess match and you will eat your words."

Pansy lifted a brow, "I am quite certain Draco would rather spend his time eating something else, after his next birthday at least," her glance at the twins held a wealth of meaning and had Ron looking very green.

Harry chuckled, "You're going to make my best mate throw up Parkinson."

"He is quite frighteningly prudish yes," she re-crossed her legs absently, "So do I take it you intend to do this mind walk now?"

He nodded, rubbing his thumb over the back of Hermione's hand, "Yes. The sooner we learn about the Horcruxes the better."

Despite her defense of Harry's choices, Hermione was really worried but she knew Harry was right as well. If he was going to do this then it was better the sooner he did, before Voldemort could have the slightest suspicion that it could happen. "Is there something we can do to make it easier for you?"

He looked up at her and gave her a reassuring smile, "Not really but if my magic flares I want you and the others to call to me or if that doesn't bring me back within a minute," he played with her hand until it looked like she was making a U in sign language, "channel your magic to the tips of your fingers and tap me on the temple. It'll disrupt my magic just enough to jolt me out." He kissed the tips of the two fingers. "Other than that just carry on as normal."

"Normal you say...Well in that case I can say after Pansy's little outplay here that even after my next birthday I'm not going to suddenly hunger to gag on cock...Just wanted that said." Draco pouted and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Well, thank you for making that clear then." For once Hermione could have competed with Snape himself in dry sarcasm. She turned back to Harry. "Be careful, watch your surroundings even in the mindscape and don't take any risks. If it looks too difficult then just back off and pull out of his mind. Please be careful."

"I will, promise." He gave her hand one more squeeze then released it to go into a meditative position in the chair, eyes closed as he sank calmly inside himself.

He felt for the connection in the back of his mind, a dark, twisted thing, steeled himself then dove in, following it along until he was in a chaotic, black mess. No mind was really neatly organized, that was why Legilimency was so difficult to learn. Most every mind worked the same, things were always a churning, bubbling stew of whatever was in the forefront of someone's thoughts and right
at the bottom of the stew was where the rest lay. That was where he'd start.

He sifted and subtly sorted through visions of death, torture, and other things he'd rather forget even existed. If he had a body while in a mind he'd have absolutely vomited when he encountered the memory of the woman Voldemort called Bella 'working' to pry information out of an Auror. Those were all simple and though the emotions attached to them were pleasant, for Voldemort, when Harry found the memory of the creation of the locket that was something else, a mad sense of satisfaction, relief, and a sickening glee.

He felt chilled as he searched for other memories that held the same feel to them, finding another of him killing a woman he recognized as Bertha Jorkins while he was still that disgusting, half-snake embryonic thing and then the black bit of soul being sealed within the snake. He dove into a memory of Voldemort, still young, still in Hogwarts, after having spoken to a portly man with a handlebar mustache, writing in a journal of the certainty that he should split his soul no more than six times, so that there would be magically significant seven pieces of soul, the final resting with his body itself. Harry found the creation of the diary, the emotions also that disturbing mix that lay with the other two but with that one there was also surprise, a very cold pity, and the tiniest bit of what seemed to Harry as remorse.

So far the diary, the snake, and the locket, all ones he'd known of already. Now to find the others. Sorting through the black mess, seeing more and more of the atrocities Voldemort had done, not only to others but to himself, was indeed something Harry would have nightmares about until he could get his hands on the spell to pull memories out, but one by one he found each Horcrux's location and identity.

Hermione had been right about the Founder's belongings, Hufflepuff's cup, now deep in a Gringotts vault owned by Bellatrix Lestrange, and Ravenclaw's diadem, hidden in Hogwarts itself, were both Horcruxes. There was one more, a ring he'd gotten from what appeared to be a maternal uncle. The deaths used to turn it into a Horcrux were the murders of his father and grandparents while in an incandescent rage. Harry also saw what had directed Tom Riddle to that very place, just before the tone of the diary had changed, and it made him more determined to put an end to Dumbledore and his machinations.

Armed with the information he'd sought, Harry began lifting himself out of the stew when a thought caught his attention, something Voldemort was concentrating hard on. An orb, filled with cloudy something. Though he knew he should just get out of there as soon as he could, Harry followed that thought until he saw before him in a broken tower of Azkaban Prison, a group of gleeful Death Eaters, and a less than gleeful Lucius Malfoy, being addressed by Voldemort.

"I don't think I need to tell you how important this is. You are not allowed to fail me, if you do fail, then hope you die before you return to me for my punishment will be worse than death."

Voldemort stroked the long, ragged scar, stretching down one side of Lucius face when he said that. "For some of you, this will be the last chance you'll get. And some, never fail to do their best."

A strangely gentle hand reached up to cup the chin of a dirty, ragged witch. "I've missed you my Bella, no one can match you when it comes to bringing me beauty, your work is always pure art. Are you ready to resume your place next to me? This retrieval mission will show if you are. I don't care how you get it, don't care if you leave the whole Ministry in ruins but you shall succeed. Bring me that prophecy, it's an order."

Harry watched as Bellatrix Lestrange turned into that hand like a kitten starved of attention, eyes burning with a fierce, insane devotion and eagerness.

"One I shall happily carry out My Lord, even at the cost of my life. I have missed bringing you art
'She loves him.' Harry thought with a flush of pity. The witch loved the man she'd taken the mark of and he was certain Voldemort cared nothing for her beyond her usefulness. He caught a memory of the layout of the Ministry, and a thought of the plan Voldemort had made. While he and a few of the other members of his inner circle he'd just freed created a distraction during the Wizengamot session, the others would slip down to the Hall of Prophecies and steal one that was vital to the bastard. One with only his and Harry's name on it.

Harry didn't linger any longer, if Voldemort wanted that thing, if he felt he needed it then Harry knew he'd need to keep it out of Riddle's hands. He left carefully, making sure not to disturb anything or give away his presence, and then he was rushing back into his own mind and snapping his eyes open with a loud exclamation, "Shite!"

Hermione's face was bone white and her eyes huge and dark. "Bloody, buggering hell Harry, you've been under for nearly an hour. Scared the wits out of me, and if you even dare to comment on that Malfoy, then cock is the least you need to worry about choking on." She sent Draco a positively toxic glare before turning back to Harry. "Are you alright? What happened? Were you found out?" She reached out and tucked some unruly, black hair behind Harry's hair.

"No but we've got a problem," Harry stood up, running his knuckles over Hermione's cheek in affection, "a big one."

"Oh bloody hell I know that look." Ron sighed and shifted from under Luna, standing as well, holding his hand out to his girlfriend, "That's the same one he got before we went after Quirrel, and before we went to save Ginny in second year. So what's our crusade this time mate?"

"Voldemort is going to attack the Ministry, well sort of. The attack is a ruse to cover a few of his little minions going down to retrieve a prophecy. We've got to get to that prophecy before they do." Harry's jaw was firm, his expression resolute.

"Okay...okay." Hermione ran one hand through her bushy hair. Since she knew they would be going all she could do now was to try and plan the best way to do it. "Did you find out when this would happen? Anyone know how we will get to the Ministry and did you recognize any of Voldemort's people? If we know who they are in advance then maybe we can find out some of their weaknesses."

"Soon, like," he cast Tempus and grimaced, "no more than two hours soon. I really only paid attention to two of them but tomorrow the papers are going to have one hell of a headline, he just broke his people out of Azkaban. One of the two I recognized was Bellatrix Lestrange, both from the memories I just waded through and the tapestry in the house Siri signed over to me. The other was," he glanced at Draco, "Malfoy's father."

Neville stiffened hearing about Bellatrix, "I don't know about weaknesses but if one Lestrange is there so will the other one be. They like to team up during assaults and raids and their favorite spell is the Crucio."

Harry met Neville's eyes, almost shocked at the hard fury in them but understanding. His parents were in St. Mungos thanks to the Lestranges.

"Joy, joy, joy...Looks like a family reunion at the Ministry. What should I bring you think? What says I hate all of you and hope you'll rot from the inside out? Pie?" Draco straightened his robes and made sure his hair was in order.
"We're in Scotland Harry, how can we get to the Ministry in less than two hours? Only Fred and George are allowed to apparate and I doubt they can side along all of us without passing out." Hermione's bottom lip was back to being abused.

Pansy lifted a brow when she saw the clever look cross Lovegood's face, "I think the dreamy lass there might just have an idea."

Ron took in his girl's expression, "What are you thinking Luna? You're a part of our pride too so share please?"

"I wasn't thinking much really. Just don't see what the worry is about. We just have to ask the Thestrals. They're certainly quick enough to get us to London in time and as long as we're nice to them they won't mind. They don't get much workout except for the carriage ride first and last day of terms anyway." Luna stretched her naked foot out and curled her toes. "Just a suggestion."

Pansy stared at her for a moment, "Lovegood there are times you scare me."

Ron gave her a glare, "What does that mean?"

"It means that I get lulled into a false sense of security by that dreamy facade and forget there's a mind just as sharp as Granger's under the fluff."

Harry shook his head, "Down Ron. I'm pretty sure that was a compliment. Luna it's brilliant, though we'll have to help the others figure out where to get up on the Thestrals. Okay that's how we're getting there, as for getting in...we'll just have to wing it." When he saw Hermione's expression at the knowledge they were flying he leaned in and gave her a kiss, "Would you rather ride one with me?"

"Yes and pretty and please are words that come to mind at that question." Hermione nodded and gripped his hand. "I'd love that if a Thestral is strong enough to carry two people."

"We should get going as soon as we can, this late in the day they usually move further into the forest and if I have to call them out it could take some time." Luna kissed Ron's ear again, her knight, always standing up for her. She didn't need it but she loved him for caring so much as to do it.

Hermione poked Harry gently in the side when she saw Orion's overly eager expression. He had stayed quiet after everyone ignoring him but now his amber eyes were practically glowing.

Harry sighed and kissed her cheek, "Hermione you, Neville, and Ginny get what you think we'll need from Gryffindor Tower. Fred, George the two of you get what you think will help best from your stock. Malfoy if you don't have a dozen or so nasty tricks stowed away in your dorms I'll eat Ron's socks, please go get them.

"Ron, Luna the two of you go call out the Thestrals, sort of act like you're doing your normal walk round looking for creatures so as not to raise suspicion. We'll meet you out there as soon as we're done getting our things settled. I want to talk to Orion and Parkinson first but then I'll be out there."

Everyone dashed off and he went to place his hands on Orion's shoulders, "Ri I know you want to come," he squeezed when Orion would have begun protesting, "and if it was purely up to me I'd let you because I know how it feels to be left behind. But I want you to think on this, I'd not even be taking the others if I could help it. I'd much rather they were all here safe and sound and I'd be the only one risking my neck but if I left on my own they'd follow me and there'd be nothing I could do to keep them from doing it. Molly's going to kill me, Narcissa is going to salt and burn the remains,
and Snape is going to keep my mind on this plane just long enough to savage it beyond repair already, please don't let's add your Dad to the mix by you going into danger on purpose?"

"It's not fair. I'm thirteen going on fourteen, I know what you'd done when you were my age. You met Sirius and fought Wormie when you were thirteen. Orion knew his Dad would freak and he didn't want to upset him, especially not now after he'd been sick and with the baby and everything. Still Orion wanted to fight to, help. "So what do you think will stop be from just following after you've left then? I know the plan, know about the Thestrals so who says I won't give whoever you'll get to babysit the slip and just follow on my own?"

Harry lifted a brow at him, "Because Parkinson will be the one keeping you here."

"Oh will I?" Pansy gave him an arch look, "And whatever gives you that idea as I do quite want to accompany my blond idiot to keep him in one piece."

"One, he's got two redhead possessive foxes who'll turn anyone who tries to hurt him inside out, literally. And two, you know that book you've been eyeing, the one in Parselscript with all the illustrations that have you almost vibrating in eagerness?" He gave her a sly smile, "I'll translate it for you."

She pursed her lips and gave it some thought, "You, Potter, know a snake's mind too well."

Harry looked back at Orion, who was still looking a bit mutinous, "Ri I was eleven when I faced Voldemort possessing Quirrel, twelve when I killed a basilisk, thirteen when I met Sirius and repelled a hundred dementors, and fourteen when I battled Voldemort himself in a graveyard full of Death Eaters. That's all true but I should never have had to." He looked into his brother's eyes, "I want you to have what I've never had, the chance to grow up at the pace you're supposed to, not aging beyond your years because you've already seen too much war. Do this for me please?"

"You really don't know me at all do you Harry? You think I want to come for the adventure, for the fight?" Orion shook his head and took a step back. "I'll stay, be the good boy glued to Pansy's side but I thought you of all people would understand. Would you stay if your family was going into danger? Wait, you don't have to answer, I already know the answer. See you when you get back." Orion turned on his heel and looked at Pansy. "I'll be in our common room." He handed her his map. "Feel free to track me."

Pansy took the map and waited until Orion had left, seeing the hurt on Potter's face, "He doesn't understand yet Potter, but he will in time. He'll understand that you know that he wants to protect his family and that you are doing exactly that by making him stay here. He'll understand once Lupin has that baby and he's holding his little brother or sister in his arms."

She huffed, "Honestly two male alphas in a family, let's hope Lupin's second child is a beta girl to balance the insanity out. Oh and if I were you I'd at least owl the furry ones about this because otherwise they'll get to you and tan your arse before Molly Weasley does."

Harry shook his head as he left. Parkinson wasn't as hard as she liked to pretend to be. And she was right. He rushed up to the owlery, with a quickly scribbled letter, and pet Hedwig as he gave it to her, "Wait a few minutes then take that to Remus please girl?" He pet her feathers a bit more and gave her an owl treat before leaving to meet the others at the edge of the forest.
Remus was cleaning the house with magic and before he'd made dinner with magic and before that he'd conjured their afternoon tea. He was aware that he was going a bit crazy but the month he'd been forbidden to use magic had just ended and now his whole body tingled with the want to use it, as much as he possibly could.

As he vanished the dust on top of the bookcase he noticed a familiar white owl tapping at the window. After charming the window open he walked over and ran his fingers over Hedwig's smooth feathers before taking the letter she was carrying. "Pads, Hedwig is here with a letter from Harry, can you bring the owl treats?"

Sirius got up from where he'd been watching his lover with amusement and went to the cabinet that held the treat container, opening it to give Hedwig her choice of treat. He blinked when she just ruffled her feathers and shook her wings at Remus, hooting impatiently, "Er Moony, I'm thinking that letter's important." He'd learned not to ignore the snowy when she was insistent as she truly was Harry's familiar, much closer than just a post owl.

"Really? Important? I couldn't ever have guessed that." Remus quipped as he opened the letter and read through it. The more he read, the grimmer his expression got, all traces of amusement gone. "Oh that bloody cub...Fifteen is not too old to be placed over my lap." He growled as he tossed the letter to Sirius.

Sirius grabbed it and scanned the hasty scrawl, "Oh bloody hell. Floo Moony, we need to tell Molly and Arthur then I'll go grab our oldest cub and the rest of his little pride. Fuck what was he thinking? No wait, forget I asked that. I know what he was thinking." He marched to the fireplace, tossing a pinch of floo powder in and calling out for the Weasley parents.

"Hello? Oh Sirius, how are you? Everything well I hope, with the both of you." Molly smiled at Sirius through the green flames of the floo fire. "Are you out of food?" During the month that Remus was banned from using magic, Molly had taken it on herself to make sure they were fed, bringing them more food than an army could eat. Her excuse was that she wanted to make sure Remus got his strength back and ate well for the baby. The truth though was that Molly found it boring to cook only for two so she'd jumped at the chance to feed two more mouths, it made her feel as when her babies were home.

"Unfortunately Molly I'm about to ruin your day and make you consider committing infanticide." Sirius' expression was a mix of exasperation and irritation, "Harry and I'm guessing the rest of the merry Chamber band have gone to the Ministry to stop a bunch of Death Eaters from getting their hands on a prophecy Voldemort wants, apparently quite desperately. I'm about to floo there and get their stupid bums out of the fire but I knew you'd want a heads up first."

"Thank you so much for the warning Sirius." Molly's eyes shot blue fire. "Infanticide is too easy for the little miscreants. A whole summer of doing the laundry, cutting the grass and emptying the outhouse, all without magic is waiting for them though, as soon as they return to Mummy's arms." Molly huffed and took a deep breath to control her temper, screeching at Sirius wouldn't help anyone and it was not his fault in the least. She turned her head away from the fire and looked at her guest. "Are you hearing this Narcissa? Our children running away from school, to the Ministry to face Death Eaters?"

Sirius' eyes widened as the familiar cool tones of his cousin came through the flames.
"Indeed I do. If I may impose upon you for a different shirt please Molly? I do believe that I should go retrieve my son myself and I would hate for the lovely sweater you made me to be damaged."

Sirius coughed, "Well I'll let you ladies get to it and go get my cub then. See you there Cissy." He closed the call then stood, getting ready to step into the grate. He saw Remus tossing on a coat, "Moony you're not-" his voice died at the look his lover gave him.

"That's right, you better not finish that sentence lover mine." Remus bristled and pulled on the worn brown leather coat. "Think I'm staying here as you, my dear wanted mate goes to the bloody Ministry to yank our lion cub back by his tail? Not even you can be as stupid as to think that?" He pulled his hair into its usual short tail and went to stand in front of the fireplace. "Now go, I'll be right behind you."

He knew it'd be useless to talk Remus out of going so instead he yanked him close and gave him a fierce kiss, "Just...please Moony. Be careful. I already nearly lost you once a month ago and," he brushed his fingers low over Remus' belly, "Just be careful okay?" He stepped into the floo calling out for the Ministry. One thing was certain, Harry was going to get his tail yanked into a knot for this one.

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Harry glanced back at his friends, making sure the acid burns Ron had gotten from those freaky brains were responding to the dittany salve Malfoy had passed over silently, then pushed open the door of the Hall of Prophecies, letting out a long, low whistle at the humongous shelves filled with bright, glowing globes of blueish white smoke. "That's...a lot of predictions."

"Indeed." Hermione sounded awed as she looked at the rows and rows of shelves with glowing orbs. "How far back do you think they date? And how are we going to find the one Voldemort is after?"

"I think the second question there is a little bit more important than the first one Mione." George raised an eyebrow. "You can read up all you want on prophecies and storing them once we've gotten what we came for and gotten out again."

"I second that," Ron hissed, the dittany salve helped but the damn acid burns still hurt like a motherfucker. "Can we do that, now, immediately, please. Before the Death Eaters show up."

Harry nodded, "Right. It looks like they're arranged by date so," he looked up at the labels on the shelves, "No bloody clue when exactly the one Voldemort wants was made but since my name was on it replacing a question mark, I'd go for between 1943 and the year I was born. Split into," he looked at the twins flanking Malfoy, "threes. Ron you with me and Hermione, Luna go with Nev and Ginny. Malfoy there's no way those two would let you out of their sight right now if we tried to blow you apart with dynamite. Keep an eye out and your backs to each other." He snagged Hermione's free hand, moving so that their shoulders touched then smiling as Ron gave Luna a kiss on the cheek before completing the guard, "the one he wants is on one of the bottom three shelves of the stack it's in."

They moved forward, scanning the bottoms of the shelves as they went up and down the latter years. "You feeling alright Ron?"

"Oh just fine, I've been attacked by brains. You have any idea how much material that's going to give the ferret?"

Hermione snickered at that, she just couldn't help herself. "Oh Ron, good that you concentrate on
the most important thing about being attacked. Maybe if you stopped calling him a ferret, he wouldn't give you such a hard time. No matter how you like it you're stuck with him now. Malfoy's going to be the vanilla filling for your brothers for quite some time if they have anything to say about it." She continued to scan the shelves as she spoke, keeping her eyes open.

"Oh thank you for that reminder Hermione. I'm getting used to it slowly but it's gonna take a little time alright?"

Harry was shaking his head at their quiet sniping when his eye caught on something. His name. He stopped and looked closer, bending just a bit, "It's here." He reached out and picked the small sphere up, tucking it into his expanded wallet before putting that in his pocket. "Alright, let's get the others and get out of here."

"Gladly, as interesting as it is, this place is giving me the creeps." Hermione was whispering now. "Isn't it much, much too quiet in here?"

Suddenly a hex shot over their heads and broke a whole shelf of glowing orbs, shards of glass from them raining down on the three teens.

Harry hissed out a profanity and brought up a shield in the knick of time as another curse was sent their way. He yelled, "Folks our time is up," before shooting a hex at the masked Death Eater who appeared in front of him. He grabbed Hermione's free hand again and started running, using a slicing spell to sever the legs of the shelves behind them, sending the prophecies crashing down and giving their backs some cover.

Ron shot a hex at a black cloud that was streaking to follow them and made a triumphant sound when it knocked a Death Eater out of an apparation, splinched, "Ha! Fred! George! Ginny! You lot had better be okay!"

Fred ducked under a curse and returned it, sending one of the cloaked creeps flying backward, "Working on it Ronnikins!"

"Same here Ron, okay so far though." Ginny called out as they battled their own cloaked cowards. She was surprised by the nastiness of Luna's hexes. The blonde girl was usually so sweet and soft spoken that it was hard to believe she had this in her. Surprising but welcome.

Draco looked closely at all the masks of the Death Eaters, trying to pick his father out of the crowd as he dodged and fired back with everything he had. He hissed when some sort of cutting curse got a little too close and slashed a gash across his upper arm but it didn't slow him down any.

Fred snarled and the modified bone breaker curse that hit the Death eater who'd landed a hit on Draco made a series of sickening cracks and a loud pained scream echo in the air. He pulled a portable swamp from his pocket and threw it down, making several Death Eaters behind them get bogged down in it as he saw George clearing their way ahead. He snagged Draco's free hand and ran after his brother, grinning as they fell into a run just behind Harry, Hermione, and Ron. "So Harry, any plans?"

"Try not to get killed!" Harry hissed out a parseltongue spell that severed the wand arm of the Death Eater it hit.

"Good plan!" Fred blew another one away from behind them.

Ron jumped over the severed arm, "Yeah Harry you're a real genius," he used a reducto to break the knees of a Death Eater that tried to hex Luna as she lead Ginny and Neville out to join them.
"Remind me to kill you later."

Neville sent a hex that had thorny vines growing up around a pair of Death Eaters, "You'll have to get in line behind our guardians Ron." He ducked as Harry hit another shelf with a spell that soon had them all falling like dominos and then they weren't the only ones running from the Hall. the Death Eaters were too.

Hexes and curses flew back and forth as masked men and women attacked and had their attacks repelled while the teenagers tried to outrun them and hex them at the same time.

Fred hissed as the Death Eaters used apparation to keep ahead of the crashing shelves and prophecies while managing enough time to hex them. It was an unfair advantage when they weren't apparating to do the same. He slid a look over at George and exchanged a nod before he slipped a pebble into Draco's hand, "Hold on to that for me love. I'm going to be wanting it back." Then he apperated to bring down their opponents from a different vantage point.

George bent down and kissed Draco's cheek. "I'll be back shortly, don't worry too much now." He grinned and winked before he too apparated to another spot to help his brother bring the Death Eaters down by helping to hex them from three different directions.

Draco watch them go and held on to the pebble in his hand. That idiot better be back to claim it back. Struck by an urge to protect that he'd only ever felt for his mother, Pansy and Blaise before, Draco's eyes went to the ring he'd gotten for Christmas. In a flash he had the sword up from its storage and he used the crystal to sink his wand into the sword, feeling the hum of his familiar magic sing through both handle and blade. He ran faster until he was almost parallel with Potter but that was fine. He had idiots out there and he was going to protect them with everything he had.

There was a shout and Draco could see a Death Eater, from the mask he thought it could be Mulciber, grab Ginny Weasley by the shoulder and at the same time a Death Eater landed almost right in front of them. Draco didn't even have to turn his head to know who this one was.

"Look at you Draco, look what has become of you? Cavorting with a halfblood a mudblood and blood traitors. Why the Dark Lord still wants you I have no idea. For now though you are in my way." Lucius raised his wand and blasted Draco backwards. "This is between you and me Potter and the item in your pocket. You see I need that item and if you give it to me now then maybe I'll let your... friends live to crawl on their bellies another day."

Harry felt Hermione's hand ripped away from his and whirled to see a dirty wizard holding her with his wand pressed to her throat, as he looked around his friends were all in similar predicaments, Neville held by Bellatrix, Luna by a man he now recognized from the memories as Rodolphus Lestrange.

Fred and George were fighting a man and a woman, trying to get to Draco, who was sprawled on the floor, blood running from the corner of his mouth, his sword centimeters away from his hand while a masked Death Eater held his wand at him in warning. Ron was also held, wand at his throat, by someone who made Harry's blood boil. Peter Pettigrew. His hands fisted and his jaw clenched and he turned to glare viciously at Lucius, "Yeah I know you need it. It's your last chance isn't it? Voldemort's very, very unhappy with you and if you bugger this up you might as well kiss what little prestige you still hold in his circle gone right?"

Lucius shrugged casually, his wand still steady though the tension in his shoulders proved that Harry's words hit their mark. "Still I like my odds better than yours Potter. At least I haven't pulled all my friends and entourage, knowingly into danger. You really have that little regard for their safety?" Lucius tilted his head as his voice turned almost gentle. "It looks as if you and my Master
have even more in common than first meets the eye, how will you face the families of the children
you have led into slaughter? Or do you just not care? I'm hoping for the latter choice, then at least
there would be something I could pretend to respect about you."

"Lucy your respect is one of the very last things in this world I'd ever want. I'm not too keen on
having the respect of a man who's so pathetic he spends his time licking the boots of a hypocrite."
Lucius' words had absolutely hit their mark but he didn't react outwardly, he wouldn't give him the
satisfaction. He turned his head at the feral hiss that came from the woman holding Neville.

"How dare you insult the Dark Lord!" Her wand jabbed harder under Neville's chin, "You filthy
little half-blood! I'll teach you to respect your betters by making your friend suffer in your place,"
her lips parted to cast a spell.

"Hurt him and I'll do more than take the prophecy out of my pocket, I'll smash it to pieces," Harry's
tone cut in quickly and cold, "Somehow I doubt your precious Master would be too pleased about
that."

He scanned the room, Fred and George still fighting the two Death Eaters the only steady noise,
"That holds for all of you. Hurt any of my friends and I'll destroy what you came here for," he met
Lucius' gaze, the eye color the exact same shade as Draco's but so startlingly different, "I'm not
giving you anything unless I have absolute assurance of my friends', and yes your son is included in
that category, safety and if any of them are hurt I will shatter the prophecy. Makes a bit of an
impasse doesn't it Lucy?"

Bellatrix quivered with the need to make this whelp roll on the floor in agony, to make his little
friends bleed, but the intent in his eyes was clear. He would destroy the prophecy her master
wanted if they made a wrong move and she'd never risk that, never risk her Lord's disappointment.

"Not really no." Lucius kept his eyes on Harry, not even glancing at his bleeding son. "My Master
hasn't ordered you lot captured or killed. I know he has plans all of his own for you Potter. So, you
can be on your merry little way just as soon as you've given me the prophecy. Given your utter
inability to keep your nose out of others business, we'll meet again. Of that I have no doubt. Don't
worry Bella, you'll have a chance to put the blood traitor you're holding just where you put his
parents, just maybe not today."

Harry literally growled and met Hermione's eyes, "You know Lucy, sometimes you irritate me
enough I could almost roar," seeing understanding light Hermione's gaze he looked back at
Malfoy's father and shifted between one breath and the next, from a boy in a tight situation to an
enormous and furious lion lunging and slapping off Lucius mask with a huge paw, claws raking
over the same side of his face that held the scar from the cutting curse.

Neville got it as well and shifted, turning and knocking Bellatrix to the ground, aware of the others
shifting around him, drawing startled sounds from the Death Eaters. The strangled gasp the bitch
who'd been holding him made however was what would make his day as she found herself facing
down a Kodiak bear in a very bad temper. He bellowed, knocking her wand out of her hand and
charged at her.

Bellatrix hissed and rolled out of the way, throwing her knife at the bear and using the momentary
distraction to sweep her wand back into her grip. Her gaze went from shocked to mad challenged
glee in an instant and she began aiming cutting curses at the bear, impressed by the hulking thing's
ability to dodge them.

Ginny, having changed too, zoomed around the closest Death Eaters, pecking at their eyes with her
tiny little beak. She wanted to help Neville but after a look she saw that her boyfriend was more
than holding his own so she continued with what she was doing.

Hermione would live on the scream the wizard holding her let out as she changed for weeks. Apparently he had not expected to face down an enraged bengal tiger instead of a teenage girl.

Luna scuttled between the Death Eaters feet, where Ginny attacked from above, she attached from the ground, biting at tendons and ankles.

Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap. Draco looked around and at the wand pointing at him, weighing two really bad options against each other as he finally decided to shift into his animagus form as well. He had just started to hop away when he squeaked in terror and pain as a big hand grabbed his ears and lifted him off the ground.

Fred would admit to surprise seeing their dragon turn into a fluffy bunny, an adorable fluffy bunny but the second he saw Draco grabbed by the bastard who'd pinned him down his temper exploded and he was running alongside his brother as a fox and clamping down hard on the Death Eater's arm, sharp fangs and teeth shearing through the flesh and forcing him to let go as he tried to shake them off. Fred was flung down and hit the ground as a human, scooping the pure white rabbit off the ground protectively, his wand out and casting a cutting curse that severed the Death Eater's knee tendons, bringing him down.

Ron, as the only one who hadn't had to transform since Pettigrew had released him with a squeak as soon as Harry had transformed, couldn't help the unholy amusement seeing Malfoy's animagus form but he really had more important rats to trap right now. "Oh no you bloody don't! Homenum Manere!"

He cast the spell at Pettigrew as he tried to shift to a rat so he could scurry away. It was a spell designed to force an animagus to remain human for an hour. Pettigrew was not going to be escaping, not this time, and he had about twelve years worth of betrayal to take out of his hide. "Diffindo!" The cutting curse slashed over the silver hand Pettigrew now sported, making a small dent. "You, you bloody traitor, are not going anywhere!"

Harry, after having knocked Lucius down, had gone ahead to block the two the twins had been fighting, taking them down by crushing one's elbow with his powerful jaws, a paw snapping the wand. The other was knocked unconscious as he landed on her and used his mouth to destroy her wand. Then he shifted back to his human form and blasted Lucius as he tried to hex a beautiful striped pelt, "Change back!"

The whole fight seemed to stop for a second as they listened to Harry's command to change. In a few moments they were all back to human forms, even Draco who even though he was up and fighting again, threw his redheads a very warning glare as he blushed. He hated that he'd had to reveal his bunny form.

Lucius was not happy, not happy at all. This was supposed to be an easy snatch and grab. No one had said anything about Potter and the fact that apparently all of Hogwarts were animagi these days. His face burned like fire and just because of that Lucius wanted to rip Potter's spleen out of his nose.

Fred tossed Draco a wink, finally understanding the prey and predator comment, "No puns love, promise. I've got to say though," he hexed away an opponent, "that you're gorgeous no matter what form you take."

Harry rolled his eyes and jumped over the prone body of a fallen Death Eater and shouted, "Quit flirting and fight Fred!"
Ron ducked under a hex, "Yeah you can play chase the cottontail later!"

"Oh you are going to get it later Weasel. The gloves are coming off. Prepare for oozing bum boils for the rest of your natural born life." Draco hissed, voice dripping with venom as he crushed the bones of the Death Eater attacking him.

Fred had to admit seeing Draco wield the sword so ruthlessly did things to his libido that ought to be illegal, "Oozing bum boils, huh. That'd be an interesting product don't you think Gred?"

"It does have a certain flair to it, I agree. It's something to add to our future product developments I think Forge." George dodged a swipe and kicked at the knee cap of his attacker, hexing him when he was down. "We'll have to ask our fierce dragon warrior what exactly this entails later, maybe we can use little brother as a test study."

"They're in here!" Suddenly other voices were heard as Remus and Sirius burst into the hall, quickly followed by Narcissa and a handful of other people.

Harry felt his face heat then chill as he saw Remus, first embarrassment then blind terror. What the hell was he doing here?! He was pregnant! He knew he shouldn't have sent that fucking letter. From now on, no listening to Parkinson. He ducked under a hex and his back fetched up against Neville's, "Nev I'd just like to say, since I'm dead once we're out of here, that it's been a pleasure knowing you."

Neville laughed and sent a hex back at Bellatrix, "Harry they won't kill you. Make you do the grimiest, nastiest chores in existence without magic for the entire summer maybe but not kill you."

Harry snorted and bent so Neville rolled over his back to switch Death Eaters as he muttered, "Not exactly something that I'm not used to there mate."

Narcissa scanned the room quickly, nodding in satisfaction when she saw her son, flanked by his redheads, more than holding his own. Then she was in front of Lucius, smirking at the blood on his face, "Oh my goodness dear, you just can't keep your face unscathed now can you?" She brought up a shield at the curse sent her way and returned it with one of her own that struck his free hand and pulled it back, dislocating the wrist.

Gritting his teeth, Lucius managed to hold back the shout of pain longing to escape him at the agony in his wrist. That bitch would get the satisfaction to get a pained sound out of him. "Now dear, keep your mouth shut and look pretty, it's all you're good for anyway." He sent a return hex that caused a gash open across her cheek. "Oh dear, it looks as if your face isn't flawless either now then...Can't even look pretty now, oh darling, what shall you do?"

Draco was tense, he had his own fight to concentrate on but he couldn't help but be distracted by his parents fighting. He couldn't care less about Lucius but he loved his mother and he didn't want anything to happen to her. The blood on her cheek made his blood boil.

Harry saw Narcissa give her husband a cold, sharp smile and shivered knowing that Lucius Malfoy wouldn't be walking out of here. Good riddance to bad rubbish. He looked over as Sirius came up to his side to help him fight Bellatrix, "How pissed is Moony?" He ducked and cast a bone-breaker that was blocked.

"Let me put it this way cub," Sirius cast a shield, "Even in his condition, anyone in his way is asking for death."

"Great. I'm fried."
"Pretty much."

Narcissa lifted a brow at her husband, "Lucius dear, unlike you I am not solely decorative," she threw a small vial at him that impacted with a shield he raised, shattering it then followed it up with a yellow curse that broke through the shield, sinking the poison coated shards of the vial into his skin, and sent him flying back several meters. The poison was an instant paralytic and in less than a minute Lucius would be dead but until then he'd be unable to move and experiencing the most searing agony she could create in a fast acting poison. She went to join her son in his own fight.

"A very nice poison Mother." Draco said in approval as he watched his fallen Sire without emotion. "You must teach me how to brew it this summer." He tossed a hex over his mother's shoulder that melted the skin off the Death Eater trying to attack her from her back.

Remus was actually growling loudly as he left falling Death Eaters in his wake. The sooner they were out of the way the sooner he could tan Harry's hide for doing this in the first place.

Ron ducked a hex tossed by Pettigrew and cast a Jelly Legs Jinx, followed by a Blasting Hex that had the foul bastard falling several paces forward then before he could get up Ron was there, bringing his foot crunching down on the sliver hand, his wand held at Pettigrew's throat as he tossed the rat's own wand away. "I should cast a cutting curse and put you out of our misery, I really should."

"Oopsie! Missed the mudblood," she moved her wand to cast at the girl again then grunted flying backwards and just barely managing to land on her feet as a powerful blast of magic hit her. She looked up to see Potter striding towards her, eyes blazing with contained fury that made the tiny part of sanity left within her shiver in fear. She licked her lips and grinned madly, "Problem little bitty Potter?"

"If you want to duel someone Bellatrix Lestrange, you'll duel me and only me."
Neville's brows lifted as magic shimmered through the room and the rest of the Death Eaters stilled, feeling it take hold. Rodolphus lay at Narcissa's feet, dead from a vicious cutting curse and the others were quickly being apprehended. Harry's words had triggered a true contest of magic, winner take all.

Bellatrix grinned, "Accepted!" She flicked her wand, "Crucio," pouting when Potter actually jumped over the curse and kept advancing.

"Reducto!" Harry's spell hit Bellatrix's shield and her boots scraped on the floor as it pushed her back before breaking the shield much to the wide eyed surprise of everyone in the room.

Everyone had stopped fighting and just watched the duel taking place between Harry and the deranged Death Eater Bellatrix. Hermione was beyond worried but there was no way she could interfere, not now when magic itself had gotten involved. Until a winner was crowned no one could get to either of the duelers.

Remus was on the floor, wand in hand and Sirius' head in his lap. He watched his mate with one worried eye and his cub with another. If anything happened to either of them, then he would chase them to the beyond just so he could kill them himself. He was so worried about Sirius and he couldn't even think about what he would do if something happened to Harry as well.

"Are you all right Mother?" Draco knew that Narcissa would find it harder seeing her sister than her husband in a fight. After all she had loved Bella once and that was more than she'd ever felt for Lucius Malfoy.

Narcissa watched as Potter dodged or blocked her sister's best spells and got his own past Bellatrix's guard, shocked and afraid for her sister. The curses Bella was tossing were intended to be lethal, she'd cast Avada Kedarva more than once and each time Potter had dodged. The boy now had a perfect right to kill her sister and it hurt knowing that she may very well see her little Bellflower die before her eyes. She'd once been sweet and lovely but time and their parents had warped the child she'd known. She reached out and ran a hand over Draco's hair, "I don't know darling."

Sirius breathed shallowly as he waited for Kingsley's spells to take effect. Once they did he'd be fully mobile again and in need of only rest when he returned home. He watched Harry fight his cousin with simple spells that had more power behind them than he'd ever seen before but what truly scared him was the look on his cub's face. It was cold and hard, no response to taunts or anything. He was completely focused on Bellatrix and nothing else. Feeling the rupture in his stomach stop hurting he sat up breathing a sigh of relief and laced his fingers with Remus' to finish watching the fight unfold.

Every spell, every cast, brought Harry another step closer to Bellatrix until they were only a meter apart. Then, after she tried another Crucio, he concentrated on her wand and hissed, "Assula!" the spell hit her wand dead on, splintering it and giving him an opening to disarm her of her knife and pin her to the ground. Wide eyes, black as night, stared up at him in disbelief before turning sly.

"Well go on boy, finish it." She met his gaze and had to admit that there was fear in her soul for what was held there, "What no stomach to kill me ickle baby Potter? What if I had hit your little mudblood then hmm? Stripped the flesh from her bones?"

His eyes flashed green fire and he looked up, seeing his friends and family, people he'd endangered and also seeing Narcissa, ice blue eyes agonized, and Tonks her hair gone white in what Harry could only think of as fear and was reminded of a spell he'd been researching, one that held more justice than ordinary death. He looked back down at Bellatrix, "I have the stomach but that's what
you want. You want me to murder you and make me no better than the monster you serve."

She sneered, "So you win and I live with only a lost duel behind me, noble."

"No. I'm not that noble. You'll live but you won't be getting away so easily," he pressed his wand to her heart, "Potestate Sunt Digna." The magic in the room swirled and coalesced and Bellatrix screamed, not in pain, but in fear and fury as she felt her magic leaving her, draining little by little until all she had left was just enough to live on. She looked up wide eyed at Potter and whispered, "What have you done?"

"I've won, and claim right of conquest over you Bellatrix Lestrange nee Black. Now Voldemort won't have any use for you." He felt the magical bind rushing through him, recognized it as the right of conquest, and stood up, stepping back from her, turning around and walking away, ignoring her screams.

"No!" she lunged at his back, magic slapping her back to the ground as Potter now held life and body rights over her, "Give me back my magic damn you! GIVE IT BACK!"

Everyone who'd grown up in the magical world stood stock still, recognizing the horror in what had just happened, draining someone's magic was almost worse than death. Especially if you had lived with your magic all your life. Draco could feel his skin crawl as he thought of what he would do if something like that happened to him, he honestly didn't think he would survive a loss of his magic, life wouldn't be worth living then. He looked at his mother again who had a strange expression on her face.

"Harry?" Hermione walked closer hesitantly. Not really knowing how to approach him after what she'd seen. The expression he'd worn as he was dueling Lestrange making her uneasy.

He saw her hesitancy and stopped from where he'd been walking toward her, the green of his eyes dulling all of a sudden and washing over with pain because what he saw in that cautious approach was fear. The person he loved more than anything...was afraid of him. He didn't even register the sound of Bellatrix's screaming or the rush as Shacklebolt and Tonks went to restrain and re-arrest her as he stared at Hermione, devastation slowly starting to creep through him.

"Oh Harry." Hermione saw the hurt in Harry's eyes and that washed away any other emotion she might have felt, only leaving her with the wish to make that terrible hurt she saw in his eyes go away. She closed the distance between them and threw her arms around him, just holding him tight and close to her, trying the best she could to give him of her warmth and strength, whether he needed it or not.

Harry's arms closed tentatively around her, as if trying to prove that he wasn't a threat, that he'd be nothing but gentle.

Hermione just held on tighter, wanting to show that she wasn't afraid of him, that she never really could be. "I love you."

His hand stroked softly over her hair, hearing the words and believing them but beneath that was the knowledge that you could fear someone and love them at the same time, "I love you too."

Remus held on to Sirius' hand tightly as the remaining Death Eaters were quickly apprehended. He saw the short man dangling upside down and felt an almost dangerous amount of hatred and loathing towards the man he had once considered a brother.

Sirius turned and kissed the corner of Remus' mouth before murmuring, "I think you and I need to
get the kids back to Hogwarts Moony, before the rest of the Auror Corps comes in."

"You're right and before I do something stupid, as much as I want to turn that rat-bastard inside out I can't. Not now when you are so close to find your freedom and you deserve that so, so much." Remus turned his back to Wormtail and walked to the where the children, except for Draco and the twins had huddled around Harry.

"Time to go pups, I can't even begin to tell you the amount of trouble you're in...And once I am done with you Harry, I can make you happy with the news that Molly is at Hogwarts waiting for her turn." Remus' jaw was set and amber eyes blazing.

Harry just nodded in resignation, already steeling himself inside. He'd known it was really only a matter of time before he did something that proved to everyone he wasn't worth anything. Well this definitely qualified.
McGonagall met them all in the entry hall, the disappointment and anger in her eyes cutting Harry to the quick. The flight back to Hogwarts had been filled with Remus growling a lecture at him, Sirius tossing in his own two cents here and there, Hagrid had met them to take care of the Thestrals and nothing had ever hit him harder than the sadness in the half-giant's eyes. Right now Harry felt about as big as a germ and it wasn't about to get better.

McGonagall swept the group with her gaze, "Everyone but Potter return to your dorms for the evening. Fred, George, Ronald, Ginevra your parents will be speaking to you tomorrow. Mr. Longbottom, Miss Lovegood your guardians have been informed and I can only imagine just what they will have to say about tonight's supreme stupidity.

"Miss Granger as your parents are Muggles and they signed an agreement for magical discipline of yourself to fall to the Head of the school I will speak with you tomorrow. Mr. Malfoy as your mother has accompanied you I will let her and Severus do as they will tonight. You can all speak to Mr. Potter to learn whether I have decided to expel you or not after our meeting."

"I'm not leaving." Hermione took Harry's hand and held on tight. "If you expel us then you can do it together. I was the one who told him to do it, said that we should go. I am not about to let him face you alone when it was just as much my fault."

She met the Headmistress gaze straight on. Minerva McGonagall was one of the women she admired most in the world but she would not stand for this. No way that she would allow Harry to be tossed to the trolls by himself. "You are a brilliant witch Headmistress but in this case you are wrong and I will not leave."

"Miss Granger do not test me this evening." McGonagall's voice was quiet and dangerous with warning. "This conversation is to be between Mr. Potter, me, and his guardians and no other."

Harry squeezed Hermione's hand and shook his head, "Hermione it's okay." He met his girlfriend's eyes when she turned to him, "Please, I don't want you getting in any more trouble on my account."

Ron reached out and squeezed Hermione's shoulder, "He's right Hermione. We're already in detention until we're old and gray. Best not to push it."

"It's still not fair, not fair at all." Hermione grumbled and glared at all the grown ups gathered. "They talk big about doing the right thing but when someone actually does it's to be punished...Makes me sick." She glared again and stomped up to the common room to wait for Harry.

Ginny glanced around before following her friend up the stairs to the tower, she agreed with Hermione. They had done this together and should face the consequences together.

Neville pat Harry on the shoulder in support and headed after the girls while Ron looked back at Remus and Sirius, both of whom were stony faced. "We'll be waiting for you mate." He looked over at Malfoy, "See you tomorrow Mr. Cottontail." Then he blazed up the stairs to avoid immediate retribution.

Fred slung his arm through George's, "Definitely our next subject." He looked at Malfoy, who was standing in front of his mother and the lady looked two seconds from yanking him off by the ear. "See you tomorrow dragon?"
"If I'm alive." Draco nodded. "As it is now, Mother might try that nifty poison out on me...No, she won't. That would be a too easy death." Draco shot his morons a wan smile and stayed next to his mother, not even daring to twitch at the moment.

Luna tossed an air kiss at Neville before rabbiting it up the stairs to Ravenclaw tower. Her dad might live most of his time up in the clouds but he would not be happy about this and Luna did not look forward to the conversation they would be having.

McGonagall nodded at Sirius and Remus, "As the two of you are also, in an unofficial capacity, Potter's guardians, I would like you to come with us as well. Potter, the Headmistress' office." She turned and began marching quickly up to the office that had belonged to Dumbledore, that she had taken over and redecorated when awarded the post of Headmistress. As it held all the portraits of the former Heads it made her job easier when they offered advice.

Harry followed, making sure not to dawdle, after shooting Malfoy a silently mouthed apology over his shoulder as Snape showed up to join Narcissa in reprimanding his godson. He entered the office ahead of McGonagall at her urging, meeting the disappointed brown eyes of Mr. Weasley and the infuriated blue of his wife's.

"Sit Mr. Potter," McGonagall held the door open for the two old Marauders before marching in once Harry was seated. She'd barely convinced Molly to allow her to say her piece before lighting into Potter herself. She clipped to stand before the seated boy.

Silence stretched through the room after the door clicked shut, Minerva staring hard and stern at Harry and Harry meeting her gaze right back, contrite and remorseful but steady and unwavering. Sirius could swear he felt the temperature in the room drop and wasn't certain if it was from Minerva's displeasure or Molly Weasley's corner. He'd bet on Minerva's though as Molly was standing calmly beside Arthur, who was rubbing his wife's back, a disappointed gaze on Harry. Something he knew struck Harry deeper than he thought the others in the room would realize.

Minerva spoke sharply, "You recklessly led eight of your fellow students off school grounds to London, into a situation you knew would be dangerous."

"Yes ma'am." It was a quiet response, almost toneless and seemed to incense Minerva more.

"Eight other students, your friends, into the Ministry, illegally, into the Department of Mysteries of all places, when you knew Death Eaters would be there to retrieve a prophecy you knew Voldemort wanted."

"Yes ma'am."

Minerva began to pace, "You led your friends into mortal danger, put yourself into danger, as well as the adults who came to pull your irons out of the fire!"

Even Arthur and Molly winced at the cutting whip of Minerva's words but Sirius noticed, with a great deal of worry, that Harry just quietly agreed again.

"You endangered several lives today with your insistence upon doing it all yourself!"

"I know," it was almost a whisper.

"Do you? Do you truly comprehend what could have happened? The lives that could have been lost due to your recklessness? Your godfather could have died!"

"Minerva," Sirius' voice was quiet, a gentle request for her to stop but she was far too agitated to
"Molly and Arthur could have lost four of their children!"

"Minerva," this time it was Arthur's voice as he recognized Harry's lack of reply and slowly rounding shoulders as a bad sign.

"Xenophilius could have lost his only daughter! Draco could have been captured and presented to that monster on a silver platter, his mother killed!"

"Minerva," Sirius' voice was more insistent this time but she powered on.

"To say nothing of the others your actions put at risk! Remus could have died or lost the baby!"

Arthur noticed the very slight flinch Harry made, something McGonagall was too worked up to notice.

"Hermione could have died! Do you truly comprehend that your stubborn need to prove yourself could have killed them all in front of your very ey-"

"Minerva!" Sirius' voice snapped loudly through the air as he stood up sharply, finally catching the Headmistress' attention, several pairs of wide eyes turning to look at him in shock as he walked over to where Harry sat, still quiet, shoulders curled in, arms around himself as if they were all that was holding him together. He crouched before Harry's chair, and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Harry?"

"I'm sorry." It was a heartbreaking whisper that sounded as loud as a trumpet blast in the quiet of the office. "I wanted them to stay here, I wanted to be able to make them stay so I'd be the only one in danger but they'd never have done it. The only ones I could make stay were Blaise, Pansy and Orion."

Sirius saw a raw flicker of savage hurt pass through the brilliant green of Harry's eyes at the mention of Orion.

"I didn't want them to be in danger but I saw what Voldemort was planning and I just reacted. I've always had to do it alone before and I...I don't know how else to do it. I don't know how else to be. I'm sorry. They could have died and it would have been my fault, just like Viktor," fat teardrops slipped down Harry's cheeks to patter on Sirius' hand.

"Oh cub," Sirius' heart broke as he pulled Harry into his arms, rocking him as he began to sob. Tears of his own leaked out for his godson, an ache in his chest blooming because he knew he couldn't do anything to make it right, to take away the burdens on Harry's too young shoulders.

Minerva watched as Harry broke down and felt a rush of shame wash over her as she was reminded that Harry was not like the other students here. He wasn't like other pubescent boys fighting authority and for his independence from it and he wasn't like Orion, a future alpha fighting to find his place in a confusing hierarchy.

He was a boy who'd been on his own, dealing with problems so much bigger than he was from the cradle. From abusive relatives directly to a world that put the expectations of a hero on tiny slim shoulders. And every time he'd faced Voldemort he had indeed had to do it alone. And she was no innocent among those putting the heavy weight on his shoulders. His very first year he and the others had come to her with a warning but she'd refused to listen and that year she had also put him
on a pedestal when she'd skipped over the rules to make him the Gryffindor Seeker.

Of course she'd have done that even if it'd been Longbottom who'd shown such talent in the air, she'd been so sick of Severus' gloating, but it had been another expectation on him. As much as she tried to treat Harry like any other student, the fact remained that he wasn't. He was a natural leader who'd been pushed into the role of hero and savior and it had left an indelible mark upon his very character that pushed him to leap to the defense even when he should tell others so they could take care of it instead.

And worse had been her unfair pushing of the possible deaths. She had allowed her Scottish temper to override the knowledge that Potter had seen the death of a friend once before and she had no doubt that when he had nightmares of this evening and saw his loved ones dead, that some of that cause of nightmares could now be laid at her door and it shamed her that she'd pushed too far and hurt him when he was, as he'd said, only doing as he knew to do.

"Enough." Remus whispered to no one in particular and went to kneel next to Harry's other side, rubbing his neck and shoulders as Harry cried in his godfather's arms. "Viktor's death was not your fault Harry. No one is to blame except for Voldemort and Crouch Jr. who came up with that plan. People are angry right now but we'll always love you Harry, always be at your back. Don't give up now."

He took one of Harry's hands and placed it on his still flat stomach. "This little one is going to need his big brother as well as a godfather, Sirius and I would be honored if you considered the position." Remus would never ever kick on someone who was already lying down and he loved Harry much too much to cause him any more pain.

Molly was crying, face pressed against Arthur's shoulder. Harry and her own brood would still be emptying the outhouse without magic but she couldn't stand to see one of her babies so broken, to take everything onto his own shoulders. She knew no one could have made her children stay behind if they had it in their minds to go. She was equally angry at all of them, didn't think that it was Harry's fault.

She too walked up to where Harry was sitting and ran her fingers through his hair. "Oh baby mine, you know it's not your fault don't you? I don't think so and neither does Arthur. This was a reckless decision...Made by all of you...Not only you. We love you Harry, you're our boy. Next time tell us. We want nothing more than to protect you and make things easier for you. We love you."

Sirius pet his back as the boy in his arms continued to choke on his sobs even harder than before. He hated this, absolutely hated it. He didn't know what to do, how to make Harry feel better, how to get him to at least stop crying. "Harry, cub, please. Stop crying. I can't stand it. Please Bambi."

"I'm sorry," Harry's voice was muffled and sobbed out.

"No, no, no no, don't be sorry Harry. Don't be sorry...well you can be sorry for breaking the rules and scaring us but don't be sorry for what you feel." Sirius' eyes met Arthur's as the balding man joined his wife in trying to help them soothe Harry.

"Shh, calm down now son." Anger and disappointment had no chance of remaining in the face of such heart breaking grief no matter that he was angry that his children had endangered themselves and disappointed that they'd not gone to Minerva or contacted them instead of going themselves.

"What in the name of Merlin?" Snape saw heads whip up and stare at him in the doorway,
"Minerva what did you do? Whip the boy?"

"Severus? What are you doing here?"

Snape clipped in, pushing Arthur and Molly back before handing Black a vial, "Headmaster Black," he nodded at the portrait, "informed me that a Calming Draught was urgently needed though I had rather thought it was for you Minerva and not the impulsive brat." He ignored the glares tossed his way as Black began coaxing Potter to swallow the potion.

It didn't take long for the potion to do its job and Harry's sobs to slow and calm until they ceased and he was sitting still held by Sirius, head bent. A flush of utter mortification at his breaking down was on the back of his neck. "'M sorry."

"Spare us Potter." Severus went to Minerva's office cabinet and withdrew a bottle of firewhiskey and glasses for it. He poured himself a finger and turned, once more ignoring the glares he was receiving.

"As I have already heard Draco's version of events, as well as Orion's, allow me to summarize. You, in an attempt to discover the identity, location, and number of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes, went mind walking and discovered a plot to retrieve a prophecy from the Ministry. Presuming, correctly, that if it is important enough to the Dark Lord for him to directly assault the Wizengamot while others slip in to retrieve it then it is more than necessary for him not to get his hands upon it, you then tell your merry band about it and in typical Potter fashion go charging off into danger in order to prevent such."

Why was it that Snape's dry recounting of the night's stupidity actually made him feel better? Harry rubbed his forehead, lifting his face to look at the Potion Master, whose expression was as snarky and superior as always. "Yeah that about covers it." It was weak but it held his own brand of sarcasm he always fired back at Snape with.

"That pretty much says it all doesn't it?" Remus gave his best friend a grateful look as he continued to rub Harry's shoulders and neck. "No one is questioning your bravery heading out like that to face down quite a number of Voldemort's finest and I do use the word finest lightly. Just Harry, we may harp but don't ever feel like you can't tell us something, even something like this. All any of us in this office ever want to do is help you, in any way we can. We all love you so very much."

Here he tossed another look at Snape, warning him to shut up. He knew there wasn't exactly love between Harry and the Potions Master but for once Severus could hold his sharp tongue.

Severus merely took a sip of the firewhiskey, choosing to make the better part of valor silence.

"Voldemort was delivered a huge blow today." Surprisingly it was Molly speaking up. "He didn't get what he wanted and he lost several key players in one swoop. The loss of Bellatrix, Lucius and Pettigrew won't be easy for him and that believe it or not can make him even more dangerous. Desperate people are always dangerous because they have very little to lose."

She sighed and leaned down to place a kiss against Harry's temple. "I'm not deluding myself that you or the rest of my children won't go after these Horcruxes...It's not in any of you not to do something when you feel you can. Please though, plan that expedition out first and let us know when and where you're going...Please. Let an old woman know so she can at least pack you lunch to bring with you."

She kissed Harry’s other temple. "A summer of…etiquette and further dance lessons are awaiting you but don't believe for a second that we don't love you, don't want you or that we blame you for
anything. I know my brood and I know how stubborn they are, if they wanted to follow you they would have, one way or another."

Molly had planned to say that Harry would muck out the outhouse, clear the flowerbeds and things like that before she remembered that, that was how Harry had spent his summers before he came to them. No, a different punishment was needed and Harry hated being formal. A summer of high heeled shoes, hessians not allowed, dancing and learning how to converse with old witches would be a much greater pain for him than hard manual labour would ever be.

"Since he was part of the madness can I at least pull Ron into the etiquette lessons so we can suffer together? I can provide proof that he needs the refresher course."

The face Harry had pulled at the etiquette and dance lessons did Sirius' heart good but his comment made him laugh and squeeze Harry round the shoulders. "There's our cub."

Arthur had to hide his smile, "What proof is that Harry?"

Harry looked at McGonagall, "Oh...um...I don't know if Professor McGonagall's going to angrier about this one or not."

Minerva gave him an arch look, "I fail to see how that is possible Potter. However I have 'run out of mad' at the moment so please do proceed in explaining how this might make me angry."

He shifted out of Sirius' hold, leaning back into the chair, privately thanking McGonagall for making the visitor chairs squashy and comfortable, "Well you know about the Marauders right?"

"Indeed."

"And the animagus thing, you know it was all of them, well-"

"Yes Potter. If you could please reach the p-" she paused and stared at him, eyes sharp and intelligent, "Are you attempting to tell me you've become an animagus?"

He ducked his head, he was more worried about her being disappointed and angry about this than anything else. He'd known everyone would be angry and disappointed about his actions tonight but he'd always hoped McGonagall would be at least a tiny measure of proud about the animagi transformations. She, more than any other Professor save Hagrid, was the one he held in the highest regard and who he wanted to make proud most of all. "Me, Hermione, Ron, Fred, George, Neville, Ginny, Luna, Malfoy, and Parkinson," he ticked the names off on his fingers.

Severus had to admit the utter staggering shock on Minerva's face positively made his day. It was so hard to get one over on the old bat and having Potter do it made it even sweeter.

"You are telling me that ten students under this roof have successfully performed animagi magic? They have, and have adapted to, an animagus form?"

He nodded his head, peeking up at her through his lashes, "Yes ma'am."

"And this happened...when?"

He began mimicking Hermione and chewed on his bottom lip, "For everyone but Malfoy and Parkinson, last year. Parkinson managed it over the summer and I don't know when Malfoy succeeded. We...well we didn't want Dumbledore to know about it while he was Headmaster because...well," he shrugged.
He'd brought her in on everything he knew about Dumbledore after her appointment as Headmistress, bringing her the notes and journals, and proof he and the others had gathered up because he felt she had the right to know. It had still hurt to see the quickly masked devastation in her eyes as she'd realized the magnitude of Dumbledore's betrayal of all she held dear.

She nodded, "Ah, I see. And I do presume you will be registering now then, as Mr. Dumbledore is no longer in a position of authority." It wasn't a question.

"I'd do it now if I had the paperwork."

"I will provide you all with the paperwork tomorrow. We will...smudge the truth and say that you and the others underwent my instruction in this matter at your guardians' behest to avoid the fines. Now how precisely does this fit in with Ronald needing a refresher course in etiquette?"

"Well at one point tonight we all had to transform to get out of a tight spot," he grimaced at Remus' growl.

Sirius ran his hand down Remus' back, knowing he'd not been able to help the growl at the mention of them being in a tight spot, "Easy Moony."

"Sorry." Remus did his best to swallow the wolf down. Growling was instinctive upon even thinking of his cubs and their friends in danger and with the pregnancy every emotion was...more. The further along he got the more difficult it was to keep a lid on his hormones. Suddenly as quickly as his anger and upset had risen it faded and Remus gave Harry a sly smile instead.

"I'm sure the Death Eaters had the surprise of their lives though, suddenly standing face to face with a lion, a tiger and a bear oh my." He squeezed Harry's neck affectionately. "What does it have to do with Ron needed a refreshment course in etiquette though, I didn't really get that...Blame the hormones."

Unlike Orion, who went limp anytime his neck was squeezed, even in affection, Harry leaned into the touch, comforted knowing he wasn't too terribly pissed at him anymore, "Well see I've known for a while that Malfoy managed to transform, there's a different feel in someone's magic once they manage an animagus transformation, a wilder edge. I don't know how to explain that right but," he shrugged, "anyway Malfoy's utterly refused, just flat out refused to share what his form is or to transform in front of us until tonight when it became necessary and after seeing his form I can see why." His lips twitched and he coughed, "Malfoy's a rabbit, a pure white rabbit."

Sirius' eyes went wide and then he hooted in laughter, "Oh by Merlin he must hate that!"

It was horrible, it really was but Remus could actually feel his nose twitch with the urge to hunt. Rabbits were fair game when Moony roamed the woods, natural prey. Still Narcissa would not be pleased if he ate her son. "Indeed." Unlike his mate he did his best to bite down on his amusement. "I can only imagine Ron's reaction to bunny boy." Amber eyes lit with curiosity. "What did the twins do when they found out?"

"Actually if we hadn't been in the middle of a battle, I'm pretty sure they'd have spent a solid hour cooing over him but er," he blew out a breath knowing this would anger Snape, "he got caught by the ears mid-hop so Fred and George were more concerned about trying to gnaw the offending arm off. Fred got shaken off and went back to human to scoop Malfoy up before hexing the Death Eater with extreme prejudice."

Severus took another sip of whiskey and clipped out shortly, "Good. Do continue."
"Right well um, after we were all human again Fred was being...well Fred and flirty so I yelled for him to pay attention to the fight and Ron," his lips twitched, "Well Ron said that Fred and George could play chase the cottontail later."

Minerva brought a hand to her mouth and looked away, the very corner of her lips twitching just a bit, Arthur had to bite his tongue to hold in his chuckle, and Sirius hooted even louder.

"Oh he will be right with you during etiquette classes, don't you doubt it." Molly's lips were twitching violently too but she was exasperated as well. "What to do? Two sons who flirt in the middle of battle and one who comments on it and comments inappropriately to boot." She turned to Arthur. "It must come from your side of the family."

Remus coughed to hide his snort. He remembered Fabian and Gideon quite well. In his humble opinion the Weasley boys behavior screamed Prewett.

"Molly my love," Arthur kissed her cheek before getting out of range, "They honor their namesakes too well."

Molly didn't swat after Arthur or even protest, instead her smile was tinted with sadness. "They do, don't they?" She still missed her brothers, missed them everyday. They had died because of Voldemort and she would fight to the bitter end to keep anyone else from her family to suffer the same fate, that included Harry.

That sadness brought Arthur back to her side, arm around her shoulders, in an instant. He kissed the top of her head, "Frighteningly so at times."

Harry turned and reached up to squeeze Molly's wrist, "I know it's not much but the berk who's finally stopped laughing told me once that the ones we love never really leave us. They're always with us in here," he tapped his heart.

Molly took hold of Harry's hand and brought it up to her cheek, nuzzling it. "You're absolutely right Harry and so is the laughing loon. Everyone we love stays with us, makes us stronger by letting us remember that love." She squeezed his hand and released it. "Thank you Harry, for reminding me."

Molly leaned against her husband.

Sirius had quieted. He'd never realized that Harry remembered those words, spoken in a rush to give comfort. It'd been two years ago after all. It reminded him that Harry looked to him often for answers and likely took his word as gold most times. It was a humbling thing to know. He looked over at Remus and nudged him gently in the arm, "Off the floor Mr. Moony. I've a feeling we're not done here just yet and cold stone floor isn't good for you."

"Indeed we are not finished," Minerva brought the tone back to seriousness, summoning a pair of chairs for Remus and Sirius to sit in, "You can, of course, inform the others Mr. Potter that they will not be expelled. Leaving school grounds, whatever the reason, is not reason enough to expel the lot of you. You will all, however, face detention for the remainder of the school year. Yours will be served with Professor Snape."

Harry grimaced, "Ugh, yes ma'am." He still loathed detentions with Snape and doubted that would ever change but at least he didn't have to worry about bleeding during them unless his knuckles scraped a cauldron bottom.

Severus just smirked and continued to sip slowly at the whiskey.

"Points have been taken from Gryffindor and I would caution stepping very carefully the rest of the
year unless you want to lose your now single point lead for the Cup. And Severus I will be watching you for unfair taking of points in that regard. I know my chickens." She nodded in satisfaction when he merely scowled and made a murmur of understanding.

Remus chuckled and tossed his friend a look. "I'd be worried Severus, you have bright students to bring you points but you're also stuck with Ri. Do you really think he can keep in line for the rest of the year? Not lose you more points? I love my son very much but I also know him, know him very, very well." He'd obeyed Sirius and gotten off the floor to sit down in one of the many chairs spread throughout the office. He didn't think the floor was too bad but when it was easy to make Sirius stop worrying then he did it instantly.

"Ah but Gryffindor has my brood...I think it will be a tie in losing points there." Molly said with a sigh although she was smiling. "By the way Minerva, who will become Head of Gryffindor house now that you are Headmistress? And what about the Defense position?" Things had been so chaotic since Umbridge's death that Molly hadn't had a chance to ask about that.

"I have ideas about that but I'll have to hold a couple of discussions before it becomes certain. This year's Defense OWLs and NEWTs however I do believe have been more than well covered," she gave Harry a very small smile, "Thanks in part to Mr. Potter and his group's clever arrangement of a Defense Association while Madam Umbridge was in authority." Once the woman had been found dead Harry and the others had come forward to her about it and it had been absorbed into the school as a sort of tutoring club, sanctioned and points given out generously for their efforts to assure all the students who wished to truly learn a chance for top level scores. "And Remus your son is something else I need to discuss with you, Sirius, and Mr. Potter."

It was on the tip of Remus' tongue to ask what his son had done this time but since Severus wasn't to be part of the discussion it couldn't be something to do with school. "Of course Minerva."
Remus bowed his head and curbed his curiosity to the best of his abilities.

"I think that might be our cue to leave." Molly squeezed her husband's arm. "Will dear Narcissa join us as we return to the burrow or are you putting her up for the night Severus?" Molly's eyes were very blue and very, very innocent. Looking very much like the eyes of the twins when they were up to something.

"I am not quite certain," Snape drained his glass and moved toward the exit, "I do believe Lady Malfoy has something she wishes to speak with Potter about and so is lying in wait. As she has however already succeeded in cowing her son for his positively Gryffindorish behavior, I doubt she will be looking to remain in Hogwarts for the evening."

Arthur squeezed his wife's shoulders and murmured in her ear as they left the room, "From my side of the family dear? Are you certain of that?"

The door closed on them leaving Harry wincing at the thought of Narcissa wanting to 'speak' with him. He rubbed the back of his head and looked at McGonagall, "Um are you sure I should be here? I mean...well Sirius and Remus are Ri's parents I'm just the almost big brother."

Sirius frowned at that. Never once before had Harry referred to himself as anything but unequivocally Orion's big brother, combined with the look that had been in his eyes at the mention of Orion earlier it was worrying.

Remus moved to a chair closer to his mate and cub and reached out to run his hand down Harry's arm. "Whatever stupid or hurtful thing our son has managed to spew over you Harry, he loves you. You're not his almost brother. You are his brother without question, just as you are our cub. Orion's turning fourteen and his wolf his growling, he doesn't mean half the things he's saying." Remus
blushed. "I almost took Sirius' head off plenty of times during those years back in school."

Harry murmured so softly that he doubted even Remus heard him clearly, "I'm not too sure about that."

Minerva cleared her throat before the two men could really begin to try and wrench Harry out of the mire of his thoughts and opinions. As much as she was certain Harry valued them, she didn't think it was Remus or Sirius he needed assurance from at the moment but Orion himself. The two old Marauders would cause more damage than fix it if they continued to her mind. "Orion's wolf 'growling' is precisely what I wish to speak about and why I wanted your presence here as well Mr. Potter. You've stuck to his side all this year and seen it all so your opinion of how close he is to going too far is invaluable."

Sirius sat up straight, "Too far Minerva? Even when Remus went through puberty he never came close to going too far."

"That may be but Orion is quite a different case."

"Orion is an alpha." Remus said without surprise. "An alpha wolf without an actual outlet to let his wolf free. He's stuck between two worlds and that makes everything much more difficult for him. Difficult and intense." He clenched his fists in his lap, hating to feel so powerless and unable to help his child. "Has he been causing trouble?"

"I honestly would feel better if he had been Remus," Minerva moved to sit in a chair as well, making a circle of people, "but the fact of the matter is he's not had the chance to cause trouble this year. During a critical time when he should have been able to stretch his legs he's been forced to squeeze himself into a small box. Since Umbridge's death he's not caused trouble exactly but he's growled at professors, bared his teeth at other students, hiding his fangs fortunately, and actually snarled at Fang, sending the poor thing into hiding for days."

Harry winced, knowing that what he was about to say was going to be hard for Remus. He reached over and covered one of the balled fists with his hand, "There's more. He bit Zabini earlier. Not the play bites he's done with Sirius but a real bite."

"Oh Merlin." Remus sighed and slumped in his chair. Poor Orion, Remus could clearly understand the turmoil his cub felt but he couldn't behave like this. "Thank Morgana that he can't pass along the lycanthropy virus."

He turned to Minerva. "If you think he's okay enough to stay until the end of the year I will bring him to an alpha wolf this summer, maybe he'll have more luck making Orion understand. If you feel him a danger we will take him with us now, letting him come back only for end of the year tests." Remus' heart hurt for his son but they had to think of the rest of the student body and faculty as well.

Sirius moved to pick Remus up and sit in the chair with his mate in his lap, worry for their cub gnawing at him but more worry for the stress it was already causing Remus. "Is he able to stay the rest of the year Minerva?"

"I'm hoping so as sending him before school's end away would do more damage than has already been done to his development. It would be the very last resort as it would be seen by his wolf as exile from the pack but I am not the one to answer that," she looked at Harry, "I am sorry to put this on your shoulders Mr. Potter, especially as not thirty minutes ago I tore into you for making adult decisions of this same importance, but at the moment you are best aware of Orion's state of mind and instinct."
Harry frowned and looked down at the floor, thinking. He almost said that Orion shouldn't stay the remainder of the year because if he'd bite a friend for Zabini's very bad comment, he was painfully close to losing it. However the way Pansy had gotten in his face and stared him down, handling the situation. "I think he could stay but only if Parkinson is around him all the time. She's the one who tied his tail in a knot and brought him down for biting Zabini and he might have growled at her a little but she growled right back and made him listen, made him think, and had him ashamed of his actions when he was arguing the point before."

Despite worry and heartache, Remus almost smiled at that, remembering the conversation he'd had with Severus as Sirius slept. He wondered just how long it would take until the two of them realized just what they were to one another. Orion was only turning fourteen so there was no hurry. It still showed though, in how he yielded to her, wanted to please her.

"We'll have to ask Miss. Parkinson if she's willing to puppysit until end of term then." Remus hoped that she would be willing, Orion would be absolutely crushed if he was taken out of school. It could be something he'd never recover from. Remus took comfort in Sirius' strong arms around him, so very grateful that Sirius was there with him, that he wouldn't have to deal with this alone.

Sirius kissed Remus' temple, "She might try and wangle something out of us but I'm sure she will be."

"It's not keeping a leash on Orion that I had to bribe her to do tonight really but more to stay when Malfoy was going," Harry lifted his shoulder, "You should have seen her when Orion got caught by the toad she ran, literally ran in skirt and neck breaker high heels, hair mussed to pieces, until one of those heels broke and she didn't even complain about it."

Minerva's brows rose, "That is indeed a good sign."

"Mmm, yes." Remus agreed and poked Sirius gently in the side to bring attention to what was going on really, with their son and the Slytherin queen. "We will still ask her properly though, it's the proper thing to do."

"Ow. I'm not a twit Moony, I can read between those lines too ya know. By the way who's this alpha you have in mind to take Orion to," he eyed his lover a bit.

Remus' answering grin was evil. "Why Aleksander of course, he's practically the perfect alpha." Remus eyed Harry. "By the way Harry, what did you think of him?"

"Your idea to have him coach Orion might have a bit of a snag is what I think," he said when he noticed the disgruntled pout on Sirius' face, "because he's in Wales getting to know the staff of the school he'll be in charge of in order to be ready for the students when they come at the end of summer."

Minerva smiled, "Ah so Ian is what you were hoping for in a Transfiguration professor then?"

Harry nodded. "Plus he got past Alek's radar so the Marauder School will be opening its doors to students the twenty first of August."

"That's absolutely wonderful Harry," Remus beamed. "And I knew Alek would be great as a Headmaster, though it really is a snag that he can't talk to Orion...I guess we have to see if one of the few others I trust have the time." Remus really didn't want to leave Orion with a wolf he couldn't trust. Especially not with Greyback raiding the packs.

Sirius sighed and slumped his head, "Harry are there floos in your school?"
"Yeah," Harry's lips twitched in amusement, "active though you have to get permission from Alek to come through."

He grumbled, "Then Orion will just have to floo back and forth after you talk to the golden alpha Moony. I don't like him on insecure principal but he's safest and trusted and I know where and how to turn him into wolf kabobs if I have to...damn it."

"Sirius...I'm your mate and I'm carrying your pup in my belly. What on earth can you feel insecure about?" Remus turned and nuzzled Sirius' neck despite the fact that they were sitting in front of the Headmistress of Hogwarts. "Aleksander is a perfect alpha, he's not a perfect man and in my eyes he doesn't hold a candle to you, you tit. I only want him to help our son cope."

"I know that, I'm just, as you said, a tit. Sirius ran his hand over Remus' hair, "I look at him and I see sharp counterpoint to every flaw I have. Bad for my ego."

Harry snorted, "Sirius your ego is the size of Fluffy."

"Oh hush you. Well will Alek mind taking the time for Orion in between getting to know his staff?"

"I think he'll probably welcome it, especially if it gets distance between him and the Potions professor."

Remus kissed the tip of Sirius' nose before tweaking it gently and turning to Harry. "Potions professor? Everything not running smoothly there? Who have you gotten to take the potions position then?" Remus really, really was interested in Harry's school and he knew that the smartest thing would of course be to transfer Orion there but Orion's home was at Hogwarts for as long as the school would have him and it would be cruel to take him away from his family, friends and everyone he knew.

"His name is Johann Spath, he's a German potion master, Snape recommended him and he's about as warm and cuddly as a shark. He knows his subject though, likes to teach, and has no enmity for werewolves. He has issues with Alek's opinion of the potions classroom and neither one of them are budging," he rolled his eyes.

Remus started laughing, squirming on Sirius' lap. "Oh dear...Well it will prove amusing at least until they work out just why they rub each other the wrong way like that." He continued to laugh. "Oh Harry, I do believe you already have one love story started at that new school of yours. Oh my...If Severus recommended him then this Spath must really be something." The laughter dropped off into chuckles but he was still very much amused. "Good for Alek, he needs someone to bite back."

"I didn't need to even think of that Moony because let me tell you, Hermione saw Spath and her eyes almost bugged out. The man looks like he just walked off a modeling cover or something. It's weird."

"Oh Harry, you are so very, very straight." Remus chuckled again. "Alek isn't exactly horrid to look at either, though a little rugged. If Spath is as you say they must make a very striking couple. I still vote for amusing." Remus pat his stomach absently.

"Sure, if Spath doesn't hex Alek's bollocks off. Seriously I am not seeing anything between those two unless it's a strong desire of one to toss the other off the roof but if you say so Moony." Harry shrugged. "Orion visiting should actually help table some of the complaining though since he's such a potion whiz and wolfish so he can yea or nay the classroom set up. Alek's problem is he
feels it's too restrictive, too stern but his ideas are too undisciplined for Spath. Yeah Moony please send Orion to visit that way he can sneaky a middle ground there."

Sirius snickered and murmured into Remus' ear, "Toss each others' clothes off the roof maybe."

Remus grinned and nodded in agreement, taking Sirius' hand and placing it underneath his own on his stomach. "I'm sure Orion will find it fun to be a mediator between two such men and since he's used to both Sirius and Severus' moods he should have no problem handling them. In fact if we angle it that way he might take these talks as less of a punishment. He needs to go, needs to learn control but I don't want him to hate it."

Minerva smiled, "Well as that is settled. Mr. Potter if you would please return to the Gryffindor dorms. I have one more thing to speak with these two about."

Harry nodded and stood up, "Alright, um, first detention tomorrow after classes right?"

"Yes."

He sighed, "I'm sure Professor Snape's saved up the nastiest cauldrons for me again too. Goodnight," he waved and left the room. He just hoped Narcissa wouldn't kill him when she caught him on his way up.

"Sorry if we got off track, Headmistress." Remus apologized from his seat in Sirius' lap. It felt rather strange to be so at ease and relaxed in front of the professor who'd caught them the most times back in the day. "Is there something more we can help you with?" Remus really hoped that this wouldn't be in regard to Orion or Harry, he quite felt his cubs had been through enough for now.

"I most sincerely hope so Remus. With Pettigrew's apprehension Sirius' freedom is nigh a foregone conclusion. He will, at the most, be fined for his escape from Azkaban as he did so to protect Harry and that is in keeping with the magical laws of being Harry's godfather. As such I am hoping the both of you would consider taking on positions here."

Remus tensed and curled into Sirius. "I...I don't know, Headmistress."

Sirius kissed Remus' temple and rubbed a soothing hand up and down his back. "It's an honor you'd ask but Remus is right. We have to tread very carefully until the link between our son and Dumbledore is gone."

"I understand. I sincerely doubt however, that Albus would risk it at present. I may not have known what he was scheming due to willful blindness on my part but I do know how his mind works after several decades of arguing with him. He views Orion's life as a bargaining tool and is, at present, unaware that Harry knows exactly what he's done.

"Harry's refusal to listen to him about the Horcruxes would, in Albus' mind, be written off as the weakness of a teenager not wanting to hear any more horror. It will quite simply not have occurred to him that anyone can see through his machinations much less a fifteen year old boy."

Sirius nodded, "I can see that. He's so far up his own arse he can't believe anyone could look and know exactly what he truly is."
"Precisely. If he still believes that Harry thinks of him as a good man, who has made a few mistakes but is overall good, then he would not risk harming Orion simply to keep you from teaching at my behest. If he did then he would know that you would immediately go to Harry and tell him the truth, all of it, and he would instantly lose exactly what he seeks. But that is only one more thing to weigh in your decision."

She got up and pulled out two file folders, "If you do decide to take my offer," she handed them the files, "I would like for Remus to take on teaching Defense once more, theory only until the baby comes, you can be assured the DA would handle the practical with marvelous success. And Sirius I am offering you the post of Transfiguration professor."

He looked down at the file, his brows high and a bit shocked, "Your subject?"

"I certainly can not teach it while also taking on the duties of Headmistress and I can not think of another, more qualified person to take my place." She smiled at the very rare sight of Sirius Black blushing to the roots of his hair.

"You've always been brilliant at Transfiguration." Remus kissed his mate's cheek and held on to his folder. He wanted this, he'd never been as content career wise as when he'd been teaching. He loved everything about it, the planning and the interaction with the students. Remus knew that Sirius would be brilliant at it as well, his mate had a way of getting through to even the most stubborn mind. Also living at the castle again, close to Orion and Harry all year along was so very tempting.

Still they would have to talk it through carefully before deciding anything at all. "Headmistress, you do realize that if we accept I will be very, very much pregnant when term starts in september? We're talking huge and about to pop almost. I could maybe teach for a month and a half before having to go on leave."

"I am aware," she said dryly, "I do think things out Remus. Harry's Defense Association has filled a gap that was created by Umbridge's odious lesson plans, it wouldn't surprise me if the students who are members not only pass their exams but surpass the expectations of their year in ability. Every single one can cast a patronus, every single one. If you can write up the lesson plans, the DA can cover it beautifully while you are on leave. And I am quite certain that both Severus and Sirius would have no difficulty covering anything that the DA can not."

"That's true." Sirius nodded, "His Hedgehogness and I would help however we can, you know that."

"I do know that. You know me though, obsess over everything," Remus flushed a little as he looked at Minerva. "I'm sorry Headmistress, just making sure." Remus knew that the DA would me more than qualified to handle any lessons, he'd seen and heard all about what Harry had accomplished during the year and he was so proud of him. "When do you need our final answer?"

"By July first so that, should you choose not to, I will be able to find replacements for the year and get their textbook and supply choices before I must send the lists out."

Sirius rubbed his hand over Remus' stomach, "We'll let you know. Thank you, for the vote of confidence."

"Fair warning Sirius, if you take the job I will be asking you to be Gryffindor Head of House as well."

His eyes nearly popped out, "Whu..."
She chuckled, "That is the last of what I need to speak with you about. I would however, like to offer you a room here for tonight so you may speak with Miss Parkinson in the morning."

"Thank you Headmistress, we appreciate that." Remus smiled and closed Sirius' gaping jaw with the tip of a finger, caressing Sirius' stubbly chin with his thumb as he did so. "You are a very intelligent witch Minerva but I have to wonder if you've dipped into the elves mushrooms when you plan to have Severus and Sirius as Head of different Houses. I thought the plan was to unify the Houses, not create a new war."

She cocked a brow, "Ah but House unity is precisely what would happen with Sirius' son in Slytherin and you there to take Severus to task for any unjustly deducted points." Her smile now was sly and knowing, "Go on with you."

Sirius got to his feet, helping Remus do the same with a soft laugh, "You're a dangerously clever woman Minerva."

"Dangerously clever or messed up on mushrooms, it's a mystery we'll never truly have the answer to." Remus grinned and gave a bow to the Headmistress before hurrying out of her office before her good mood ended. He was tired, relieved that his cubs were safe and unharmed. Happy that Wormtail was in custody and honored that Minerva had even thought to consider them for such important positions. It all worked to make him almost giddy, as if he was drunk without the alcohol.

Sirius waved goodbye to Minerva and dashed to catch up with Remus, "Whoa there Moony." He pulled him back against his chest, "I think you'd better wait a tic for the house-elf I'm sure Minerva is summoning as we speak to show us to our room."

He swayed gently where they stood, a habit of comfort he'd taken up years ago after the moons when Remus would be edgy and scared, "It's okay now baby," he kissed the side of his mate's neck, "just take it all easy."

"Don't know if I can Siri, it's been a crazy, crazy month and this wasn't exactly how I planned to use my first day allowed to use magic again." Remus leaned against Sirius and swayed with him. "I'm completely wired, like there's lightening sparks underneath my skin."

He turned in Sirius' embrace and hid his face against Sirius' neck. "I thought I'd lose you, when Bellatrix hexed you and you almost fell through the arch. I was so fucking scared and I don't think my heart has slowed down since. I saw it happen and was too far to reach you. If it hadn't been for Harry...Oh gods Siri!"

"Shh," Sirius pet Remus' hair, "I'm still here Remus, very much thanks to Harry." He weighed whether or not to tell him this but knew that there was a very real possibility that Shacklebolt or someone else might tell him just how bad that hex should have been. He pulled the amethyst point Harry had given him out from under his shirt, "Remember this?"

Remus shifted his head so that he could look at what Sirius was showing him. At the sight of the amethyst point he nodded and felt his own rest against his skin underneath is clothes. "Of course I remember the amethyst point Harry gave you, gave all of us."

Remus looked up at Sirius with eyes that were so filled with worry they were almost completely black, only the slightest sliver of amber ringed the large, dark pupils. "Sirius...What are you not telling me?"

"I'm getting there love," he kissed the tip of Remus' nose, "The spell Bellatrix hit me with is an old
dark curse, meant to disembowel." He held Remus closer as he felt the shakes start to take over.

"It's okay Remus, it didn't happen because the effect was greatly dampened by Harry's little gift."

"But it could have happened, it could have." Remus was shivering all over and he couldn't stop it. If Sirius hadn't been holding him up he would have hit the floor because it didn't feel like his body was obeying him. The thought of Sirius gutted made him want to scream and cry and throw up. He couldn't lose Sirius, not a second time. He wouldn't make it if that happened.

"Remus look at me," he cupped his face looking into those dilated eyes and pressing his brow against his lover's, "It didn't. I am still here, alive, well and with all my parts in place. I'm here."

He pressed a kiss to Remus' brow and decided to, essentially, say fuck it to waiting on a house-elf. He picked Remus up in his arms and strode to the Come and Go room, pacing back and forth until the door appeared and then walking through into a cozy bedroom.

He couldn't stop shivering. Remus knew that Sirius was right, thanks to Harry the love of his life was fine, here and whole and fine but the events of last month and now this. Two such close calls in such a short amount of time was almost more than he could handle. Especially since he wore his emotions on top of his skin these days. Remus clung to Sirius like a child, still trembling violently.

"It's okay baby," Sirius strode to the bathroom that came with what he'd imagined, the large tub already filled with warm water, nothing too hot as that wasn't good for the baby, and set Remus down on the rim to start gently stripping him out of his clothes. He slipped off the sensible loafers, unbuckled the belt and pulled off the brown tweed trousers and the bright red boxer briefs that had made him smile this morning when Remus had pulled them on.

He eased Remus out of the coat and slid his hands under the pullover shirt, coaxing it up over Remus' head, mussing that mane of brown and gray. He smoothed his hand over the slight swelling of Remus' belly where their baby rested, the protective runes still in place just in case, and kissed it before standing to strip out of his own sweaty and battle singed clothes.

Remus sat on the edge of the tub and watched his mate shed his clothes, revealing toned muscles and smooth skin. Remus remembered a time when all that skin had been flawless, not a single mark on it. Now scars, marks and forced tattoos littered it and Remus couldn't help but think that he was responsible for each and every one of those marks, at least in some way. Sirius was still beautiful though, the most beautiful man Remus had ever seen, ever would see.

He was absolutely everything to Remus. Twelve years without Sirius had proved that he could live, at least some sort of halflife, without Sirius but he didn't want to. Dear Merlin he didn't want to live even a day without his mate right by his side. He continued to watch Sirius and then reached out his hands toward him. "Come here."

Sirius kicked his pants aside and padded the two steps back to Remus, leaning down, his hands smoothing over the strong, broad shoulders. The corners of his lips kicked up just a bit. It'd always been a source of amusement and private pleasure that Remus was broader everywhere than he was. Sirius might be the longer of them, tall and sleek, but Remus was muscle and meat and all man. Somehow him being pregnant, that little pooch of his belly, just highlighted that and delighted Sirius on a different level. He tugged the tie out of Remus' hair, scattering kisses over his face, "Here I am love. Right here for you."

"Here you are." Remus made a small content sound even though he was still shivering lightly. He wrapped his arms around Sirius and inched both of them into the water, it was not hot but it was warm and comfortable and perfect because Sirius was right there with him. "I know I tell you
everyday but I love you. Everything I am, it all belongs to you. To you and our children."

He stroked his hands over slick, wet skin, petting lovingly. "You don't just tell me that you know, you show it to me in everything you do." He kissed Remus' nose, brow, and cheeks, "And it's worth more to me than anything else in this world. You and your love, our children, I'd toss away my freedom, my fortune, my humanity, everything for you and our kids Remus. You own me, heart, body, mind, and soul and I'm more than happy to have the collar on." He brushed his lips very lightly over Remus'. "I love you." Simple and unvarnished and filled with every last trickle of feeling he had for his lover, his mate.

Remus kissed back, letting his lips press and slide of Sirius' without demands or urges to take it any further. It was perfect just the way it was. He slid his hands under the surface of the water and and ran them over a chiseled abdomen, warm and alive underneath his fingers. Not slashed open but whole and beautiful. Remus inched forward until he was crawling into Sirius' lap, straddling him. "You want this don't you love? Transfiguration position, a home here, the ability to stay close to our cubs?"

Sirius' own hands stayed moving on Remus, running over his back and hips and shoulders, grounding himself in touch. "Would I like to? Yes, absolutely. With Minerva in charge here Hogwarts is safe, secure, more secure than our little home in Hogsmeade anyway. And if we took the offer you'd be here, with Poppy, when you have the baby. Snape's good don't get me wrong but he's a potion master, even with his healing knowledge he's not a full healer and I'd feel so very much better if you were under Poppy's care when the little moppet is born. The post would be an honor and a challenge and you know how much I like those." He nuzzled Remus' nose with his, "But there's still the worry of Dumbledore."

"Dumbledore will be a worry until we find a way to sever the bond he has with Orion. You and Minerva are right though, Hogwarts is safe, a lot safer than where we are now. At least Dumbledore won't get to us here without triggering some pretty hardcore wards." Remus ran wet slick hands over Sirius' chest, tracing muscles as well as planes and valleys of Sirius' wonderful body.

"I gave birth to Orion on my own in the woods so anything over that is an improvement, whether it's Snape or Poppy." He leaned in and kissed Sirius as his fingers found flat, brown nipples to circle teasingly. "I want this too. I know we can't decide right now but I want it, so badly I can taste it."

Sirius pinched the top of an arse cheek at the tease, "So we'll think, we'll spend a month or so mulling it over, discussing, weighing the consequences and possibilities, and then give Minerva our answer."

"Mmm, sounds like a plan." Remus replied, having gotten distracted by the way Sirius' nipples turned hard and pointy. His eyes going dark by something other than worry as he started to slowly move on Sirius lap. "We'll discuss until we're all talked out...simply no way we can even discuss any more."

"Moony," Sirius brushed his lips over the pulse point in his neck, "I think you've distracted yourself here love, and now giving distracting me a go."

Remus made a rather enthusiastic wiggle on top of Sirius. "Is it working?"

Sirius groaned, "It always does and you know it you beautiful tease." He scraped his teeth over the tendon in Remus' neck, "You sure you're up for this?"
"Love...I've been up for this for a month now. Severus said no penetration for a week, you were the one who dragged it out and refused me." Remus leaned his head to the side to give Sirius more room as his own hands got busier on Sirius' body. "It's been a fuckscary day Siri and I think this is just what we both need. I need to have you near me, inside of me, part of me."

He sucked lightly on the skin under his mouth, "I ask because it's been a fuckscary stressful day." His hands roamed Remus' body, stroking expertly over every dip and plane, lingering wherever he knew made Moony's breath hitch. "I'm all in protective lover mode," he nipped at Remus' adams apple as he stood up in the tub, using a little magic to keep them from falling as he hitched Remus' legs around his waist and stepped out, heading right for the bed.

Remus locked his feet around Sirius' back as his lover carried him, his lips continuing to nip and kiss at whatever skin he could reach on Sirius' neck. "You're always in protective lover mode." He whispered against his lover's skin. "Now you can be in protective, horny, playful mode okay?"
Remus was still shook up, he could admit that, at least to himself but this right here was the best cure for any fears he had. To have Sirius pressed against him, skin against skin, lips, against lips. "I want you Siri."

"You have me," Sirius gently lowered him onto the bed, covering him with his own body, hands still stroking over the tawny, scarred skin, touching everywhere he could as he slid down to lave his way to a tightly furled nipple. "You have me. You've always had me, there never has, nor ever will be anyone but you Remus. I'm yours every last bit of me." He sealed his mouth over the nipple just as his hand found the hardening shaft of Remus' cock.

Moaning, Remus arched up into Sirius' wonderful, hot, wet mouth. He didn't know what felt better, the mouth on his nipple or the hand on his prick but together they felt like heaven. "It's the nghhhhhhhhhhh, it's the same for me love. Only you. Only ever you." He raked his fingers through Sirius' hair as his hips rose, trying to thrust into Sirius' grip.

Sirius made a soft sound and pumped his hand up and down Remus' erection, licking, sucking, and occasionally nipping the little nub in his mouth before moving further down Remus' body. Leaving sucking, marking kisses in his wake, Sirius slid down his lover's body until his breath washed over the cock he was still stroking but he didn't take it into his mouth. He pulled Remus' hips up off the bed and spread the firm globes of his arse, exposing the tight opening to his mouth. He laved his tongue over the puckered ring of muscle, groaning at the musky taste before devoting himself to rimming that sweet hole.

In any other situation, Remus would have been absolutely mortified at the needy sound he let out but here he wasn't ashamed. Here with Sirius he was allowed to be himself and just feel. His hands clenched in siloki black tresses and he had force himself not to pull on them. The feeling of Sirius' mouth on him, especially there was indescribable. It turned Remus inside out in the best way possible, tore pleas, moans and sobs of pleasure from his throat. His cock was hard and aching against his lower stomach and Remus could feel his toes curl in absolute pleasure.

Sirius shifted his hips, his own hard cock needing the friction as the taste and sound of his lover filled his senses and inflamed them. He could feel his heart beating hard in his chest, feel the lingering after effects of adrenaline in his bloodstream and it made everything sharper, clearer and sent static waves of pure sensual hunger through him.

He sucked, licked and prodded the ring of muscle until it loosened enough to let him push his tongue in and properly fuck Remus with it. Long slow laps in and out and in again in time with the hand he still stroked Remus' cock with, drowning happily in the scent and flavor of his mate. He fucked him with his tongue until Remus' cries grew near desperation and then he moved up to
mouth at his balls, groaning out a spell that had his fingers slicked before he brought them to the hole he'd so thoroughly eaten out.

"Oh gods, oh Sirius...Don't need fingers, just you." Remus was breathing hard and quick, a light film of sweat all over his body and he couldn't keep himself still for even a second. One of his hands traveled down to where Sirius' fingers were and he felt around, sliding his own finger inside, right next to his mate's, breath hitching a little at the try catch of his unlubed finger. "Feel that love? You've opened me enough for you, feel how I'm gaping, just wanting your thick, lovely prick inside. No more waiting love...Please."

Sirius turned his head and nipped sharply at the inside of a muscled thigh, "It's been a month," he licked over the spot he'd bitten, "and I refuse to hurt you." He nuzzled at Remus' thigh and continued to push and thrust with his fingers, deliberately avoiding Remus' prostate. They were both on edge, he was almost hurting he was so hard and Remus' cock was leaking precome steadily. "Just a little longer baby," he spread his fingers inside him, "and I'll give you exactly what you want, me inside you, moving in and out and loving you." He hid his grin against his mate's thigh at the frustrated growl Remus made. He slid up his lover's body to catch a protesting mouth with his as he worked him a little wider with his fingers until he was satisfied and sure Remus was ready.

Then he broke the kiss, whispered the spell again and slicked his cock up, pressing the head against Remus' loosened hole and pushing in long and tortuously slow, his breath hissing out in pleasure as he was swallowed by the tight, clinging passage.

Even with the careful preparation, too careful in Remus' mind, he still felt stretched wide open, so deliciously full. Still he arched up again, trying to get Sirius inside him even deeper. Once again he locked his ankles behind Sirius' arse and surged up with every thrust, his lips not wanting to leave Sirius' skin for even a second as he kissed down his mate's thigh at the frustrated growl Remus made. He slid up his lover's body to catch a protesting mouth with his as he worked him a little wider with his fingers until he was satisfied and sure Remus was ready.

Shifting so that he was more comfortable and making sure that Sirius wouldn't slip out of him, Remus straightened, arched his back and moaned at the feeling of Sirius, hot and hard inside him. Remus placed his hands on Sirius' knees behind him to give him leverage as he rose up and dropped down. His eyes only a sliver of glowing amber underneath his half closed lids as he rode Sirius with everything he had.

"Gods you're beautiful," rough raw honesty was in Sirius' voice as he watched his mate ride him, body arched back, body gleaming with sweat and the remains of bathwater, face flushed and expressive in pleasure. He ran his hands up Remus' torso, over the baby bump and the delicious broad chest, flicking his nipples.

He bent his knees up, giving Remus more support and using the leverage to roll his hips up to meet each downward slide, panting, groaning, and grunting as the heat in his veins built and built to a flash point, pushing him so very close to the edge that he was nearly biting through his lip to stave off his orgasm until Remus had his. It was there, coiled and waiting to burst. He reached down and wrapped his hand around Remus' cock, pumping it along with the thrusts.

"Mmm, yesss." Remus' hiss was more like a snake that a wolf but he was so lost in pleasure that he didn't even notice. His hands tightened on Sirius' knees as his movements grew erratic, quicker and harsher. Sirius was so bloody beautiful splayed out beneath him, so beautiful that it made his
stomach clench in more than just lust. With the added pleasure of his mate's hand around his prick it wasn't long until Remus couldn't hold out any longer, driven my need, lust and love. He released Sirius' knees and leaned down so he could capture Sirius' lips as he shuddered and shook and came apart around his lover, spilling himself hot and wet between their bodies.

That was all it took for Sirius to go over as well, his mate tightening down on him and coming over his hand and he groaned into the kiss, one hand going up to bury itself in Remus' hair as he came. The pleasure swamped him until his world narrowed down to just the two of them as they shuddered together. He angled his head and licked at Remus' throat, "Love you. Love you, love you, love you."

"Love you too, more than anything." Remus was slumped on top of Sirius, a boneless, sated mass of goo. He knew he should move and allow Sirius to breathe but he didn't know if he had the ability or energy to even twitch at the moment. Remus could hear Sirius' heartbeat against his own and it was a greater comfort than anything. Sirius was there underneath him, still inside him and Remus never, ever wanted to let him go.

Sirius groped for his wand, cast a cleansing spell, then curled his arms around Remus, pulling a blanket up and over them, "Comfortable?"

"Mmm, yes, very, very comfortable." Remus rested his face on Sirius' shoulder, both arms and legs wrapped around him. "You can't be very comfortable though, with the two of us pressing you down." He motioned to his tiny baby swell that was pressing into Sirius' abdomen.

Sirius snorted, "You're hardly what I'd call heavy Moony, baby and all. I'm fine where I am."

"That's good," Remus nipped gently at the shoulder he was resting on. "because I'm not moving. I'm a selfish wolf in a very comfortable position, Minerva walking in here right now wouldn't make me move...Though ew at the thought."

Remus bit Sirius again, just because he could, knowing very well where his son had gotten the biting thing from. "I wonder what she would think though, about us frigging in the come and go room...And the Defense Association...Oh Merlin. We've buggered where they train." Remus burst out in giggles.

Sirius shook his head, "I doubt they're going to be in here tomorrow and each room this room comes up with is a different room so I doubt they'll ever know or care." He ran his hand down Remus' back, "Get some sleep Moony. We have a pup and his she-wolf to talk to tomorrow."

"Spoil my fun why don't you. I rather liked the thought of friggin in school, like a classroom. Like the good old days." Remus nuzzled his cheek against Sirius' strong shoulder, his eyes growing heavier. "Orion is still going to be upset, I hope he will understand...Also wonder what he said or did to Harry." He smothered his yawn against Sirius' skin.

"We'll figure it out love. Tomorrow." Sirius didn't like that one of their cubs had hurt the other but there wasn't anything to be done about it tonight. He just hoped Harry would be okay once the calming draught wore off.

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Unfortunately Harry wasn't okay.

He'd relayed the message about not being expelled and gone to bed, casting a silencing charm around his bed, drawing the curtains, and not an hour after he'd fallen asleep he'd been thrashing
and screaming awake from a nightmare. He rolled out of bed, checked that Ron and the others were asleep, then made his way down to the common room.

He looked at the squishy couches and roaring fire and the warm color scheme for a moment before shaking his head and heading for the Chamber. He exchanged pleasantries with Myrtle then went right to the library, settling down in a chair and summoned parchment and quill. If he couldn't sleep at least he could plan some things out.

Her footsteps were soundless as she crossed the stone floor since she was only wearing thickly knitted woollen socks that Molly had given her. She knew Harry better than he thought and when she'd heard him sneak out she knew exactly where he was going. Hermione wrapped her arms around herself and regretted not taking a sweater with her, her purple t-shirt and plaid pink and purple pyjama bottoms weren't exactly warm and the walk down to the hidden library through the castle was cold.

Harry looked tired and miserable and Hermione was willing to do anything at all to make that expression go away. "What are you doing?"

He jolted and his head jerked up, blinking at her in surprise, "Hermione? You should be in bed sleeping. Tomorrow's going to be rough."

Hermione's answering look said it all. "Mmhmm." She walked closer and sat down on the edge of the desk, thankful that this room was warmed by a fire since she was still cold. "Where should you be then Harry? I heard you sneaking out and if you think I would let you spend all night alone, you're mental." She pulled on the end of the braid she had gathered her hair into for the night.

"I just couldn't sleep is all, figured I'd get down the locations of the Horcruxes and all." He started to reach out to tug on her braid, hesitated to see if she flinched, then ran his hand down her arm softly, "If you can sleep you should," he frowned, "Merlin Hermione your skin feels like ice." He transfigured a blank piece of parchment into a thick, warm blanket.

"No way I can sleep when I know you're down here." Hermione started to wrap the blanket around her when she stopped, then she shifted so she could slip into Harry's lap and pull the blanket around them both. "You can lie to a lot of people but not to me, you couldn't sleep because of nightmares."

It wasn't a question. "Also Harry, you never, ever have to hesitate to reach out to me. I love you."

She bit into her bottom lip. "I wasn't afraid of you Harry, I wasn't but the power you wielded tonight like it was nothing...It's a little intimidating, never scared though."

One arm crept around her waist and the other hand lifted to tug her lip out of her teeth, "Are you sure?" Worry lived in his eyes as they searched hers, "What I did tonight scared everyone, even the Aurors. I took Bellatrix's magic away from her, all but what she needed to live. I essentially turned her into a squib and even before that...it was nothing Hermione. Ron practically passed out as soon as his head hit the pillow, his reserves were falling low after all the fighting but mine...it's almost full. So what I used tonight was basically nothing."

"That's what I mean by intimidating and yes...Yes I'm absolutely, positively sure that I'm not and was never afraid of you." She reached out and rubbed her thumb against Harry's cheekbones.

"Harry, you have magical reserves that Merlin himself would be jealous of. If Voldemort or Dumbledore even had an inkling of how powerful you really are they would turn tail and run as far as their puny little slimy legs can carry them." She snuggled against him. "I could never be afraid of you, you have the gentlest soul I know, the kindest heart and I really, really do love you. Every part of you, including what you did tonight."
He trembled once and then his arms tightened around her as he rested his face in the crook of her neck, "I was so scared I'd made you afraid of me. I hate this, I hate all this...stuff. The fighting, the danger, all of it. I just want to be a normal wizard with nothing to worry about but passing my exams, catching the snitch, and keeping my beautiful, brilliant girlfriend happy. I want a life, a regular life without creepy old wizards wanting some kind of immortality after me."

"I want that too, for you. I wish more than anything that you could have that. But as long as things are as they are. I just want you Harry, the way you are, creepy old wizards after you and everything." Hermione petted his hair gently and leaned her cheek on top of his head, wrapping the blanket tighter around them. "You are wonderful Harry and I am so, so lucky that you even see me."

"One day I'm going to figure out a way to let you see yourself through my eyes Hermione, so you'll understand just how amazing you really are." He closed his eyes and breathed in her scent, "I feel so raw right now. Scraped inside and out, plenty of magic left but weary to my bones. Not to mention I'm pretty sure I completely bollocksed up my relationship with Ri."

"I don't think you have." Hermione continued to sooth him, pet him and love him. "You have witnessed for yourself the epic fights between the Weasley siblings. Not just fights but hurt and silence as well. You're family, that always trumps anything that happens between you in anger. He's hotheaded and confused right now but he'll come around. If not then Parkinson can take another chomp out of his nose and pull him back in line."

Even knowing now how real families were, there was still that niggling voice of insecurity in the back of Harry's mind that told him he wasn't worthy of a family. Still that dark whisper that told him that one little push was all that was needed and he'd lose the regard of those he loved. He let himself laugh at Hermione's comment though, trying to bury his doubts, not very successfully but still trying, "That was definitely a sight. I have a feeling that soon Parkinson is going to find herself shocked and pleasantly surprised by Orion. He's sneaking up on her have you noticed?"

"Oh yes, I've noticed." Hermione nodded, seeing beyond Harry's put upon cheer but not pushing or prodding him about it. She hoped Oron would put this right though and soon. Harry didn't deserve worry or be sad when everything he did was for the ones he loved. "Have you seen how he's growing too? Like a weed. I can almost bet that after the summer he will be taller than me, he's well on his way." She rubbed the back of his neck gently, even as fingers raked through the black hair curling slightly there.

Harry turned his head and nuzzled at the spot just under her ear, "He'll probably wind up taller than I will. Sirius is taller than my Dad in all the pictures I've seen of them but with Sirius' height I think Ri's going to wind up with Remus' build." He sighed, "Things are cutting close for him Mione."

She nodded. "Tall and broad and with the wolf inside him unable to get out...Poor thing." Hermione shivered a little as Harry nuzzled behind her hair, being very sensitive there. "I really hope he finds a way to control himself before he ends up hurting someone he loves...Or hurts someone full stop."

"We've got a plan for that actually," one hand rose to play with the tiny, soft curls at the base of her neck that wouldn't fit in the braid, the other ran up and down her back in long, slow strokes, Harry grounding himself in the feel of her.

"You know how I've got Marauders all staffed right? Well Orion's going to be flooing there daily to spend some time with the alpha I hired as Headmaster, Alek. It should help, and with more than just Orion." He lifted his head and kissed the tip of her nose, "I'm hoping it'll end the classroom debate between Alek and the black haired, blue eyed German who had you starring." It was a gentle
Her cheeks turned a light pink. "Well...The bloke look like some sort of supermodel, It was hard not to stare. I never thought someone like that existed outside the pages of some glossy magazine."

Hermione leaned into Harry's touch, finding herself more relaxed than she had been all day. "Still you may be right, Orion is a potion genius by Snape's own words and he's the wolfiest not whole wolf I've ever met, he should be able to mediate and it should be amusing if nothing else." She twisted to she could place a kiss on his temple. "Have you told Sirius and Remus what you've named the school yet?"

"There is that. Well I used the name in front of them when I told them where Alek was so, sort of?" He bumped her chin with his nose lightly, "I don't know if they noticed or not though, considering the mess tonight's been."

"If they didn't make a fuss about it then they didn't notice." She leaned down a little so she could kiss the tip of his nose. "Not terribly strange when you think about how the day has been. They will be so happy and proud when it finally sinks in though. Your father would be too, in fact I'm sure he's bursting with pride for you. You are an amazing man Harry James Potter and don't you dare to forget it."

Harry hummed a bit, "I don't know about the proud bit but I am hoping for the happy. I'm kinda hoping it'll bury what remains of the angry."

Hermione kissed his nose again, taking care not to jostle his glasses. "I don't think there's much of the angry left, probably were more worry than anger to begin with." She pulled the blanket higher. "Just wait until Headmistress McGonagall lets my parents know...You might find your girlfriend confined to a nunnery after the summer."

"I don't think McGonagall's going to, tell them I mean. At least not what you left school grounds to do, just that you left school grounds." He tugged on her braid, "So grounded all summer maybe but not confined to a nunnery. Besides I'd break you out of the nunnery."

"You'd better." She smiled and tweaked his nose instead of kissing it. "I'm not made for a life of solitude and prayer...And I have a much too hot boyfriend that I'm very much unwilling to give up on. Alas, the nunnery wouldn't work for me."

He felt his cheeks heat. He was no prize in the looks department, at least not in his opinion, but he didn't mind Hermione thinking he was attractive. He brushed a soft kiss over her lips, "Good because I'd miss you too much."

"That feeling is very much mutual, I'd miss you too, much, much too much." Hermione chuckled. "Merlin...This is a really silly conversation really, no nunnery in my future, just a hot boyfriend that I love."

"And who loves you," he kissed her again, longer but still softly. He doubted she'd ever want to know that he'd drained Bellatrix's magic not because of her attack on Sirius but because of the curse that had almost hit Hermione. He'd never tell her that but it was the truth. Otherwise he'd have just used an Incarcerous and claimed the right of conquest over the bloody bitch that way.

Hermione pulled out her wand from her pyjama bottoms pocket and transfigured the chair they were sitting in, into a large, very plushy loveseat. She pushed Harry backwards on it and stretched out on top of him, pulling the blanket along with them so that it covered them both. "I can't force you to sleep if you can't but please just lie here with me, let me know that you are here and safe."
She nuzzled her face against his collar bone.

He raised his hand to pet her hair, "Can't think of anything else I'd rather do when I can't sleep."

"You charmer you." Hermione smiled sleepily at him and snuggled even closer as she found it more and more difficult to keep her eyes open. She wasn't like Harry, her magical reserves were greatly depleted from the day's fight. "Mmm, love you."

"Love you too tigress," he kissed the top of her head, "Go to sleep now. McGonagall's probably going to want to see all our transformations tomorrow when we fill out the paperwork so you need your rest."

"We'll make her proud, keeping it in the feline family." Another nuzzle and a huge yawn and Hermione was out like a light, hands still fisted in Harry's shirt.

He smiled and closed his own eyes, the tension and wakefulness the nightmare had cursed him with fading away with Hermione in his arms. He'd never tell her about his nightmare or that it had involved seeing her lying broken and bleeding on the floor of the Department of Mysteries and knowing it was all his fault. With her here though, safe and sound and with him, he could relax and drift off.
Chapter 49

Orion squirmed in his seat, not really wanting to meet either of his parents’ eyes. The scolding look he could handle without a thought but he hated the disappointment he could see there.

Remus looked at his little baby boy and had to admit that he wasn’t very little any longer. Right now he was all long limbs and wild hair but you could see the man he was about to become.

"I'm sorry alright, I'm sorry." Orion couldn't stand the silence anymore.

"What exactly are you sorry for then Orion?" Remus knew they couldn't just slap him on the wrist and expect that to be it this time.

Sirius wanted to give his son a hug, similar to how he'd hugged Harry last night but he knew that this was a far different situation and not only would it not help, but he doubted Orion would welcome it. So instead he nodded and met the amber eyes Orion had gotten from Remus, "And why are you sorry?"

Just for a second Orion's upper lip pulled back to reveal his fangs before looking ashamed and running his hand through his hair. He would never, ever challenge his parents. He didn't know what was wrong with him, he did things he would never do if he just could stop and think about it.

"I'm sorry for biting Blaise, I didn't mean to break skin but that's no excuse. Blaise is a friend and I should never even have attempted such a thing, no matter what kind of crap he was saying about Harry and Hermione."

Sirius exchanged a look with Remus, "No you shouldn't have but we're not the ones you should be apologizing to for that. Is that all? Just for biting Blaise?" It was harsh but Orion didn't need the long leash anymore, he needed to be held accountable for his actions with heavy consequences for loss of control because an alpha without control hurt his pack.

Remus stayed silent for now but his eyes was on his son, reading the wolf in every turn of Orion's head, the shifting of his eyes. Minerva was right, Orion was walking on a spider thread right now and he was so close to falling.

Orion blinked and ran a tongue over one fang, pressing his tongue against the sharp point until he almost broke skin. "No that's not all I'm sorry about...There's a fire inside me and it's burning away every bit of me that is me." Amber eyes grew shiny with tears. "I'm short with the people I love, mean when I don't mean to be. I'm burning and itching and I'm so, so angry all the time. I don't know what to do. I was horrible to Harry yesterday, said unforgivable things to him and I don't know how to make it right again."

He looked at both Sirius and Remus. "Help me Papa." Orion had never called Sirius by anything other than his name before but right now it felt like he was shattering into a million pieces.

Now Sirius came forward, brushing his hand over Orion's hair, his heart hitching in his chest at the paternal name and the lost look in Orion's eyes. "You're a future alpha wolf Orion but you're not able to transform. It's coming out other ways but you need to learn to control it."

He kept petting his son's hair, knowing that touch anchored him, as it often did Remus, "Unlike your Dad you can't just repress your wolf, because you're alpha. You need someone to teach you how to blend with it, not just live with it itching under your skin but become part of you, no separation because that will only hurt you. Your Dad and I don't know how to teach you that but
"Are you sending me away?" Orion's voice was small and unsure.

"No Ri! No, never." Remus moved over to Orion too and and caressed his ears the way he had when Orion was just a tiny little cub and was about to fall asleep. "We would never send you away. You're our son, our cub and we love you so much. You need to learn how to control this though, before it grows too big and splits your soul in two.

"The Headmistress is already worried about your behavior Orion, you need to control your wolf, turn into the alpha you are meant to be. The wolf you'll be talking to is a good friend of mine and he's the Headmaster of Harry's new school. You'll floo there the days you'll meet with him and think of it this way, you'll get to see the school before any of us."

Orion let out a sob and leaned into his Daddy's arms. "I don't want to be this way, I want to be myself."

Sirius rubbed Orion's back, "We know kiddo. Aleksander is going to help you get back to being yourself and we would never, ever in a million years send you away. It's a floo there for a day of wolf lessons then come back home sort of deal. We're not angry son, we're worried and want you to feel better."

"Okay." Orion moved so he was practically sandwiched between his parents, he did realize he needed help. He hated this feeling of anger and not being in control. Hated what he had said to Harry and hated the way his friends had ignored him after the bite incident.

"This whole thing is to help you pup, to make you feel better." Remus ran a hand over Orion's hair. "We'll work out a schedule with Aleksander, he's a good alpha and he'll be able to teach you a lot of things your father and I can't. It'll be alright Ri and we'll always be here for you when things are rough."

Sirius kissed the top of his son's head, "That's our very happy job as your parents, to be here for you when things get rough. We want you to be able to finish out the rest of the year here at Hogwarts before we start those alpha lessons though so there's something we need you to do okay? If a certain lady snake will agree."

"Have my lady snake shadow glued to me, keep control and apologize for my arsehattery, is that about it?" Orion gave his father a wan smile but he was still emotional and very, very worried about what would happen next.

"Basically. Your professors understand but I still want you to apologize to them for growling at them," he gave Orion a 'look' that fathers have been giving misbehaving children for centuries, "apologize to Zabini for biting him, and most of all, talk to and apologize to Harry," he ran his hand over Orion's hair again, "just the apology and letting him know you still love him is all you need to do to make it right with him. The making sure he knows you still consider him your much loved big brother is the most important part of that because I'm pretty sure he thinks you hate him right now." He gave Orion a gentle hug, "You need to let him know that's not the case."

"I'll try my best. I could never not love him...He's my Scar, my big brother." Orion wiped at his eyes. "I am still upset about being left behind...I know why I was and I do understand but understanding and feeling it are two different things." He looked into his father's eyes, knowing this was something Sirius would understand more than his mostly level headed Dad. "Almost everyone I love left for danger, leaving me behind with a babysitter. It killed me."
"I know kiddo," he pet Orion's hair back from his forehead, "and you may not think so but Harry does too. Remember the World Cup? If Hermione and the others hadn't sat on him Harry would have been doing what he always does and running into the fire to try and bring the Death Eaters down." He leaned down, eyes amused, "And what would you have done if he hadn't bribed Parkinson to sit on you?"

"Been on the next Thestral to London." Orion flashed fang in a small smile. "I still could have if I wanted to, Pansy or no Pansy...She's not as brilliant in sitting on me as she thinks she is but I let her think so. Besides even though I was a bugger of the highest degree, I did promise Harry to stay put. I may be a flawed, angry halfblood but I do keep my promises."

Remus was glad to hear some of the old Orion in his son's voice but then he furrowed his brow. "Don't call yourself that. You're our Orion and you're perfect the way you are."

Sirius poked Orion in the ribs, "Exactly so. You've got your Dad's brains, when they're not scrambled by hormones and whatnot, and my good looks, how could you be anything but perfect?" He waggled his brows then sobered, "Joking aside Orion, never put yourself down like that. Plenty of people will try to put you down, you don't need to do it to yourself. You don't think there's anything wrong with your Dad and being a werewolf right? Or anything profoundly wrong with me and being human right? So why would being half and half be wrong?"

"Of course nothing's wrong with Dad being a werewolf or you human...Nothing will be wrong with this little one either." Orion petted his Daddy's belly gently. "Cock it up to another stupid thing to apologize for." He grew serious. "Thank you for being my parents, for loving me even when I'm a clotpole. I love you."

"Ah well you get the clotpole bit from me I'm afraid," Sirius ruffled Orion's hair and hugged him tight, "Love you too pup."

"Always will." Remus added and joined the hug.

"As bonding and mushy as this family time is...If we are done for now I should go find Harry and grovel. I want to make things right between us as quickly as I can. It's only going to be harder the longer I wait." Orion hugged them again and swallowed loudly at what he had before him to do.

"Alright kiddo, go on and find Scar. Your Dad and I will lie in wait outside the Slytherin common room to talk to Miss Parkinson."

"Good luck with that...Oh, give her shoes, those fancy muggle heel thingies. Designer is French I think. She broke a heel chasing me down and deserves a new pair." Orion grinned and steeled himself to go find his brother, fishing out his map to check where he was.

He was with the rest of their transforming pride, lips twitching in amusement as McGonagall came to a stop in front of Draco.

"Well Mr. Malfoy, as part of the requirements to put my seal of approval on your paperwork I have to see you transform." She cocked a brow at the blushing and still human blond, "So if you please."

Draco knew the rabbit was out of the hat so to speak but he still hated it. Didn't want to transform in front of the Headmistress or the other animagi. He could only imagine the kind of comments Weasel would spew now that they weren't in mortal danger. "Oh fine." He shifted and looked up at McGonagall with twitching nose and snowy fur.

Harry made a dive for Ron before he could open his mouth and clamped his hand over it, hissing in
his ear, "Unless you really do want those oozing bum boils I'd advise silence." He nodded over where Fred and George were glaring at Ron and fiddling with their wands.

Ron read the promise in his brothers' eyes and just nodded before pushing Harry's hand off, "Fine I'll behave."

Minerva hid her smile and marked down on Draco's paperwork, lifting a brow as the twins made their way over and Fred picked up the rabbit that was Draco, nuzzling his fur.

Fred pet their transformed boyfriend, "You're so soft and pretty."

"Beautiful and fluffy and gorgeous." George added and nuzzled white long velvety soft ears.

"Is it bad that I find this as bad as Ron's mouth?" Hermione whispered in Harry's ear. "Those two are really disgustingly smitten with that bunny boy, whichever form he dons."

Ginny just shook her head and leaned against Neville's strong side. Luna, who was still transformed, was busy climbing her boyfriend's trouser leg.

Pansy sat, legs crossed, filing her nails in vague amusement. So far the only ones who'd yet to perform for McGonagall were Potter and Granger and she had a feeling they'd engineered it that way. She had, of course, gotten the pass as had the rest of them and had seen the Headmistress' head shake of exasperation at the twins and the startled momentary drop of her stern mask when Neville had become the bear. The woman's reactions were amusing and a good way to learn how to see past her stern expressions.

Ron smiled and reached down to pluck Luna from his leg, and put her on his shoulder, petting her affectionately.

Minerva came to a stop in front of Hermione and Harry, "The two of you have not put down your forms on the paperwork. May I ask why?"

Harry gave her a sheepish smile, "Well we sort of wanted them to be a surprise for you."

Hermione grinned to and squeezed Harry's hand. "We hope you'll like it...Sort of keeping it in the family." Hermione exchanged a look with Harry and after a brief nod she was the first one to transform, looking up at Harry and McGonagall with tawny eyes, stretching her striped body. Yes, she was showing off a bit but she couldn't help herself. Hermione was very proud of her animagus form, in the shape of the tiger was the one time she felt beautiful.

Harry smiled, "I keep telling her that it's proof that she's going to be just as good as you are."

There was no hiding the expression of surprised pleasure on McGonagall's face at that and Pansy had to admit it made the stern woman look years younger.

"No Mr. Potter," Minerva reached down to run a hand over the sleek, striped head of the tigress, "she'll be better as I've known for some time." She tilted her head, "And you?"

He grinned and shifted quickly, just as quickly as he had when faced with Lucius Malfoy, shaking out his mane and looking up at his transfiguration professor, now the Headmistress.

A slow blink was soon followed by an equally slow stretching of lips that morphed into a smile of beaming pride, "Well done Mr. Potter, very well done indeed."

Harry nuzzled her hand then nuzzled Hermione, purring loudly as McGonagall filled in the
remaining spots on his and Hermione's paperwork and signed her approval.

Draco shifted back and batted Fred and George's hands off of him but his pink cheeks and satisfied smile proved that he wasn't exactly against the cuddling and complements. He snorted as the big cats purred and preened in tandem. Oh how he wished he'd been something really big and bad in animagus form, that way he could have eaten them. Draco exchanged an amused look with Pansy as there was a knock on the door and a very solemn and subdued Orion poked his head in and asked if Harry had time to see him.

Minerva heard the lion that was Harry stop purring in an instant and before he transformed saw his tail going round his legs and ears flattening just a bit in slight fear. She tucked the paperwork into separate folders, "Of course Mr. Moonstar. We're all finished here."

Pansy slipped off the desk, "Well then boys, girls," she looked at the ermine on Ron's shoulder, "ermine and tigress. Shall we," she sashayed out of the room, running her hand over Orion's hair on her exit.

Fred shook his head even as he hooked his arm through George's and held out a hand to Draco, asking but not demanding or pushing for hand holding if he didn't want to, "That lass is one of a kind."

"That she is." Draco said with purest pride and took Fred's hand. "She could take over the world that one, if only she wished to." He took George's hand with his free one. "Come on, let's go see Blaise, he was moaning about his leg being about to fall off either...Big fraud, he barely has a bruise." Draco led his men out of the room.

Hermione shifted back and kissed Harry's cheek, telling him she'd be waiting down in the Chamber library for him. She pulled on Ron and a changed back Luna to join her.

Neville kissed Ginny's cheek, "Come on Ruby, let's let these two work it out."

Fred shook his head nervously as everyone but Orion filed out until they were the only ones left in the room. He shifted from foot to foot before leaning back on a desk, "Er...what's up Orion?"

Orion shuffled his feet awkwardly before rushing at Harry and almost tackling him as he threw his arms around the older boy and hugged him with all his might. "I'm so sorry Harry, so, so sorry. I didn't mean any of it. Not a thing. I'm an idiot and worse but please, please forgive me. Please don't hate me." Orion held on tighter.

"Oh pup," Harry returned the hug, patting Orion's shoulder, "I'd never hate you, ever."

"But you should, you should hate me and not want to be my brother anymore." Orion's eyes were tightly clenched as he hugged Harry. "I talk big about not being a kid anymore but I certainly acted like one yesterday and I'm sorry. Being leader of a pack is doing what's good for the pack, not what you want to do. I made that decision much harder for you than it should have been..." Orion paused. "I don't want to lose my brother, I'm a pillock right now but I am going to try and be better, I promise I am."

"Shh, it's okay. I understand. You're not going to lose me Orion. You've been one of mine since you bounced into the compartment on the train for the first time." Harry ran his hand over Orion's hair comfortingly.

"I really am sorry." Orion did his best to calm down. "I don't want a distance between us, you're my Scar." He released his deathgrip on Harry but didn't let go completely. "Thank you for letting your
new Headmaster take time off planning to speak to me this summer. Dad and Papa promised that they're not sending me away."

Harry snorted, "You nit. They wouldn't send you off if you turned furry and stayed stuck that way. And please don't thank me, entirely self serving. I'm hoping you can get Alek and Spath to quit sniping at each other over the bloody potions classroom."

Orion raised an eyebrow. "Potions classroom? Why are they disagreeing over a classroom? All it needs is room to move, plenty of ingredients, shelves and sturdy cauldrons." He shrugged, as long as he was allowed to brew, Orion was happy.

"Maybe you're not the best one to help after all. That's exactly Spath's argument. Alek's is that the kids need more space and freedom, for lack of a better word, for their wolf. He's got a point too. You, Orion, are a potions whiz and love the subject but for people who don't, the potions classroom is dark, dank, dreary, and far from an enjoyable class. Do me a favor and be sneaky and get them to strike a compromise will you?"

"Sneaky is my middlename, I'm Slytherin." Orion grinned, happy that he and Harry seemed to be okay, Orion would do everything he could to make it stay that way. "Now for an I'm sorry I chewed on gift for Blaise. Homemade lube since I think his biggest problem is that he hasn't gotten Charlie into bed yet even though it's almost two months since he turned sixteen or chocolate? What would you want most? Oh the lube smells like chocolate by the way, if that makes a difference...The twins were very interested in the recipe."

"Orion I have no idea why you seem to think that's something I'd be remotely interested in," Harry shook his head, "and I don't even want to know why you know how to make that."

He poked Orion's forehead, "If memory serves though, Blaise doesn't drool over chocolate like Pansy does so if I were you, I'd go for something else, not pertaining to his sex life or lack thereof."

"Why would I not know how to make lube?" Orion looked almost shocked. "I'm a healthy teenage boy and you know...A little slick makes it quick. Even you, saint that you are must take yourself in hand at times."

Orion started to pace. "What do you think he would want then? Sex and Charlie is almost all Blaise talks about...That and dragons. Maybe I could talk to Charlie and give him something to do with dragons, maybe even from the reserve in Romania."

"Merlin you really are Sirius' son," He shook his head, "And you should ask the she-wolf, whose form you still haven't seen have you? Anyway, ask Parkinson about an apology gift. She knows her idiots best. Certainly better than I do."

"Pansy is a wolf, I could smell it the moment she achieved her form but you're right...She hasn't honored me with the sight of her animagus form." Orion grinned at Harry. "I suppose I should ask her and bring chocolate as I do so since the parentals will have tried to talk her into extended babysitting by now. I told them to buy her shoes."

"Good bribe, for Parkinson that is. Go on then, attach yourself to her side and apply the pleading eyes generously when asking for advice. I am going to catch up to my girlfriend before we all have our detentions tonight. Did Malfoy shriek when he was told he'd be serving his helping Hagrid muck out stalls?"

"He managed to keep a straight face in public but I'm sure there was a tantrum behind closed doors." Orion's grin was evil, he was so happy that Harry seemed to be okay with what had
happened and forgiven him. "Malfoy and manure don't go together well." He walked over and gave his brother another hug. "Go find your girlfriend, let me know if you need any lube, I can make any scent and taste you want." He winked at Harry and bounced out to find Pansy and grovel at her feet.

Harry narrowed his eyes and decided to earmark a final prank of the year for Orion. The kid bit Blaise for a comment similar to the one he'd just made after all. He needed a reminder that he wasn't alpha yet.

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Pansy jolted awake at the loud yell that sounded as if it'd come from the boy's dorms and ran out in her nightgown and dressing robe to see what in the name of Merlin had happened. She drew up short when a laughing Blaise and snickering Draco rushed out into the common room, impeccable as always and she lifted a brow. "What in the name of Morgana's knickers are you two so," she waved an expressive hand, "about?"

"Oh, just enjoying a case of what goes around comes around. I actually like the way the color brings out the fangs." Draco tilted his head to the side and smiled an absolutely lethal smile.

"Couldn't have said it better myself." Blaise grin matched Draco's and only widened when growling was heard from behind him just before a very pink haired Orion shuffled into the common room, a murderous expression on his face as he tried to flatten his puffed out hair.

Pansy's eyebrows went straight up, before she looked at Draco and Blaise, "Which one of you," she trailed off when both of them shook their heads, "Neither?" She tilted her head, "Orion darling who did you piss off?"

"I don't know." Orion wailed. "I've been good and non growly, you should know...You've practically been riding my bum since Dad and Sirius bought you a new shoe wardrobe." He pulled on his pink tresses, trying to cast finite incantatem without result.

"Here let me see," she cast a counter curse that only resulted in the hair suddenly poofing out more and making her jump with a small squeak. The snicker coming from her two idiots had her pointing her wand in their direction, "Would the two of you like something similar out of your noses?"

Blaise and Draco managed to get themselves together, knowing that it wasn't an empty threat. Their lips were twitching violently though.

"What did you do? What did you do?" Orion felt his even larger hair with a panicked and miserable expression. "It got bloody worse!"

"Well it was a counter curse but apparently whoever did this set it to...well get worse if someone tried to counter it." She poked at the pink poofy hair cautiously, hearing the squeak of a restrained snicker behind her when it almost wobbled. "Well this is...hmm. Let me go get dressed and we'll try to figure this out before we have to go down for breakfast."

"I'm not stepping a toe outside this room while looking like this." Orion crossed his arms over his chest. It didn't get better when Walnut flew inside the common room, gave a screech of horror when he saw his master and almost molted in fear as he flapped his wings and desperately tried to get away from the pink blob.

That did it for Blaise who crumpled in a heap of hooting laughter.

Pansy just gave Blaise a look then reached out and snatched the tiny owl out of the air, "Darling
you'll have to if we can't fix it. You can't stay in the common room indefinitely. At the very least your parents would come fetch you."

She turned and swished back into her dorm, Walnut cowering on her shoulder, one big eye on the pink blob eating his master's head. It didn't take her long to get dressed and return, of course by that time the rest of Slytherin House had woken and seen Orion, who was flailing and warning people off from trying to reverse it. "Alright you lot back away from the hair!" She strode forward and shooed them all away.

Orion gave Pansy a grateful look at that and hissed at the smothered snickers echoing through the room. "Fuck this!" He summoned a large blue and black knitted hat and pressed it down on top of his head, not caring that it was June and warm outside.

Pansy pointed at everyone in the room, "Not. A. Single. Word. Not one." The way the entire house, minus Blaise and Draco, shrank back was gratifying. "Come on darling, let's eat then get ready to load ourselves on the train." She guided him out of the common room and to the Great Hall.

Ron looked up as they entered and tilted his head in curiosity, "How come Ri's wearing a hat? It's not cold."

Fred looked over at their little protege and shrugged, "Maybe he felt cold?" He looked at Draco and gave him a slow, almost steamy smile.

A silver blond eyebrow rose and Draco answered the grin with one just as steamy of his own, throwing in a hint of filthy just because he could.

"Maybe he has fleas and ticks and doesn't want them to catch a cold." George added and had to shift a little in his seat from the look Draco sent his brother. Damn it but their dragon was near dangerous.

Fred ran his tongue along his lips and winked at Draco before slipping a hand under the table to trace a pattern over George's thigh and mouthed, "Five days." At their dragon.

Orion looked around as if challenging anyone to mention his hat as he stalked to the Slytherin table and sat down in his seat, pulling the hat down more securely on top of his head.

"He doesn't look very happy does he?" Ginny looked curious.

"He looks like he wants to bite someone's nose off," Neville eyed Orion warily.

Harry on the other hand just buttered his toast casually, "He probably does. Strawberries Hermione?" He passed his girlfriend a plate of the bright red berries, aware that he had two redheads now narrowing their eyes on him in suspicion.

"Thank you Harry." Hermione accepted the strawberries and piled some of them over on her plate as she watched her boyfriend. She knew Harry and knew he had something to do with the headware Orion was sporting but she didn't make an issue of it, hoping she would learn what it was all about later. Whatever Orion had done to make Harry retaliate she was sure he deserved it.

George moaned very lowly and placed his hand over his brother's on his thigh before he wouldn't be able to stand up at all when breakfast was over. Fred had wicked hands and as much as George loved them, the Great Hall wasn't the ideal place for him to use his talented fingers.

Fred turned his hand up and tangled the fingers with George's, looking over at the green eyed,
innocent faced boy sitting beside Hermione, "Harry, what do you know?"

"Mind being more specific Fred?" Harry nibbled on his toast, "I know a lot of things."

"That," he pointed at Orion.

"It'll wear off in about three hours. Other than that," Harry shrugged, "convince him to take it off if you want but I wouldn't advise it unless you want him biting your noses off."

"Some things are worth the price of a nose." George looked wicked and waved his wand under the table, making Orion's hat soar off only to land in Theo Nott's breakfast porridge.

The whole Hall grew deathly silent before the snickers and giggles started and Orion turned bright red in the face.

"Oh Merlin...Harry what did he do to deserve a fate as a pink mushroom?" George was gaping in awe and frankly admiration.

Harry took a sip of pumpkin juice, "The very same thing he bit Zabini for." He noticed Parkinson's eyes narrowing on George. "By the way George, if I were you I'd run as Parkinson looks ready to run a fox to ground."

Fred shivered at the look on Pansy's face, "Forget missing noses Gred, the she-wolf looks as if she's going to rip off our bollocks." He got up and pulled George with him as they exited quickly while Pansy retrieved Orion's hat, cast a cleaning charm, and tucked it back on over his head before sending a supremely nasty hex at one of the guffawing Gryffindors, which worked well to silence the others in the hall.

"Parkinson really is protective of Orion, I'm glad I wasn't laughing." Ginny had a speculative grin on her face. "They will make a power couple like few others." She snuggled close to Neville. Wanting to spend as much time with him as she could before they had to go on the train. She knew they would meet during the summer too but not everyday.

Ron shook his head, "Harry mate, you're evil."

Harry lifted a brow, "Swamp thing."

"Oh well when you put it like that, good job."

"Uh-huh. George will be finding his favorite snack less than appetizing on the train too now. Sending the hat flying is not convincing Ri to take it off. I wasn't planning on the whole school to see it, just Orion, Parkinson, and her idiots."

Neville smoothed his hand down Ginny's hair, "So the charm or whatever it is will wear off?"

"In three hours. I'm not cruel and look," he nodded at the Slytherin table where a Gryffindor had come up to sit among the snakes supporting Orion and making him laugh, "He'll be fine with Dennis and Parkinson flanking him."

"Just one question Harry, how are you going to make Malfoy less than appetizing since he's both my twin brothers favorite snack?" Ginny blinked innocently at Harry.

"Thank you so much for that horrifying mental image Gin," he gave her a sweet smile, "I'll remember your kindness."
"Harry you're acting very snakey today." Ron bit into a sausage, "Any particular reason?"

Harry gave Hermione a smile, "Just slipping into the proper frame of mind to break into a nunnery."

Hermione smiled back and reached out to pop a strawberry into his mouth. "Good, no nunnery will be safe and I will aid you from the inside." Hermione was happy since she had managed to talk her parents out of going with them on their annual trip to France. She would spend the first three weeks at home and the rest of Summer break at the Burrow. It was not only so she could be with Harry, they did have a Horcrux hunt to plan and Hermione refused to be left out.

"Nunnery? Do you have a kink you've forgotten to tell us about?" Ginny didn't feel particularly threatened by Harry's mood. She had six other brothers, it took a lot to scare her. "Oh and you still haven't told us what you want for your sweet sixteen."

He frowned, "What is it with all you lot and your minds in the gutter?"

Ron shook his head, "You're a really weird teenager Harry. You're supposed to be focused in the gutter and have hormones flying about like mad but there you sit next to your girl, all prim and proper. I don't get it."

Harry made a sound of exasperation, "For the love of...I don't see you barking at Neville for him being decent."

"Well he's dating my sister, that's different."

"Ron just because I don't wax pervertedly poetic about Hermione's bits or try to grope them all the time doesn't mean I don't bloody well think about it. I just happen to have a brain and keep those thoughts in it out of this little thing, you might have heard about it, it's called respect for my girlfriend. Now leave off."

"Ron, you really shouldn't talk, you've been nothing but a gentleman to Luna, girls talk you know."

Hermione smiled. "She's actually starting to worry you don't know what things are what in the female anatomy since you never touch them." She winked at Ron and ate more strawberries. What she and Harry might and might not do in private was no one's business but theirs.

Harry smirked at the bright red flush on Ron's face and leaned in to kiss Hermione's cheek, "Did I tell you yet today that you're amazing?"

"Not today but thank you." She grinned and tilted her head so she could give him a quick kiss on the lips. "You're amazing too you know."

"You two are sickeningly cute, I thought it would wear off with time but it actually only gets worse. You're lucky we love you." Ginny leaned over and swiped the remaining strawberries off of Hermione's plate.

Neville chuckled, "Alright so what do you want for your birthday Harry?"

Harry shrugged. He honestly didn't know. He was always just happy that people remembered his birthday, he never assumed they would so never thought to ask for anything, "A day without crisis?"

Ron laughed a bit, "You're impossible. I don't see how th-mmph."

"Don't say it Ron! For the love of mercy it's an unwritten law of the universe that if you say it, it'll
happen so please just don't." Harry took his hand off Ron's mouth.

"Don't jinx it for goodness sake." Hermione agreed. "Besides Harry has almost two months to think of something he wants." Hermione wasn't as calm as she sounded. She wanted to give Harry something wonderfully brilliant but she had no idea what to get him. She wanted it to be special and something no one else would think of.

"We'd better finish here and get ready or the train will leave without us." Ginny pushed plate aside and kissed Neville's cheek. "Oh for your birthday Harry...I think you should have Polyjuice party, make everyone guess who's who."

"Uh can we have a big no on that one. Way too much potential for disaster though..." he tilted his head in consideration, "a costume party might be nice. I don't know. I'm still wrapping my head around knowing that I'm even going to be having a party."

"Of course you're going to have a party and a costume party sounds really nice." Hermione took his hand. She never got to have parties on her birthdays since it was just at the beginning of the school year and everyone was freaking out about their new classes but she wanted Harry's birthday to be big and wonderful. He deserved it after all ignored birthdays. Harry deserved everything good and Hermione wanted to make sure he had it.

"Yeah mate," he pat Harry on the shoulder, "You're one of us Weasleys now, a party is a requirement to celebrate your birthday and soon as you tell Mum about wanting a costume party, well she'll go into full squealy happy mode. Mum loves planning parties, probably could have made a career out of it if she'd wanted and a costume party's the best kind to plan according to her."

Harry took Hermione's hand, squeezing gently, "Well if it'll make Mrs. Weasley happy. But I really don't know what to tell you lot about 'what I want' I mean I've got everything I need and everything I ever thought about wanting before. The only other thing I can think of that I actually want aside from peace to live my life as I please is for Orion to be free from the Bee."

Neville smiled, understanding. Harry'd only ever wanted what everyone took for granted but he'd never had, everything else like the toys and things just didn't occur to him. "Well you'll just be a challenge then won't you?"

"It only makes finding something you'll really like all the more fun." Ginny agreed. "And yes Mum will be really happy if you allow her to throw you a costume party, she lives for those kind of things. Oh and Harry, she's your Mum too, have been for years now officially. I think you can at least call her Molly. You'll hurt her feelings if you keep calling her Mrs. Weasley, she'll think you don't love her." Ginny knew her mother very well.

"Hate to break this up but Ginny was right before, we really have to go and pack the last of our things. Only an hour until we need to be in Hogsmeade." Hermione was starting to feel the usual end of the year stress, always afraid she would forget something important. Besides it was a little difficult leaving the castle when you lived most of the year there. "Oh, a quick question. Will Sirius, Remus and Orion stay in the house in Hogsmeade or will they move back to the cottage over the summer? Does anyone know? I want to know which address to send any letters to."

"Actually they're moving into Black Manor," Harry got up and started walking to the dorms with Hermione, "Since Sirius was pardoned last week it's his again and he's spent the last week clearing it and fixing it up."

Ron nodded, giving Luna a smile as she waved from the Ravenclaw table, "That's right he's Lord Black now innit he? Talk about weird."
"Where exactly is Black manor located?" As always Hermione was on a quest for knowledge. "And I think it's great that justice has finally been served and that Sirius is free. I heard that Orion visited the Headmistress to take on his real name of Black officially from now on."

"It's in Wiltshire, not too far from Malfoy's home," Ron paused and shook his head, "Dear Merlin save us all they're neighbors. They'll blow the county up."

Harry laughed, "Hey they've gotten better."

"Narcissa and Sirius actually get along now, as do Malfoy and Orion. I think it's great. And with a manor comes grand grounds. Remus will have plenty of room run safely on the moons. Maybe Orion can run with him now." Hermione paused as they stood in front of the portrait to the common room.

"My only worry there is our buzzing problem," Harry gave the portrait the password and stepped into the common room, "though Snape should be giving Orion that potion right about now. I wonder if it tastes as nasty as it looks and smells?"

"It probably does but I think Orion would be willing to drink Black Lake sludge if it gave him even a little protection against the bearded bastard. I'm actually sorry Ri never got the chance to set his beard on fire in the Great Hall." Hermione frowned, Dumbledore was one of the few people she really, truly loathed. She leaned in and kissed Harry. "I'll go to the dorms and get my things ready, can we meet here in the common room before heading to the carriages?"

"Of course," he returned the kiss sweetly and gave her a smile. He knew her things were already together and packed, just as well as he knew she had to recheck a few more times before being certain. "See you back down here in a bit love."

"Right, thank you for putting up with me." Hermione smiled and dashed up the stairs to check her packing for the hundredth time. "Love you."

He had a goofy smile on his face for a moment before Ron whacked him on the back of the head and told him to quit mooning and get his own trunk from their dorms.
Harry ruffled Orion's hair and looked back over his shoulder at Sirius and Remus, chuckling at the gaping looks they had as they laid eyes on the Marauders School for Werewolves. It didn't have the soaring turrets and towers of Hogwarts but it was pretty imposing all things considered. They were at the bottom of the large hill that led up to the gates. He'd had the Anti-Apparition wards put beyond the gates for extra security. "So what do you think?"

Remus was at a loss for words, this was more incredible than anything he could have dreamed about. "This is amazing Harry, I am so very proud of you. And the name...you shouldn't have, you should have named after something that matters." Remus reached out and gave Harry a hug, his baby bump brushing against Harry since he was growing in size rather quickly now. "So, so proud."

"This is bloody awesome! I almost wish I was going to be a student here. I'm so glad I get to see it." Orion bounced around his big brother.

Harry shook his head, "Remus you're being a tit. I did name it after something that matters. More I named it after the ideal that it was born from. Dad and Sirius, because you know I don't count the rat, stood by you, worked harder than they ever had before, and all because they wanted to keep you company during the worst times in your life. It didn't matter to them that you went furry once a month, you were still Remus, so they got furry with you. That's what I want for the kids here, real opportunities and friends."

Sirius smiled and went to wrap his arms around Remus from behind, "It's incredible cub."

Remus wiped at his eyes and pretended it was hormones though it definitely wasn't. "You're going to embarrass me here," He chuckled and wiped his cheeks again. "Now show us the inside before I break down and bawl like a baby."

"Yes, I want to meet this wolfie who will teach me manners." Orion nodded excitedly, laughing at his father's fake growl. Orion still had a very hard time with the wolf inside him but he was really trying and just the knowledge that he would have someone to talk to, someone that really understood made him feel somewhat better.

Harry flicked Orion's ear, "Aleksander is coming to meet us and take us up."

Sirius huffed a bit but chose to nuzzle Remus' neck lovingly. "So...where is he?"

Harry shook his head, "You really need to get over your issues. Alek should be here in just a minute."

"Actually I'm already here," the blond alpha wolf stepped out of the tree line and came forward to shake Harry's hand, "Mr. Potter. Welcome back."

"Alek please, enough with the Mr. Potter already. It's Harry."

"Alright, Harry." He looked up, his gaze measuring Sirius and his arms around Remus, "Remus, good to see you again." He flicked his gaze to Orion, studying him knowingly, "And you would be Orion yes?"

Orion nodded slowly as he carefully measured the older wolf up with cautious amber eyes. The blond practically bled power and authority but he seemed kind as well. Orion looked forward to get
to know him. "I'm Orion Black yes. It's a pleasure to meet you." He didn't hold out his hand but gave a nod to the older man instead. "I see you know my parents, they are going to give me a little sister or brother."

Somehow he felt the need to really point it out that his Dad and Papa were together and that the blond giant didn't have a chance in hell with either of them. It was probably a childish thing to do but Orion did it all the same. "You're in charge of a beautiful school."

Harry shook his head and let Alek take it before going to poke Sirius in the side and hiss, "Behave and stop setting a bad example."

Alek heard him but kept his focus on the pup in front of him, "I know your Dad, Remus, however I don't think I've had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of your sire."

Sirius sighed and though he kept one arm around Remus' waist as they walked forward, he held out his hand to the blond alpha, "That's not entirely true."

"Oh?"

"The very rude and misbehaving dog you met when you visited...Well that was this berk." Remus sighed but leaned against Sirius, happy to give his mate that assurance even though it was not needed at all. Remus would never have eyes for anyone but Sirius. Even without the wolf and the mate mark Sirius was the one for him, the great love of his life and the father of his soon to be children in plural.

"I hope you're well and that you settled in all right. I know it must be a change from the wild woods. Thank you for taking time off what I know must be a busy time to talk to our son here. He can be polite even though he didn't show it here." Remus gave Orion a look that made his son squirm.

"Ah," it was a sound of understanding as Alek accepted Sirius' hand and shook, "That explains it. I did wonder why a dog was able to growl at me much less be so bold."

Harry snorted and exchanged a look of amusement with Orion, "You mean he was a possessive berk."

"Hey I don't want to hear it from the guy who turned Bill Weasley blue for a week."

"Oh did that last a week? Good, means he learned his lesson," Harry grinned, "and that wasn't possessiveness, it was retroactive protection."

"Orion's hair?"

"That was just punishment for crude commenting on my relationship and it wasn't supposed to be seen by the whole school."

"Do you even get jealous cub?"

"Of course I do. I spent most of fourth year jealous. Until Cho and Cedric whacked me with the clue bat and I asked Hermione out." Harry smirked at his godfather.

"Maybe I should tell Molly to step up the etiquette lessons," Sirius looked thoughtful.

"Do and I'll do more than just turn your hair pink and puffy," it was spoken in a low, warning tone.
Alek chuckled and met Remus' eyes briefly, "I can see why your son's having a little trouble with those two always around. Both leaders and both different than a wolf." He angled his head to indicated the path up to the school and began to walk, "It's actually not too much of a hard adjustment. Good food, warm, real bed, no worrying about the rain collapsing my shelter and getting soaked. I've gotten to know, and like, most of the staff with one caveat so it's not too busy to offer help to a lad struggling with his wolf."

He looked over at Orion with a close lipped smile. He could smell the wild trying to break out of the boy and the underlying scent of someone meant to be an alpha as well. It was good Remus had brought him here, an alpha needed to learn from an alpha.

"Good food and a warm bed is always a good thing." Remus nodded as he walked beside Alek, Sirius' arm still around his waist. He noticed how the other wolf was silently feeling Orion out and once again he was grateful that Aleksander would be the alpha to teach his son. Remus didn't trust many people but Alek was one of the few that held his trust and it helped to know the blond would be there for Orion when he and Sirius couldn't.

Orion was silent for a while, not knowing quite how to address the older wolf. It was someone who demanded complete respect but Orion didn't feel comfortable baring his throat either. Finally he decided on treating him like he would Headmistress McGonagall without the cheek and hope that it was proper enough. "Excuse me Sir, I was just wondering, will we be alone during our talks later on?" Orion loved his parents and he loved Harry but he really thought this was something he had to do on his own, well alone with Aleksander.

Alek nodded, "We will yes. The lessons wouldn't go very well if those two were around," he flicked a thumb at Sirius and Harry. "They're too dominant without being wolf. One's too playful and the other is too lazy."

"I happen to think I've earned the right to be lazy when there's no life or death situations going on thank you very much." Harry smiled at Alek, "But you are right, I take the laid back approach."

Sirius just shrugged his acceptance of the playful label, "I'm a dog for a reason."

The blond man shook his head and addressed Orion, "Hence the reason our lessons won't have them around, conflicting energies." He paused as they reached the foot of the steps leading to the school's main entrance.

There was a crest above the door depicting a wolf flanked by a stag and a Grim and the motto Aequo Omnium etched beneath it.

Remus stopped and looked at the crest and motto and he felt himself gripping Sirius tighter as he sent another look to his oldest cub. The school was beautiful and Remus was still amazed that Harry had done this, that he had made it a reality. Seeing it and seeing Alek as a Headmaster made him really want to teach again too, he hoped that he and Sirius would be able to accept the positions they were offered at Hogwarts.

He looked at the motto again, 'Equality For All'. Remus hoped that would be absolute truth someday but this school was a very nice start.

"Cool." Orion looked around. "Are we going inside or are we going to stand here in awe the rest of the day?" He sent Harry a grin.

Harry shook his head, "Alek you'll be working his patience too right?"
The blond chuckled, "Yes, it's a primary component. A wolf is a hunter, a hunter needs patience or he ruins the hunt. He'll also be a leader and a leader also needs patience so it's one thing to be covered." He tapped on the doors and they swung open into a welcoming foyer in tones of mossy green, sky blue, and amber. "I'll let you give them the tour Harry and I'll probably be in the lunch hall by the time you're done. I have to make my rounds first though."

"No worries. We'll drop Orion with you after the tour," Harry reached over and ruffled Orion's hair, "That good for you too pup?"

Orion shrugged, suddenly feeling insecure as he looked around the warm, welcoming foyer. "Sure, that'll be good." He didn't know why he felt like this, it was as if stepping inside the school made everything more real. Made him remember that he wasn't here for fun. He was here because he couldn't control himself and could end up hurting someone. "Any secret passageways? You must have secret passageways right Scar?"

"None that lead outside of the school's main building but it's Marauders, of course there are secret passages but it's up to the students to find them, hence the word secret."

"Kill my structure why don't you," Alek waved and loped to the end of the foyer, going up a flight of stairs to start his rounds.

Sirius chuckled, "Oh I'm tempted to try and find them now, but I won't."

"Good dog," Harry took the lead, "Originally I wasn't going to have houses but Alek thought friendly competition would be good for the students so there's three houses, Moony House, Padfoot House, and Prongs House. On the first level we've got all the muggle classes. You know, Mathematics, Language Arts, Science, World History things like that. See I thought, because the wizarding world isn't too welcoming, that the muggle world could be a place where the graduates could find steady work."

He grinned, "The goblins even helped me work out how to explain the monthly absences and how worn out the graduates would be after the full moons."

"You've thought about everything," Remus smiled. "Prongs would absolutely burst with pride if he saw this. He'd be preening and be absolutely insufferable. Imagine Siri times ten." He squeezed Sirius' hand, knowing how much his mate still missed his best friend.

Sirius peeked into the classroom, smiling at the rows of desks and posters on the walls and nodded, "He's proud of you Harry, not just for this but for everything. I can feel it." He looked at his godson, "Knowing him he's running round the afterlife bragging to anyone who'll stand still long enough to hear." He squeezed Remus' hand back with a smile. He'd always miss James but his friend would kick him in the arse if he dwelled on it.

Harry flushed, "Thanks. Come on, I'll show you the dorms for each house." He lead them through the school, explaining things as he went, nearly got crushed by two old Marauders hugging him half to death when he pointed out the mural in the main gathering hall that held a fairytale of the Marauders and the two boys who'd stayed by a werewolf's side through the moons and how it inspired the school, and they were winding down the tour now. "Oh yeah, Ri you ready to check out the still in progress potions classroom?"

"Absolutely, can't wait to see what all the fuss is about." Orion tore his eyes away from the mural to smile at Harry. He knew of the Marauder story of course, how they had stuck up for and supported his Dad but it was a completely different thing to see it portrayed as a fairytale on a wall. It made Orion realize and appreciate just how much Sirius and James had done for Remus and how
alone his Dad would have been without them. "I hope your potions master won't mind us coming by, if he's anything like Uncle Sev we could end up on the cutting end of a very sharp tongue for intruding."

"Part of the reason I hired him is that, though he's stern and seems a bit cold at first, he doesn't actually mind intrusions like that. I didn't want the students to be terrified of asking a question you know?" He ruffled Orion's hair, "He might be a little grouchy if Alek's been by though." He lead them to the classroom near the exit to the Herbology greenhouses.

Orion pulled his head away and made sure his hair was secure in its short tail. "Watch it Scar, don't ruin the do, I want to make a good impression you know." He poked his brother in the side and then stopped in the doorway to a half furnished classroom. Even though it was a functional space it seemed lighter and more airy than the potions classroom back at Hogwarts. Uncle Sev would be jealous if he saw it.

There was a tall slim man, stocking the shelves and marking jars of ingredients in there and when he turned around even Orion had to admit that he was very, very pretty.

"Herr Potter, a pleasure to see you again." The man nodded at Harry. "Can I help you?"

Harry smiled and poked Orion further into the room, "Just giving a tour Professor Spath. My godfathers, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black and this," he pat Orion on the shoulder, "is the little brother I told you about when I hired you, the potions whiz."

Sirius' eyes went wide on sight of the dark haired, pale blue eyed man and he murmured to Remus, "Bloody hell Harry wasn't joking about how he looks."

Remus just shook his head in amusement and watched his son blush and squirm at Harry's praise.

"Not a whiz Sir, I've just had a very good teacher." Orion resisted the urge to poke Harry again with a sharp elbow.

"Ja, Herr Snape, a truly formidable potions master." Johann nodded and his pale eyes lit up with interest.

"Will you store the ingredients and cauldrons on different sides of the classroom like we do at Hogwarts?" Orion looked around the classroom curiously.

Johann eyed him. "Vhas do you think?"

"I think you should store them at the same side of the classroom, then the students can load the ingredients in the cauldron as they gather them and save time, plus the classroom won't be as cluttered and there will be less of students running back and forward from wall to wall." Orion quickly lost his shyness and started to discuss everything and nothing with the pretty professor.

Harry shook his head and went to poke Sirius in the side, "Quit staring."

"I can't help it, it's like a train wreck, you can't look away. I'm trying to figure out if it's natural or if he invested in s-mmmph," Sirius blinked innocent gray eyes at his mate's stern look.

"Behave! Don't be rude because you can't stand someone being prettier than you." Remus removed his hand from Sirius' mouth after another look. "Don't blink those innocent eyes at me, I know you." He motioned to his son chattering, arms waving wildly as he explained something. "Look at him Siri, he's really in his element here."
Sirius nodded, smiling at his son, "He slides back into his own skin when it comes to potions. It's good to see." It was a relief to see actually.

Johann listened to everything the young man had to say. He didn't necessarily agree with it all but the kid had some valid points. It was clear he'd been taught by a master. Then he remembered his manners and a small flush rose on his high cheekbones. "Where are my manners?" He walked over and bowed to Sirius and Remus. "I am Johann Spath, it is a pleasure meeting the men the school is named after."

Sirius dodged the elbow aimed for his ribs and inclined his head, offering a hand with a crooked grin, "Well two of them anyway. Nice to meet you Professor Spath."

Remus nodded and shook the professor's hand as well after Sirius.

Johann offered a rather lethal smile. "You have a very smart son."

"Sometimes yes, when he wants to be." Remus agreed and ignored the way his newly turned fourteen year old son stuck his tongue out at him. "As I said...When he wants to be."

Harry laughed at Orion, "He gets the brilliant from Remus, the occasional lack of it I lay at the dog door."

"Oh very funny cub, very funny." Sirius stuck his tongue out at Harry.

"And you just made my point for me."

The door opened again and in stepped Alek, who nodded at the others before frowning at the potion master, "Spath I thought you were going to line the sills with plants."

Harry rolled his eyes and went to murmur to Orion, "Enter argument one."

Johann stiffened and his pale blue eyes grew noticeably colder. "Plants ja, plants that could kill or heal you in the blink of an eye. You may be Headmaster of the school but not of me. I vork as I like." Basically Johann told Alek to stuff it, only a little more polite due to the company they had.

Orion knew it was wrong but he couldn't help but grin at the tension between the two men.

"You sealed the windows because of some rot about the air negatively affecting the brewing temperature, you won't bring in simple harmless plants, refuse a mural on the walls. You may work as you like but it won't be just you working in here," Alek's golden eyes flashed with temper, "The majority of the students coming here will have spent most of their lives in the wilderness, they need something to keep them from feeling contained. Make your personal office as cold and lifeless as you want but the classroom needs life."

"It is not lifeless!" Johann's voice grew tense with an edge to it. "Potions demands full concentration as you brew it, a single mistake could have horrid consequences. It is not about being contained but about keeping focus. Wölfe den in caves, waz is difference? Go bother the rest of the staff and leave my classroom to me."

"We're not just wolf we're human too and you know that." Alek snapped back, "Both sides of our nature want the familiar and not having it would be more distracting than a couple of plants!"

Sirius blew out a breath and leaned in to murmur to Remus, "Merlin the want between them is almost choking me and I don't have wolf senses."
Remus nodded almost invisibly and hid a smile as Spath bristled and said something else in protest. "I bet you that they're shagging like wolves by Halloween." He murmured back.

"Will the plants smell?" Orion suddenly interrupted. "Because if they do, I must agree with Professor Spath, they could be a distraction and confuse the scent of the potions, especially to sensitive wolf noses. There will be enough scents in here with the herbs and ingredients."

Alek froze and tilted his head before turning it to look at Orion, brow lifted in very slight reprimand at the interruption before his expression smoothed out in thoughtful consideration. "All plants have a scent to a wolf nose." It was a grudging concession, spoken with a small glare at Spath. He shifted and gave his attention to Remus' son, "So the way the room is now would be enjoyable for you?"

Orion bowed his head in apology for interrupting before he looked around the room carefully. "I am not sure I'm the right person to ask since I am used to working and living in dungeons but I don't think some warmer or softer colors would be wrong, something to smooth out the harshness of the stone walls needed for brewing properly. You are right that the students shouldn't feel trapped Sir. Also I would space out the work stations a little more, also to reduce the distraction of scents from each cauldron and to give the students more freedom to move. You don't want to keep a wolf cramped in and too close to each other, no matter how young they are."

Harry noticed the flash of consideration that crossed Spath's face and could have fallen to his knees and kissed Orion's feet. Now perhaps the two men would look past their irritation and actually listen. If not Orion would make a good mediator. He blinked and turned his head at the gurgle that came from Remus' direction, lips twitching, "Mini-Moony getting hungry there?"

A soft blush tinted Remus' scarred cheeks. "Seems that way yes. Not used to being this far from the kitchen for too long." Remus looked very much like his son as he squirmed in place, very much embarrassed to be the center of attention due to his loud stomach.

Harry chuckled, "Come on, I'll show you the lunch hall where we'll feed you while these three talk," he looked between Alek, Johann, and Orion, "and hammer out the classroom issue at last."

Sirius grinned, "Sounds good to me."

"Me too." Remus nodded and then looked over at his son who stood between the two tense teachers. "Be good Orion."

Orion rolled his eyes but nodded, walking over to Harry so he could whisper in his ear. "I don't think I'm the one who needs to be told to be good...If they start snogging in front of me, I'm out of here though."

Harry snickered and gave Orion a hug, whispering back, "I so owe you for this Ri. I was losing my mind trying to get them to stop snarling at each other over the room. If you and Moony are right about the whole sexual tension deal I'd hate to be round when they decorate their house."

Orion snorted. "I'd run the other way, fast and far." he hugged back and took a small step away. "Now go feed my Dad before he faints, he did a few days ago you know...Thought Sirius would have kittens when Dad just tipped over on the living room floor."

"Well he just dropped! What else was I supposed to do?" Sirius' cheeks flamed red.

Harry chuckled and ruffled Orion's hair, "Sometime very far into the future when you do the same with whoever you wind up with I am going to remind you that you said that pup." leaving Orion to
pat his hair down again he led the two old Marauders out of the classroom, "We've got house-elves, they'll be happy to fix something up."

Sirius grinned, "Does Hermione know about that?"

"They're paid, just like Dobby is. They see the pay as another service they're doing because I told them I'd get in trouble with my girl if I didn't pay them."

Remus chuckled. "Poor elves, I bet they were confused by that but they're nothing if not eager to please. Does Hermione really know the history of the house-elves servitude? Haven't you covered that in magical history?" He looked at Harry curiously as they walked down a cheery, warm hallway. More murals lining the wall, giving it a fairytale feel.

Harry gave him a 'look'. "You've lived through Binns' class right? I don't know what he went over with you but it's all goblin rebellions, vampire wars, and ogre revolts. Plus boring. The entire school considers that nap time as it is almost impossible to stay awake."

"Right...I managed to repress for a moment." Remus remembered Binns lectures from when he was in school even he, prefect as he had been had difficulties staying awake during those classes. "Well tell that brilliant girl of yours to look it up for herself then, if it's not in the Hogwarts library then I'm sure it's in your secret ones. If she reads about the house-elves history and their own choices she might understand better. They really aren't forced at all and very, very few are treated like Dobby was." His stomach grumbled again, making Remus blush.

"Alright you, lunch first then you can give me the short version." Harry waved them on into the lunch hall, "Since you know I'm not going to look it up when I know Hermione'll give me the full version later."

"She will do that won't she? In detail even." Remus smirked and hurried his steps a little though he didn't know where he was going. He really was rather hungry. "Do you think the elves can whip up pickled herring with mango? I'm really in the mood for that...Oooh maybe some muggle canned tomatoes as well, with vanilla ice cream."

Harry exchanged a disgusted look with Sirius but hid it from Remus, "I don't think that'll be a problem." He shook his head and called an elf to make the lunch requests. If nothing else it would give the elves a challenge.

Charlie stretched and rolled his shoulders. It was good being back on the Romanian reserve for the summer and it was good having Blaise with him for it too. His mate had been suspiciously busy the past two days since arriving though, making him curious. He wondered what the sneaky incubus had up his sleeve.

Blaise was aware that Charlie was wondering what he was up to but he didn't mind. It would only do his mate good to wonder, keep him on his toes. Blaise smiled as he mucked out the hatchlings paddock. He never would have thought he would shovel dragon manure out of his own free will and actually like it. His life certainly had changed after running into Charlie in the dungeons corridor but it was all changes for the better. Not only was Charlie his chosen mate, he was also the man Blaise loved and he wanted to do something to show Charlie just how much he cared.

Dragonhide boots rounded the corner and Charlie paused to study Blaise as he lifted and shoveled, walking closer to run a hand up his back, "Hey, it's almost time for dinner."
Blaise arched into Charlie's touch like a cat would and he very nearly purred. "I'm close to done here, I'll just finish up." He looked over his shoulder and gave his mate a slow smile. "Want to wait? It'll only be a minute."

Blaise wiped the sweat of his brow and really put his back into getting the paddock clean and ready. He hoped that Charlie would react well to what Blaise was planning. It was basically a seduction since they hadn't been fully intimate yet but it was more than that. Blaise wanted to soulbond with Charlie, truly become one with him but he wasn't really sure if that was what Charlie wanted and that made him jittery and nervous. An Incubus soulbonded through sex, that was the truth, Blaise was a sexual creature but Charlie had showed him that he could be more than that and Blaise treasured it so very much.

Charlie smiled back at him, "I don't mind waiting." Normally he'd have pitched in but this time he settled to lean against a stall post and watched Blaise with a half smile on his face. He liked watching Blaise, not just because he made a gorgeous picture, but he liked seeing all the different nuances that came out. Not to mention he enjoyed seeing his work ethic, something he knew had been absent to a degree in the other before last year.

If it had been something done to impress him Charlie would have been far from it but he knew it wasn't, that something had shifted in Blaise and it was a choice all his own for himself. That made him pleased and happy because it gave his little mate something to be proud of that had absolutely nothing to do with sex or good looks, giving him a sense of worth beyond being an incubus or Slytherin. Merlin he had it bad. Real bad. What had registered as a slow slide over the Christmas holidays had turned into a full blown, fall flat on your face, free fall through the air with hard impact into love.

He loved Blaise. Knew there was more yet to discover about him but he loved him and that was set in stone.

Hurrying to finish mucking out the paddock, Blaise straightened his back and looked at the clean area with pride. It didn't matter that the hatchlings would put it in the same state rather quickly again. For now it was clean and the small hatchlings could tumble and play as they wanted to. "Do I have time to wash up some? I don't want to go to supper smelling like the shite I've been shoveling." He raised his arm and sniffed gingerly, wrinkling his nose at the odour that met him. He had to laugh, a brief, delighted rumble at the rather adorable expression, then reached out to tuck a bit of hair that had escaped the perfect order Blaise had put it in, back behind a mocha ear. "Not a problem. I came to get you just a bit early since I know you like to be squeaky clean at the table."

"You know me so well." Blaise beamed at the redhead walking next to him. "Food is pleasure, it's art and if I am not fresh and clean than I can't enjoy my food the way it deserves to be enjoyed." Blaise was Italian, food was almost as important and as good as sex to him. "Oh completely different topic but have you heard anything about Icy? Did he like his girl? Is he happy?"

"Well," Charlie tilted his head, "he found a lady that caught his eye. She's a bit more skeptical but then Icy's a friendly dragon and being so friendly can sometimes be seen as a weakness among dragonkind. So he's courting her, trying to prove he'd be a good mate. Only issue is that they're safe and protected in the reserve so he can't prove to her that he can be as lethal to a threat as he is friendly. The handlers there keep trying to coax him to another girl but he's not having it in his quiet, ignore you til you bugger off sort of way."

Blaise grinned. "That's our boy. Of course he shouldn't settle for anything but his heart's desire and if she can't see what an utter catch he is then it is her loss." He put his nose in the air, wishing he
could really jump to the old dragon's defense in front of his chosen lady. Icy had made Charlie and Blaise really talk for the first time and Blaise thought that it was in that little cave, closed in by a dragon butt that he had first fallen in love, not just having a bond with his mate but really falling in love with the amazing man that Charlie was. "I miss him here even though I only met him that one time."

"I do too. Icy's a rare dragon and we all miss him but who knows, when the lass finally sees that he's not going anywhere she might just decide to head south and settle here. There's no telling. I think she'll probably become a believer in Icy the first time another male tries to make a bully move on her. Icy's big for his species and he knows how to use his size in a fight."

"He's cracking. I have faith in him." Blaise and Charlie made it to Charlie's small hut and Blaise chucked both trousers and shirt the moment he'd stepped over the threshold, moving into the small bathroom and the water basin there so he could wash up for supper.

Charlie blew out a short breath at the exposure of all that gorgeous coffee colored skin even as he picked up the clothing Blaise had let drop and dropped it in the hamper before going to grab a clean set from the wardrobe. His mate organized his clothes like most women organized jewelry, in matching sets and woe betide anyone who disturbed the balance.

He grabbed a simple shirt and trousers, pale blue and black respectively, and laid it out on the back of the couch before narrowing his eyes at an odd chirp. He looked up and cursed when he saw a feathered menace in his rafters looking down at him with evil glee. "Blaise stay in the bathroom." He quickly used his wand to seal all the exits, known and unknown, to the hut then swung up into the rafters to stalk the panther sized bird that looked like a cross between a crow, a vulture, and a snake.

"What? Why?" Of course Blaise didn't stay in the bathroom, when had he ever done was he was told? Especially when he heard his mate sound both tense and worried. He stalked out into the living area of the hut wearing only his underwear, skin still damp from him washing up. Not seeing anyone he finally looked up and saw both his mate and a creature he'd never even heard of before. "What in the bloody fuck is that?" He took in the long neck and sharp beak and shuddered. "What are you doing? Can't we hex it?"

The creature made what sounded like a hungry shriek and Charlie cursed, leaping as it made to dive at Blaise. He caught it round the body and crashed down onto the floor along with it. Wings flapping and large talons scrabbling to claw him the creature hissed and wrestled to get free but Charlie was having none of it.

Normally he'd have just transfigured a chain and bound it then taken it to a cage to be transported very, very far away from the reserve but it had caught the scent of a magical humanoid and prey and would return no matter how far away it was sent. He dodged a slashing peck and bared his teeth as one talon raked over his thigh, cursing that he'd not worn his leathers today.

He was vaguely aware of some of the sturdy furniture breaking as he tried to get a grip on the creature but his main focus was keeping it away from Blaise. He managed to grab hold of the sharp black beak and roll over so he stood on its chest as he gave a mighty pull and twist, a sickening crack echoing through the hut before it went limp. He clambered off it, canceled the sealing spell and sat on the floor, arms hanging over his knees as he caught his breath. "Blackfeather, scaled armor under the feathers."

Blaise looked from the dead, feathered creature to Charlie and back again. Dark eyes wide. "Blackfeather? I've never heard of one before, what was it doing in here?" Blaise was still a little wild eyed as he knelt in front Charlie, making a worried sound at the back of his throat at the blood
seeping through his mate's trousers. "You're hurt." He petted Charlie's thigh carefully. "Off with your trousers so I can have a look."

Charlie looked at the three talon gashes on his thigh and got to his feet, testing with a grunt. It hurt but he'd been injured enough to recognize that it hadn't gone too deep, not into the muscle, so he shucked his trousers and moved to sit on the couch, "This is definitely not how I imagined dropping trou around you for the first time."

He inspected his arms and hands, noting various other small nicks and scratches and there was a line of fire over his cheek so he imagined something had been hurt there too. "Blackfeathers usually keep away from people so you wouldn't have heard of them. The only ones who see them with any regularity are people on dragon reserves. Nasty little bastards raid the dragon nests for the eggs and hatchlings, they'll sneak into a hut and hide out during the day then usually sneak off before the handler comes back."

"Horrible creatures." Blaise glared at the dead bird creature before getting off the floor to get his wand and then hurrying back to kneel in front of Charlie again. "I do understand that all beings have to eat and survive but from what I hear they seem so...devious. I've never liked praying on the weak, whether it's creatures or wizards." He looked up into Charlie's eyes, before reaching up to cup his scratched cheek. "Do you trust me? I'm rather good at healing charms and I hate seeing you hurt."

He leaned into that hand, "Of course I trust you. Have at it." He shifted to let Blaise at his thigh more easily, "They got the taste for dragon eggs and hatchlings when they used to live with Shadow Dragons, in the dark forests or caves where there's no light. Nature can be cruel and Shadow Dragons are harsh. If an egg doesn't hatch soon enough they'll discard it and if one of the hatchlings is the runt, it'll be kicked out of the creche, the Blackfeathers would pick them off because they have a taste for magical flesh. They used to prey on hags, vampires, the occasional werewolf during the full moon, other magical beings but find it easier to sneak about the reserves."

"That's precisely what I don't like, taking the easy way. Of course it's the nature of all creatures to do so but that doesn't mean I have to like it." Blaise frowned in concentration as he slowly ran his wand over the three talon marks on Charlie's thigh before moving on to his cheek and then the smaller cuts and scratches. "There, almost as good as new and bloody gorgeous." He leaned down and pressed a kiss to the newly healed skin on Charlie's leg. "What are we going to do with that?" Blaise motioned to the Blackfeather carcass.

"Tell Yuri about it. He'll arrange for it to be sold off for potion parts. We need to do that now actually because where there's one, others tend to follow." He got up, stroking his hand over Blaise's cheek, then donning his trousers, only casting a cleaning charm to get rid of the blood. He'd fix the tears later.

Blaise gave the torn trousers a look but he didn't say anything about it as he found the clothes Charlie had laid out for him and slid into them, straightening out the blue shirt so it sat perfectly on his slim frame. He wouldn't let himself get hung up on a torn pair of trousers, better they had tears in them than Charlie. "Shall we then? I do not fancy meeting more of these Blackfeathers. It wanted to eat me right? Because I'm not completely human?"

Charlie nodded, drawing Blaise into his side, more for his comfort than Blaise's, as they walked out, "Yes. That's why I killed it instead of capturing it and having it shipped off. It would have come back or tried to track you down at Hogwarts."

"Well at least they are tenacious then." Blaise smiled but a shudder went through him at the thought of a creature like that stalking him, wanting him for dinner. "This was not how I had
planned this evening out." Blaise took a breath of fresh air as they walked the path to find Yuri. After what had happened it looked as if his seduction and bonding would have to wait, Blaise wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"Ah you have been up to something then. I thought so." Charlie ran his hand up and down Blaise's arm, "What plans did you have?"

Blaise shrugged. "Doesn't matter, not a fitting evening for them. It'll have to be another time instead." He smiled up at his mate and leaned into his touch.

Charlie quirked a brow, "You're going to get me curious here. A curious Weasley is not a good thing. We get into all kinds of trouble."

"You go looking for trouble is more like it...I'm starting to get a handle on you Weasleys by now." Blaise met Charlie's eyes with a raised brow of his own. "It's really not important, mood went away with feathers and talons and blood."

"Yet another reason to dislike those bloody menaces." He caught sight of Yuri and gave a whistle, catching his attention.

The supervisor was over to them in a second after glancing at Charlie, "What happened to you? Wrestle with one of the juveniles?"

"Blackfeather," Charlie had to smile at the string of invectives Yuri immediately gave out. "Where is it?"

"My hut, it's dead but you know how they like to stick together."

Yuri nodded, "Take your lad to the dinner hall and get some food, you look like hell. I'll get the rest on shift together for searches and get the carcass out of your hut."

"Like hell? And I thought I fixed you up good, what a blow to my ego." Blaise nodded at Yuri as he spoke, he had nothing but respect for the older man, despite or maybe because of the man's occasionally very dirty mouth. "I can find my own way to the dinner hall if you want to join any search." He stroked his fingers over Charlie's.

Charlie shook his head, "No. I wouldn't be any good after that first one. I'm fagged. Most spells just bounce off them so we have to catch them without magic."

"Then I won't let you off my leash and you are hereby forced to dine with me." Blaise grinned at his mate though his eyes stayed worried. "And you old man, be careful, somehow I've gotten used to your brand of ugly, even though you still dress like a sack of potatoes." He looked almost challenging at Yuri.

"Well we can't all be little pretty boy fashion plates like you lad. It's just catch and ship off, nothing as dangerous as dealing with our Fireball."

Charlie watched Yuri dash off with a head shake, "He'll be fine Blaise. He's caught more Blackfeathers than he has girls."

"That I can believe...What girl would want him?" Blaise smiled to show he he was joking before he tangled his fingers with Charlie's and started to pull him toward the dining hall. Despite almost being dinner himself, Blaise was hungry.
Charlie laughed and squeezed Blaise's hand, happily letting him pull him to dinner. After that fight with the Blackfeather he could have eaten an Abraxan.
Chapter 51

In a dank cave, among the charred remains of thousands of Inferi, an old bearded man panted and sweated through the pain of an agonizing poison. He'd had the foresight to bring a bezoar with him as well as a vial of Fawkes' tears to heal anything life threatening so he would live but for the next few hours he would be in agony. He lay staring at the stone ceiling of the cavern, the closed locket clutched in his hand and thought of his next move once he left here.

He had no access to basilisk venom, nor to Gryffindor's sword which had absorbed the venom of Slytherin's basilisk venom so the only option to destroy the locket was Fiendfyre but he'd just used that very same spell to destroy the Inferi and had nearly lost control of it as his magic had run out. Whatever had happened the previous summer to drain his reserves and break the siphon bind he'd placed on Harry had shown how badly it affected his magic here.

He couldn't risk using such a powerful spell again, not until he could find a way to bolster his reserves. There was no way for him to place another siphon bind on anyone. Those who had enough power that he could drain the excess for himself without them being any the wiser were all adults and would not accept such a ritual and there were no children who fit the bill either, none that he could get access to anyway. Replacing the one on Harry was out of the question as he'd overplayed his hand and frightened the boy. Frightened the boy and nearly gotten himself arrested.

It had been foolish to arrange that meeting in the Astronomy Tower rather than his office. He closed his eyes against the pounding in his temple. He couldn't quite recall why he had done so either. He knew that he'd had a good reason for choosing that location but for the life of him he could not recall it. That was happening more and more lately, his reasons and reasoning slipping away like sand through an hourglass. He'd been too eager, too desperate. He could feel Death slipping closer to him and he wanted to secure his name in the people's minds, in the very lore of Albion as Merlin had before the cold specter took him. It had made him sloppy.

No more. He'd have to tread carefully now. First was to get back into Harry's good graces. Attempting to play the caring grandfather sort would not work now because Harry no longer needed that. He had the Weasleys and others as his support network. Nor would Harry respond to his knowledge or suggestions for fighting the dark, not after his bungling of the information of the Horcruxes.

No, he needed to convince Harry first that he was regretful for pressuring him then slowly rebuild trust. With that trust Harry would come to him again for advice. He was, after all, the only wizard Tom had ever feared and had been fighting him long before others had recognized the threat. Only he knew that he had been the one to push the boy that had been Tom Riddle the rest of the way into the darkness.

He could not risk sending an owl or even Fawkes to Harry with a message, it could be tracked too easily back to where he was hidden. He used a communication mirror to hold meetings with the Order these days but the Order would be how he contacted Harry. He would pass the message on to young Nymphadora and she could deliver it to Harry. From what he'd gathered the young woman had earned a measure of Harry's trust which would help greatly.

Kingsley looked up as Tonks came in, a troubled look on her face and sighed, "What did you break this time?" She was an excellent Auror but when not on assignment she was horribly clumsy.
"What? Oh nothing, except the kettle in the break room but that was not my fault. Hannover tripped me, I'll swear to that under Veritaserum." Tonks didn't lose her troubled expression as she made it through the office gingerly, trying her best not to trip or pull something down as she made it to dest and sunk down on the chair opposite to Kingsley. She looked down at the cluttered desk and her hair turned from pink to a deep, pensive navy blue.

"I've got a bit of a problem Kings. Dumbledore contacted me, I thought it was for the Order but it wasn't. He wants me to deliver a message to Harry Potter from him and I'm not sure what to do." She looked at the older Auror, Kingsley Shacklebolt being someone she trusted completely, she put her life in his hands daily when they were out on missions together.

Kingsley set his quill back in the inkwell and met her gaze. Since responding to the emergency out at Ottery St. Catchpole they'd been working to prove or disprove their theory that Dumbledore was the one who'd placed the bind on Potter's magic. The best way to do that was to get into a position of trust with the old man and then either weedle it out of him subtly or get permission for a clandestine veritaserum questioning. Either way would work but they had to actually get close to the old fossil first. "Dictated or did he send you an actual letter to give to Mr. Potter?"

"Dictated, through the Order mirror. The old coot is as paranoid as they come and too clever to leave any kind of written evidence behind, even if it is only a message for Mr. Potter." Tonks looked at Kingsley with solemn eyes. "What should I do? If Dumbledore is the one who put the bind on Potter, I can't practically deliver the boy to him and if he's not, if this is all a conspiracy against him then I should tell Potter shouldn't I?" She let out a huge sigh and pulled on her dark blue hair. "I've only met Potter twice but I already care about him...Bloody hell I just don't know what to do."

He drummed his fingers lightly on the desktop, "I believe, that you should deliver the message to Mr. Potter with an addendum of your own not to trust the message as Dumbledore is still wanted for his attempt at instructing Mr. Potter about Horcruxes and is under suspicions of other charges."

She nodded. "It just feels wrong you know, Potter is not yet sixteen. Even with warnings and suspicion I feel it's wrong he should be burdened with it at all. The boy can't help the name he was born under and that a maniac chose to do what he did to the Potter family. I've always been taught that the name you carry doesn't mean a thing." She knew Kingsley was right but since that first meeting in the woods almost a year ago she'd felt this strange urge to protect Harry Potter.

Kingsley gave a soft snort, "He's a not yet sixteen year old who lead a pack of teenagers past Ministry wards and defenses into the most heavily guarded department in the building to get a prophecy Voldemort wanted. Then he proceeded to lead them through a battle against hardened Death Eaters from the Dark Lord's innermost circle and even before we arrived and more, they were winning. Without backup they'd all have been much more badly injured but they still would have won.

A not quite sixteen year old who dueled Bellatrix Lestrange in a magical contest, won, used an obscure spell to turn her into a squib, and claimed right of conquest. That boy has more power in his little pinky than Dumbledore dreams of having, has the darkest wizard since Mordred after him, survived the pink toading toad for a school year, and if he doesn't know more than he lets on I'll eat Dawlish's octopus stew."

"Oh please don't...I've just trained you to put up with me, I don't want another partner." Tonks’ smile was sly and she stretched her legs out underneath the desk. "I know you're right and meeting Potter, the power and magic almost crackles around him but he is still just a boy. A boy who hasn't asked to be part of any of this." She looked up at Kingsley. "What is Voldemort trying to achieve? I
mean really, deep down? After all that's happened he must know his dream of world domination and pureblood supremacy can never really be?"

"Since when do I speak insane megalomaniac? Truth be told I don't think he's stable, not even in the evil way he was during the first war." He plucked his quill up again and continued filling out paperwork. "If it is true that he created multiple Horcruxes, and that at least one of them was destroyed previously, then he's most assuredly not stable. And that makes him more dangerous than ever before."

Tonks nodded. "He is dangerous, more so than I think people realize. And now that he's lost his most precious Death Eaters he doesn't have very much left to lose." She shook her head, feeling very morose all of a sudden. "I will do as you advise and give Potter the message and I will warn him also. I know we don't have all the facts but something seems off with Albus Dumbledore." Her hair slowly turned a deep, dark purple instead of blue, bringing a little more color to her once again.

"Very true. Eventually the truth will out, it always does in the end." He pointed the quill at her then at her desk, where a cubit high stack of papers sat. "Now stop stalling and do your paperwork. It's not going to just disappear and I am not filling out your reports for you."

"Not even if I flutter my lashes and beg pretty, pretty please?" She turned her lashes long and shiny and blinked them in Kingsley's direction. At his utter ignorance of her pleading she sighed and reached for the paperwork and the quill, managing to nudge the ink so it fell and ran out all over the documents. "...Ooops."

Kingsley just shook his head, "You're hopeless."

----------------------------------------------

Harry peered over Molly's shoulder and blinked at the ever growing guest list for his birthday party she was making. He'd just finished helping Ron clean up after he'd tripped over a loose stone in the path from the outhouse while cleaning it out. He didn't have the chores as punishment but he helped with them anyway. He'd been the one to lead them into trouble so it was only right he share the load of the consequences. Not to mention Molly would have a fit if Ron came in smelling like a sewer. "Is there going to be room for everyone on that list?"

"Hm?" Molly looked up from the list and turned so she could face Harry. "Oh Harry, of course there will be room...We're magic. We'll make all the room we need and you turn sixteen, it's a very big deal and we should celebrate." She beamed at him and reached out to smooth his impossible hair. "Is there anyone I've forgotten? Someone you want to add, it's your party after all."

He scanned the list, leaning into the touch absently. He still didn't get all the fuss over his birthday, it was a day like any other for him or had been for years. The only thing different had ever been blowing the candles out on an imaginary cake. Still it made Mrs. Weasley happy to have a fuss and he'd have his friends there so it was fine with him. He hummed, "Wel-" a knock on the bottom half of the stable door to the kitchen had his head coming up and he blinked at the brightly colored hair of the woman leaning in over it. "Please tell me I'm not getting arrested this long after the fact."

"Well we can be slow at times but not that slow I hope." Tonks smiled at him and beamed at Molly, nodding her hellos. "No, no arrest today, I do need to speak with you though Harry, if you have the time."

Molly furrowed her brows, she liked Tonks, remembering her from when Bill and Charlie was at school but the girl was still an Auror and Molly couldn't understand what they needed to talk to
Harry about. "Does he need me or Arthur with him? He is a minor and you can't ask him questions without either of us there."

"I promise it's nothing like that and Harry is free to tell you want he wants later on. I just have a message to deliver." Tonks looked completely serious for once.

Harry's brows rose and he studied her carefully before nodding and squeezing Molly's shoulder, "Alright then we can talk out in the garden." That would let Mrs. Weasley watch them through the window so she wouldn't worry too badly.

Molly let her hand drop from Harry's hair and rubbed his neck gently. "I'll stay here and I'm only a holler away Harry. Call me if you need me." She sent the young Auror another look, not feeling reassured at how apologetic Tonks looked.

"The garden will be fine." Tonks nodded and moved away from the door so Harry could step outside. She let Potter lead the way until they stood in the garden, within view from the kitchen window. "I apologize just showing up like this, I promise it won't take too long."

He shook his head, "It's fine. You don't seem like the sort to just pop in unannounced and all serious if it wasn't something important. What did you need to talk to me about?"

Tonks looked around the garden at the glittering pond and blooming flowers, it was a very nice and restful garden, her mother would love it. "Albus Dumbledore contacted me through the communication mirror the Order of the Phoenix uses. He wants me to give you a message. That he's been set up and that he's sorry for scaring you. Also he said something about keeping the locket safe for you. I hope you understand that because I don't."

She looked into his eyes. "Dumbledore obviously wants to meet with you. We're still investigating him but my personal advice to you is to be cautious and not meet with him alone." That wasn't exactly what she was supposed to say but Tonks couldn't help it, something about the old man rubbed her the wrong way.

Brilliant green eyes narrowed at the message and mention of the locket. There was no possible way Dumbledore could have the locket. He'd not only left it in the Chamber library but he'd charmed the box to only open on password, a parseltongue password a great deal more complicated than 'open'. That meant the old man had a replica, one he likely thought was the real thing, and brought up a whole different set of questions. The apology set his teeth on edge too, knowing what he did of the old man and more knowing exactly what he'd tried to convince him of.

He studied Tonks, "I've a reply for him but I won't be using you as the middle woman. Hedwig can find anyone and I do mean anyone, anywhere." He tapped his hand on his thigh in consideration, "He may want to meet with me but it's not happening. Can I trust you Tonks?" He met her eyes, his own sharp and knowing, "Not only with my safety and well being but with the lives of those I love? I'm not too sure about Shacklebolt but there's something about you that I want to trust so I need to know if I can."

Tonks didn't respond right away, she wanted to show Harry the respect of really thinking about the answer. "I'm an Auror Harry and I believe in what I do, believe that I'm doing something to change things for the better, something that matters. I believe in doing the right thing more though, regardless of whether it is done by the rules or not."

She met his eyes. "Yes Harry, you can trust me. I promise I will help you any way I can and though I am clumsy I do know how to keep a secret. I don't know if you know but I am both Sirius' and Draco's cousin...All the old families are interbred one way or another. I knew all along that Sirius
was with Remus Lupin since his breakout but I would never turn him in since I never believed in his guilt to begin with."

He measured her, the honesty in her eyes, remembered the way she'd focused more on Umbridge's illegal activities, sanctioned by Fudge, than she had on the toad's death, and nodded slowly. "Alright. I've known for a while just how rotten Dumbledore is, and I am talking to the core. Voldemort was pushed over the edge by his subtle manipulations that brought Tom Riddle to the place where his mother had grown up, and sent him to his muggle father's home, where Riddle killed his father and paternal grandparents in a fit of rage, created his first Horcrux, and framed his maternal uncle for the deed.

"Dumbledore took a boy who was walking the edge between dark and light and pushed and nudged him until he fell over and became a dark wizard. I'm of the belief that the old man is after stamping himself as a great hero wizard the likes of Merlin onto the people's minds so he created an opponent, another Dark Lord to defeat. After all even Merlin never defeated two Dark Lords in his lifetime so it would be a feat remembered by the magical world for eternity."

He moved to sit on one of the benches by the koi pond with a sigh, "But he couldn't do it. Tom's too strong and Dumbledore too old."

She hissed out a sharp breath and dropped to the ground right where she stood, crossing her legs underneath her on the soft grass. "I can't lie, I've had my suspicions, something have seemed wrong and false about the old man for quite some time but I didn't want to believe it. A part of me still doesn't. Talk about Hubris...Merlin is remembered not for defeating dark wizards and witches but for helping a king unite Albion, make magic welcome and make things better for the people. That was why he was great and Dumbledore hasn't got a shot in hell at becoming anything like him."

She looked over where Harry sat. "He needs you doesn't he? He needs you to take down Voldemort since he can't but he wants the glory for the deed. What an arsewart!" Anger turned her hair and eyes a deep crimson red.

Harry couldn't help it, he laughed, bringing up a knee to rest his cheek on it while he grinned at her, "I really like you Tonks, you are definitely my kind of people. But oh no it's a little bit more convoluted. I mean if I took Voldemort down I'd be the hero," he grimaced at that, "and that's not what the arsewart wants. I'm pretty sure he's the one who bound my magic, can't prove it of course, so that I wouldn't be quite able to take Voldemort all the way down. Just wear him out for Dumbledore before I die so the old man could swoop in, kill him, and get the eternal glory.

"I'm just his little weapon to take out the Horcruxes, battle Tom to a standstill then conveniently die. That's what he sees people as, tools and weapons. Orion, you'll remember him as the cute little charmer who was with me after Umbridge kicked it, is also in danger from the old bastard."

"What? How do you mean? In danger?" Tonks would of course care about anyone in danger from the manipulative old buzzard but this was different. "Orion is family, he's Sirius' boy." Her hair turned even darker. "I wish we could do something worse than arrest him and charge him for his crimes. I actually wish there was a way to erase him completely from people's memories. Make him forgotten and insignificant."

She grew silent as she stewed in anger. "I can't believe I'm going to say this but apparently I am...Have you considered to speak with Grindelwald? The first 'Dark Lord' that Dumbledore defeated. He is still alive you know and from the rumors flying around he and Dumbledore were lovers. I don't think anyone, not even Aberforth knows more about Dumbledore than Gellert Grindelwald."
"I've thought about it yeah but is he even allowed visitors in that prison he's in? If he is then yeah, I definitely want to have a talk with him, he might know how the old man condensed the ritual he used on Orion."

Harry sighed, "The old arsewart bound Orion's life to his whim, that's the short version, he used a ritual called Vitae Fit Mea that he somehow condensed so that all he needed was a goblet of ritual potion and a drop of Orion's blood, with a single thought he could kill Orion. That's how he kept Remus from pressing for Sirius to at least have a trial and how he kept him from getting me away from the Dursleys."

"He actually tied an infant's life force to himself to keep Remus from causing trouble to his plans? That is beyond cruel, imagine the planning and preparation going in to something like that. It makes me feel sick."

Tonks leaned her chin in her hand. "I've never heard of the ritual itself but that doesn't surprise me, that is dark arts at its worth, not exactly something they teach at Auror training. Every ritual has a counter ritual though, we only need to find it...Not that it will be that easy. And regarding your former question. No, Grindelwald isn't usually allowed visitors, luckily you know this brilliant, awesome and beautiful Auror at the Ministry of Magic that is willing to write you out a pass, allowing you to see him."

Harry grinned wider, "I knew you were good people. Oh um," he fiddled with a loose string on the hem of his trousers, "Sirius did tell me about how you're related and that your mother is Bellatrix's sister. Well that spell I used on Bellatrix? It translates as power to the worth and since magical power tends to follow bloodlines when it can I think your Mum got half or maybe a quarter, not sure since both Narcissa and Malfoy...er Draco, sort of got some of Bellatrix's magic. Sorry?"

"Ah, that explains it." Tonks looked wry. "Mum was doing a simple house cleaning spell just the day after the whole thing with Bellatrix happened and she blew up Dad's telly...It was hilarious to see, she acted like me." She gave a low chuckle. "Don't say sorry though, you have absolutely nothing to apologize for. Bellatrix Lestrange was a plague on the whole of the wizarding world and you stopped her. I know Mum knew her differently once but all my life she's been nothing but a monster. Tried to drown me in the bathtub when I was a baby...Saying she tried to save Mum from being related to unclean blood."

Harry made a growl, "Definitely better she's a squib. I was apologizing for your Mum, and maybe you I don't know for sure, getting some of her magic. Personally it would freak me out."

"I don't really see how, not with the magic already crackling around you. I haven't noticed a boost but then again...I manage to miss most things that are about me and Mum is back to normal again...I think you get used to it, like you get used to muscles if you work out. Bellatrix might be evil and insane but her magic isn't. Magic is magic, not good or evil, it's all about intent." Tonks looked thoughtful.

"Point. Anyway, I can send you a copy of a journal I've been putting together with all the things that have happened and what I know about Dumbledore and his psychosis," he tilted his head a bit and studied her again.

"That would be appreciated, I'll even try not to incendio it out of anger as I read." She pulled at some grass underneath her fingers and looked up at Harry. "What? Do I have something on my face?" She turned her nose and mouth into a huge duck beak and crossed her eyes as she looked down at it.

He blinked, "Well you do now. I'll have to ask you how you do that without a wand but first I was
wondering if you wanted to come to the insanity that's turning out to be my sixteenth birthday party."

She made the beak disappear and smiled at him. "I never turn down a chance to party so I'd be happy to come. I'll give me a chance to see red pest one and two again...Gosh...I had such a crush on Bill Weasley back in school, before I realized his ego was as large as the Hogwarts grounds. Still, it was never boring with he and Charlie around."

Harry laughed, "He's still got the ego but you ought to see the way it nosedives when he's around Fleur." He nodded up at a high window on one of the Burrow's upper floors where a beautiful blond was watching them. He waved at Fleur and received one in return. "She's got him so wrapped around her pinky finger he can't tell which way is up. It's sort of cute."

Tonks chuckled. "I'm sure it is, it's good though. Bill needs someone that turns his head around and is strong enough to be her own woman around Bill." She followed Harry's gaze and looked at the blonde girl. "Doesn't hurt that she's brilliantly beautiful either...Still a strong spirit is worth more in the long run and from what I've heard about Fleur Delacour she possesses both." She grinned. "Every Weasley child except for Charlie seems to have gone for a blond...Maybe they do have more fun." She shook her head and her hair turned platinum blonde and with her natural gray eyes, she looked uncannily like Draco.

He blinked then snickered, "Oh that's almost scary. How do you do that by the way?"

She shrugged. "I don't really know, I've always done it, since the day I was born. It's no different than flexing a finger or even breathing to me. I'm a Metamorphagus, it's a part of me and I have no idea how to not be different."

"That is really, really cool. Must come in handy for undercover missions and such. The pink's the best look for you though I've gotta say, matches your personality." He gave her a smile.

Grinning back she turned her hair back to its usual blinding pink. "I do rather like the pink myself and yes, it does come in handy for undercover work and I would never want to be without my ability. It can be hard though at times, not knowing if someone likes me for me or for the ones I can turn into."

Tonks shrugged again and looked toward the burrow, noticing Molly. "Oh, I'd better go, Mrs. Weasley is starting to wave the wooden spoons around, getting ready to get out here and protect you." She got off the grass. "I'll get you that prison pass as soon as I can and I'll be happy to come to your party...Is it on your actual birthday? Last of July right?"

He nodded, "It is. Don't worry you'll get the invitation," he stood up with a grin and offered his hand to shake, "and thanks. Fair warning, Ginny originally suggested a Polyjuice party but it's been changed to a masquerade. And Tonks? Any berk who doesn't like you just the way you are needs a kick in the bollocks."

Giving him a small smile, Tonks leaned in and hugged him instead of shaking his hand. "Your lady is a very lucky girl Harry, had you been a few years older or at least legal I might have given her a run for her money." She let him go and ruffled his hair. "And a costume party huh...I'll bet you I'll win, who knows...Maybe I'll show up as a man, it's been a while since I had a penis." Tonks laughed heartily at Harry's expression. "See you around Harry Potter, take care." There was the distinct pop of disapparation and she was gone.

He out and out laughed then trotted back over to where Mrs. Weasley was standing, "Her, absolutely put her on the guest list and since this is going to be a blowout, might as well invite all
the staff from Marauders." His grin stretched from ear to ear.

Molly relaxed, seeing Harry smile like that meant that whatever Tonks had been here to say couldn't have been too bad. She loved to see Harry smile and she would bend over backwards to make sure he could keep doing it. "Anything you want Harry, anything you want." Putting down the large wooden spoon on the counter, Molly picked up her quill and added the names to the guest list.

He sat down next to her, "Thanks. You wanted fair warning about our hunt for Voldemort's Horcruxes. I think just after Hermione comes to the Burrow is when we want to go get one of them, it's the only one that's not in a secure place yet. Two are already in Hogwarts and one is in Gringotts so those are the easy ones. This one's in Little Hangleton. We um, might extend the trip too, maybe..."

"You should, you should go visit them. You're already close if you're in Little Hangleton." Molly wasn't very happy that her babies would go out and hunt for those dark and evil things but she knew there wasn't a way to stop them and she preferred knowing when and where they left instead of them sneaking off. "I will be on your backs about being careful...More the closer you come to leaving. If I could I would tie myself to your back and come with you to protect you." She walked over and hugged him tightly.

He hugged her back, "I know, and I wouldn't mind it really. We might wind up making a trip to Germany a bit before my birthday. If we do, want to come with so we can nip by Romania and pester Charlie?"

Molly laughed warmly. "Germany and Romania aren't exactly close to each other but yes, I would love to come with and see Charlie, pester both him and his little mate. I really am insisting on a proper wedding there as soon as the Zabini boy turns seventeen. I only hope there won't be any babies until the boy is out of school. Even with as much as I want to be a Grandmother."

Molly had had her reservations about Charlie and Blaise. The age gap and not knowing if it was only Blaise's blood that called him to her son. After Christmas though she had seen how much both of them cared for each other and as long as Blaise Zabini made her son happy then she was happy too.

Harry laughed, "I don't think there will be any grandbabies coming from Charlie just yet. Bill and Fleur on the other hand," he grinned, "With the way they nearly devour each other with their eyes, I give it maybe two months at the most after they're married before they announce another Weasley on the way."

"You may be right about that." Molly nodded. "Marriage first though I hope and I do wish they have it here and not in France, a wedding is such fun to plan." Fleur was a wonderful girl and Molly had come to adopt her into her ever growing brood of 'babies'. The veela blooded girl was clearly as smitten with Bill as her son was with her and just from the way they looked at each other, Molly could tell that their love was the real thing, that it would last a lifetime. The they looked at one another was the same way she and Arthur still looked at each other. "Oh I just got an owl this morning that Percy is coming home for your birthday, it will be so nice seeing him again."

"Yeah it will. I hope France has done him good, let him stretch his wings and do a little flying. " He took one of the napkins on the table and began absently folding it, "Tonks delivered a message and tacked a warning onto it for me. Dumbledore contacted her through the mirror he talks to the Order with, dictated a message of apology for 'scaring' me and that he'd keep the locket safe for me."

He snorted, "I don't know what locket he's got or where he got it but it's not the real one. Tonks
warned me not to meet with Dumbledore unless I’ve got backup, not that I ever had plans to do that in the first place, I'd rather eat Bill's cooking. I like Tonks, she's an Auror but she's not mired in the 'what the Ministry says always goes even if it's wrong' blind following the leader twaddle."

Molly hummed. "I rather like her too and I am glad I won't have to stop because she's harassing you in a Ministry capacity." She gave Harry a smile. "I knew her Dad in school, Ted Tonks was a lot of fun to be around and he was always a sweetheart. I was surprised when he got together with Andromeda Black, he was so warm and open and she was...Well she was a Black sister, much the opposite of him.

“No one really thought it would last, they thought Andromeda was only rebelling against her family but she gave up everything for him. From what I know she hasn't spoken to either of her sisters in almost thirty years. I haven't asked Narcissa about it, don't want to tear open old wounds but I find it sad. Narcissa could use a sister now, taking care of that huge Mansion and all the Malfoy business all alone while Draco is in school still."

Harry nodded, "Maybe we could use my party to get them in the same room. Family's important plus Malfoy and his Mum can always use a little color in their lives and it'd be interesting to see them with Tonks. I'd call her by her first name but she'd probably feel the disturbance in the Force and come to turn me into a mouse or something."

"Yes, I wouldn't put it past her. Really though, I can't understand what Andromeda and Ted were thinking, Nymphadora...It is cruel to a child, naming them that.” Molly shook her head. "And I think using your party as a chance to bring them together is a wonderful idea, there will be lots of people around and should the reunion not go well it will not be as awkward as if they were the only ones meeting.

"Sounds good to me," he shifted and kissed her cheek, giving her a hug, "I'm going up to chip away at a bit more of my homework."

"You do that, if you can then make sure that Ron at least opens his book instead of just sitting at his window and mooning at the hill and the one who lives beyond it." Molly hugged Harry back with a smile. "I'll just be down here, planning away." Her beaming expression made sure that she didn't mind the planning at all, in fact she utterly enjoyed it.

"I'll bribe him with chocolate." He grinned, knowing she was in her element. "That or remind him that Mione will come down on his head if he doesn't have at least one essay done. Works wonders that." He loped upstairs.
Sirius looked up at the imposing facade of Malfoy Manor and rolled his eyes. The things he did for his cubs, then again it wasn't just for Harry he was doing this but if Harry was right about the invocation, and Merlin only knew where he'd gotten it from, then for the entirety of the wizarding world. Heavy thought that. He walked up to the door and knocked perfunctorily, hoping it would be a slightly less than completely barmy elf that answered.

It was a small elf in a pristine, bright white toga that answered the door. It also had what looked like Christmas ornaments hanging from its large, flappy ears. "Yes? How may Tipsy help the Sir coming calling?"

A blond head showed up behind the elf and Draco looked at his cousin in surprise. "Sirius Black, what brings you to the Manor?" Draco didn't mean to be rude or unwelcoming. He was just surprised, the older man hadn't seemed interested in visiting at all. "Let him in Tipsy, Sirius Black is family."

The elf's bulging eyes widened almost comically and she curtsied deeply, holding the door open for Sirius. "Family...Welcome, welcome then MasterSiriusBlackfamily. Tipsy will take your coat and treat it well. What sort of refreshments would the MasterSiriusBlackfamily like? Tipsy can do anything."

Draco only rolled his eyes, the elf was unstoppable once she'd got started.

Sirius twitched. So much for that hope, "Er tea I suppose?"

"Draco darling who was at the, oh." Narcissa looked at Sirius in surprise and curiosity, "This is a surprise. Tipsy if you would please bring some Jasmine tea and vanilla eclairs to the blue sitting room. We should be there momentarily."

"Tipsy will do that right away Mistress." The elf curtsied again and disappeared with a soft pop.

"The elves have become a little...Giddy since Mother returned to the Manor." Draco tried to excuse the weird little creature and he didn't say what he really meant. They were happy that Lucius was dead. Draco couldn't disagree with that. "Please do come in though, how are Orion and Remus?"

Sirius followed his cousins through the manor to a sitting room decorated all in yellow, "Orion's doing better, not nearly as bitey. Moony's...moody, can't blame him what with the sprog growing merrily, making him crave all sorts of weird things, and sending his hormones out of whack. I just try to keep out of the way and pamper where I can."

Narcissa's lips twitched in amusement, "That is for the best yes."

"I do not even pretend to understand what it's like with the hormones and the moodswings but pleasing and pampering does sound like the way to go." Draco nodded, silently thinking that it sounded a lot like Pansy when she was in that time of the month. He was much smarter that mentioning that out loud though. "I am glad Orion is doing better. Blaise will be very much pleased as well. He's talking about battle scars after that biting incident but I think he's full of it. Orion barely broke skin."

Narcissa quirked a brow, "Livia's son darling, over dramatizing is a requirement."

Sirius coughed to mask his snicker, "Barely or not he still broke the skin and if he'd been full
werewolf biting anyone but Zabini that would have been very, very bad."

"Indeed," Narcissa settled into a seat, finally letting the gentlemen sit as well, "What brings you to our door Sirius?"

"It has to do with the Wizengamot and well...the politicians who run Britain in general. Have either of you ever heard of the Invocation of Merlin?"

Narcissa shook her head, "I don't believe I have."

Draco shook his head. "I have not heard of it either I'm afraid, what does it entail and what does it have to do with British Wizard politics?" Draco was honestly interested and he tried to learn everything he could so that he could help his mother and ease some of the burden of handling the Malfoy empire. Plus he needed to be prepared for when he came into his majority and gained the lordship officially.

Sirius sighed, "Well see I'm sure you know that Merlin was the one who set up the Wizengamot and the way we are currently governed and run," he waited until they'd both nodded, "Turns out Merlin didn't quite trust the future generations to adhere to the original purpose of the system he set into place. Because of that he created a sort of failsafe."

Narcissa lifted a brow, "A failsafe?"

He nodded, "If a group of seven magical Lords and Ladies or seven hundred 'common' wizards and witches come forward and call upon the Invocation of Merlin, and trust me it's long, in Welsh, and made my head hurt so it's not an easy thing, then any of those in power are magically bound by the rules Merlin set down, the same rules that a member of the Ministry or Wizengamot agree to in triplicate signature before they claim their seat, to work only for the good of the people, all the people. Should they attempt to push their own agenda because it would net them more power but at the same time oppress the people, their magic is forfeit."

Long, slender fingers came up to tap against a pointed chin as Draco took in what Sirius was saying, he'd had no idea that something like this invocation existed and he had a feeling the Ministry did its best to keep the knowledge under wraps as well. "That is very interesting. If that invocation is ever needed it is now. Do you think we can gather five more Lords and Ladies to come forward?"

A very distressed Tipsy showed up with the tea tray and eclairs. "Mistress said Mistress and family would be in the blue sitting room and Tipsy went but no family or Mistress was there. Mistress was in the gold sitting room....Mistress lied." The elf came very close to stomping her small feet as she set down the tray with a harsh clatter.

"I most certainly did not Tipsy, you know the gold sitting room is decorated in red and green."

Sirius groaned, "Great mercies I knew it. Why can't the blue sitting room be blue or the gold one be gold or the green one be green? Why does every single one of the Manors and estates have to decorate their sitting rooms in colors other than what they're called?"

"Because that, dear cousin, would be boring. Three sugars and a dash of cream as before?" She doctored his tea for him then handed it over before doing the same for Draco.

"Thank you Mother." Draco accepted the tea graciously and hid his grin at Tipsy's glares. It was obvious that the house elf didn't agree with her Mistress and that she hadn't forgiven either.

"Tipsy will be going, if family needs an elf you can call on Pip." Even the pop sounded angry as
the elf flickered away to somewhere else in the house.

Sirius shook his head at Narcissa's cool demeanor before answering Draco, "Harry already spoke to Neville and Neville's spoken to his grandmother and Augusta agreed, Xenophilius is on board, and Mr. Weasley will be invoking on Harry's behalf as his proxy. So that leaves two more to find." He took a sip of tea, "Any suggestions?"

Narcissa picked up an eclair, "Amelia Bones holds the title of Lady Bones, as she is thoroughly invested in the good of the people, and equally disgusted with politicians, I would seek her out about it. That leaves one."

"Severus is the heir to the Prince lordship even though he never uses it. The problem there is his position as a spy." Draco looked troubled as he mentally tried to think about the old families and who they could ask if Severus couldn't help them.

Sirius sighed, "Remus keeps trying to get the Hedgehog to get out of the bloody spy game. He just refuses to listen."

Narcissa took a sip of her tea, "That is Severus for you," her expression was placid but the grip on her teacup was white knuckled.

Draco looked at his mother before looking down in his tea. "Maybe you should ask him Mother. I do believe your opinion holds greater weight than even that of a best friend. If you ask and if we implore Orion to use his puppydog eyes then maybe we'll have a chance." Draco was about to take one heck of a chance and he hoped that his mother wouldn't take offense. "Have you told him how you feel Mother? You have nothing that holds you back now. You've been in love with him for years."

Narcissa frowned at her son, "Draco..."

"He's right," Sirius raised his hands in entreaty. "Hear me out Cissy. we don't need him to keep spying but he won't listen to Remus or anyone else. He would listen to you and it's bloody well past time the prickly bastard got his chance to be happy. Past time you took a chance to be happy too."

"It's true. You were never happy with Father and you have been in love with Severus for a very long time. Now both of you finally can be together and you should grab that chance with both hands and hold on to it and to Severus. You both deserve to be happy. I love the both of you and wish for the best for you. Please Mother." Draco was pleading now and he hoped his mother would understand. He wasn't trying to push her or Severus but Severus needed to get out before he got really hurt or worse and Narcissa deserved to be loved the way Severus loved her.

"It is not that simple darling. Competing with a ghost is not something I relish doing." Narcissa set her cup down in her saucer.

Sirius' gaze sharpened in understanding, "Lily."

"Indeed. I can not compete with the ghost of perfection."

He shook his head, "Cissy...I don't doubt that Severus," he rolled his eyes at the shocked look from two blonds, "I can use his name you know, I just usually don't and will deny I have should you mention it to anyone, mutual enmity suits us so well after all. Back to the subject. I don't doubt that Severus still has some measure of love in his heart for Lily, you never forget or completely lose that for your first love after all, but I doubt that he still views her in a perfect light."

He sipped at his tea. "Lily and James were perfectly suited for each other, a matching set so to
speak, cast from the same mold. Yeah James was more obviously a prat and certainly was a bully, just like I was, and prone to making snap judgements and not budging on them but he was also generous and kind to those he liked or chose to get to know. Lily was exactly the same but not nearly as obvious about it. Anyone with brains was terrified of getting on Lily's bad side, we'll just say that James existed in a perpetual hormone fog around her that killed his brain that or he got off on pain," he lifted a hand in apology to Narcissa.

"Point is that Lily could be downright nasty and could be a bully if she was in a foul mood. She was unbending on some subjects. Soon as Snape started hanging round with the more popular Slytherins she started leaving him behind because she didn't like them and felt he shouldn't associate with them at all, never mind that if he gave them the cut he'd be painting a target the size of a hippogriff on his back. Once she chose a stance or a course she stayed with it no matter what evidence might have been shown to the contrary.

"If she thought she was right then to her mind she was the only one who was right and no one else knew anything about it. She wasn't a bad person, was a very good person, but she had her flaws and they were almost the exact same flaws James had. I think that's why she hated him for most of our school career, she saw exactly her own worse qualities reflected in him and didn't like the reality check."

"That may very well be true but that does not mean Severus doesn't still paint her in the light of perfection." Narcissa bit sharply into her eclair.

"But I don't think he does, honestly I don't think he ever did. I think he knew her flaws just as well as he knows his potions but she was his first friend if I'm not wrong. His first friend, first love, and he loved her in spite of her flaws, despite her slowly abandoning him because she was the first person to look past the greasy hair, humongous beak, scrawny, scabby knees, and the worn and patched second hand clothes a few sizes too big but I don't think for one second he didn't resent her pulling away.

"I think he resented it almost as much as he loathed James otherwise he'd never have slipped and called her a mudblood when she stepped in to stop us from bullying him that day. And I believe that resentment would have grown after she refused to forgive him for that slip unless he abandoned his Slytherin friends or became someone he wasn't just to please her. He still loved her but I think he grew to hate her in equal measure because he still cared enough to essentially sell himself into slavery to keep her safe when, knowing Lily as I did, she'd never have done the same for him. Once she turned her back on him that was it, he no longer existed to her and if I were Severus Snape I'd grow to positively despise her for that." He looked at Draco, "What do you think kid? You hang around him almost as much as Orion does."

"I think there was more to Severus' dislike of Harry than his likeness to James Potter. I think it has equally to do with Lily." Draco was thoughtful as he replied to Sirius' question. He wanted to make sure that he answered it truthfully instead of just saying what they wanted to hear. "Part of him will always love Lily yes but not in the romantic sense, those feelings had gone away even before they graduated from school." He met his mother's eyes. "I wouldn't say this if it wasn't true Mother but you honestly don't have anyone to compete with, least of all a ghost."

Narcissa's brows drew together and she studied her tea, making Sirius shake his head.

"Cissy you know Snape very well. Before you graduated you'd taken him under your wing and introduced him round to the rest of the upper echleons, looking back on the prickly, guarded boy you knew without the haze of fear for your own heart, do you truly think he could continue to hold romantic feelings in his heart for someone who abandoned him so thoroughly and coldly?"
She stirred her tea and thought of Severus as that wide eyed, skittish boy she'd first met. Back then he'd been so fragile emotionally, desperately wanting to be accepted and to have friends and at the same time so terrified of being hurt that his every word had been razor sharp barbs coated in acid poison. The only one he'd not slashed at had been Lily Evans. She'd not been there to see Evans pulling away from him but Bella had and she'd been eloquent in her disdain for the Gryffindor girl and had even, at one point, taken it upon herself to guard Severus when she could. That had been long before her Bellflower had descended into complete madness, before her insane devotion to Voldemort had turned her vicious as a rabid dog and had her turning even on those she'd once called friend.

She did know Severus and she knew in her head that both her son and her cousin were right. It was her heart that was hesitating. Her gaze caught on her son's hand and the ring that he wore, simple silver and green crystal, beautiful and crafted painstakingly specifically for him and her words to Draco echoed in her head. 'Love never stops being terrifying, it also never stops being wonderful and worth every ounce of fear.' She truly despised when her own words wound round to bite her. "As I do greatly disdain great hypocrisy, I will speak with Severus."

"Thank you Mother, but speak with him for your own sake as well. I want you to be happy." Draco was growing up, in less than a year he would be seventeen and he feared he would be mixed up in his own life with his two fiery redheads. He desperately wanted his mother to be happy, loved and not alone. Narcissa had given him everything growing up, sacrificing her own happiness by staying with a man she felt nothing but contempt for.

Now that Lucius was gone, now that she was free to do what she wanted with her life, Draco wanted her to reach out and grab her chance at true love. Severus hadn't stuck around for Lucius sake. It wasn't Lucius that had made him accept the position as Draco's godfather, it wasn't Lucius that had made him help their family any way he could. It had always been about Narcissa. Draco couldn't help but wonder just how long the potions master had loved his mother.

A blond brow lifted, "And you think I need Severus to be happy?"

Sirius drained his teacup, "You need someone Cissy, friend or more. You were never made for solitude and someone needs to coax his Hegdehoginess out of his cave."

"When, precisely, did you acquire a measure of wisdom Sirius?"

"Happened around the time Harry smacked me on the head with a rolled up newspaper and told me I had a twelve year old son. Funny how being faced with his mistakes slaps wisdom into a man."

Draco shifted a little in his seat hearing that, there was something so raw and achingly honest in Sirius' voice that made it seem as if he'd intruded on something private. At the same time he wanted to reassure the older man but he had no idea what to say or do. "Regardless of what mistakes you've made in your past you must be a wonderful father and family man now. Since day one, Orion has had nothing but praise and love for you. Even when he couldn't mention your name it was all my father did this and my father said that." He slid a look at his mother. "Proves that it is never too late."

Sirius made a soft chuckle at the irritation crossing Narcissa's features at having her son attempt to prod her. "Well in any case you work on the Hedgehog, Cissy and if he won't drop the spy game see if you can root out a seventh member to invoke with us."

He reached into his jacket and withdrew two vellum envelopes and a flat square, silver wrapped gift box, "Also you are both cordially invited to the masquerade being held at Black Manor in the honor of Harry Potter's sixteenth birthday." He grinned and handed them each their invitation.
before passing Draco the gift, "also Happy Sixteenth to you ickle cousin, as I'm the only adult rooster left in the Black hen house."

Gray eyes widened in surprise and tore the silver colored wrapping paper off the box and opened it. "This is...Thank you." Draco picked up the heavy pocket watch carefully, noticing that the face of the watch was made up of star constellations instead of numbers. It was a beautiful pocket watch, old and beautiful craftsmanship. "Really, thank you."

Narcissa looked at the watch, eyes widening just a bit as she recognized it, and she looked sharply at Sirius, "The surety watch?"

Sirius hummed, "I always hated that nickname for it. Just because it was the watch given to de Noir's second son and passed down to the second born Blacks after stepping foot on England's shores," he met Draco's eyes, "I'm giving you that one because it was the one Regulus held for a time. Harry recently found something out about my brother, the reason Slytherin's locket was in Grimmauld Place to begin with. My brother learned about the Horcruxes and took a stand, attempting to destroy the locket. It's a more involved story but," he nodded at the watch, "I'm giving you that one because just like Reg you made a choice to stand against a few centuries of tradition and a megalomaniac. My brother called it the Star Watch and I think it's only right that it go to another star in the family sky who finally got the meaning of the Black motto, for all that you're a Malfoy," he winked at Draco.

Narcissa smiled, "Toujours Pur. Never meant to mean the bloodline but the soul."

"I'm humbled and not at all sure I am worthy to even be named in the same company as your brother but I will continue to strive to become a better man." Draco looked down at the watch again, feeling very small as he heard of its history but grateful to have it. He would wear it always, as a reminder to think before he acted and trying to make the right decisions. He then picked up his invitation to Potter's birthday bash and raised an eyebrow. "Black Manor? Did Mrs. Weasley really let you hold the party there? From what I've heard she's been going a little bit crazy with the planning for Potter's party."

Sirius chuckled, "It was either use the Black Ballroom or a tent. That party has grown let me tell you. She's still the one planning it, Moony and I are just providing the locale. I'm not joking calling it a masquerade. It is a full on masque ball. I told her to go mad and I'd foot the bill and she took me at my word." He grinned, "Harry's going to find that his etiquette 'punishment' is going to come in handy."

Narcissa studied her invitation with a soft, wistful smile, "It has been so long since a real masquerade was held. I think I will quite enjoy this." She looked back at Sirius, "By the way Lord Black, when exactly do you plan to make an honest man out of poor Remus?" The blush creeping over her cousin's face was charming she had to admit, "He's about to give you another child and you already consider everything yours his as well, I think it is past time don't you?"

"Well past." Draco agreed with a chuckle. "Though your son rather likes being a bastard as he calls himself. He says it saves time and that he can only nod and agree when he's called it after one of his pranks." Draco had never thought he would become close with the boy who'd hexed him on his first day in school but he was. Orion had become a part of the Slytherin trio somehow, especially with how Pansy absolutely adored him. "A proper masquerade, that means full formal wear and face masques right?"

He nodded, "With the reveal at midnight yes. And don't think I haven't thought about asking Remus to marry me," he pulled a ring box that was missing its flocking in places out of his pocket, "I've been carrying this around with me...forever." He still remembered the day he'd gotten it, the
day before they'd been told about Voldemort planning to come after James, Lily and Harry, before he'd bollocks everything up out of orbit.

Draco looked at the worn ring box before looking up at Sirius. "I don't think you have to be worried that Professor Lupin will say no. He looks at you as if you are the sun in the sky." He fiddled with his own ring, it was nothing like a wedding or even a promise ring but it was gifted to him by his terrors and that made it precious beyond words.

"He needs glasses," it was an insecure mutter.

"'Love looks not with the eyes but the mind.' And do you not say that Remus doesn't have a brilliant mind. Ask him Sirius, go home and ask him now before you waste more time you'll never get back." She leveled a Look on her son when he gave her one of his own, warning him not to say a word. "Matter of fact," she smiled slow and deviously, "Pip!"

"Yes Mistress, Pip is hearing Mistress call." Another house elf, if possible even more hyper than Tipsy had been popped into the room, large round eyes eager. "What are Pip able to do for Mistress?"

Sirius began trying to edge out of the room, not liking the look on Narcissa's face.

"My cousin here," she nodded at Sirius, "has an urgent matter to take care of. Could you please pop him to Black Manor? Right at the feet of Remus Lupin if you can."

The tip of Pip's long nose swept the floor as he bowed deeply. "Of course Mistress, consider it a did deal." The elf hurrying along to the man his mistress had pointed out and grabbed a hold of the man's robes. "I am to be back soon Mistress!" Pip called out even as he popped away, Sirius still in a firm grip.

"Evil Mother, pure evil." Draco smirked at his mother's deviousness.

"Well of course." She sipped at her cooling tea and studied a tapestry on the wall of Tristan and Isolde. "Do you have an inkling of your costume for the masquerade dear?"

"Nope, none in the slightest." Draco shook his head. "How about you? What will you go as? I need that information so I can tell Severus and the two of you can match." He sent Narcissa a sweet, innocent smile.

She gave him a quelling look before studying the tapestry again then shifting her gaze to the mantle where an alabaster statue of a winged woman stood and her lips curved, "Titania. Good luck convincing him to come as Oberon darling." She rose to her feet and went to her potion lab to take her mind off of her agreement to attempt to talk Severus out of continuing with the spying.

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One second he'd been trying to escape and the next he was on his knees on the floor and blinking up at Moony while an elf chirped goodbye. He was going to kill Narcissa.

Amber eyes were wide with shock at seeing his mate being popped in at his feet by an unknown house elf. He blinked and blinked again as if trying to make sure that Sirius really was there, on his knees on the kitchen floor. "What are you doing Sirius? What was with the elf?" Worry crept into the soft amber eyes. "You're really pale Siri? Is something wrong? Did something happen at the Malfoys?" Remus fell down on his own knees to look Sirius over carefully, trying to figure out what had happened to his mate.
"I'm fine Moony," he cupped Remus' cheek, "just Cissy's sadistic version of a joke. I'm not too fond of being popped somewhere without so much as a beg your pardon is all." He brushed his lips over Remus' lips, "Hello again."

"Hello again." Remus echoed and pressed his lips a little firmer against Sirius' making a content sound in the back of his throat. "You sure nothing's wrong? Why would Narcissa pop you in here with a house elf? It's your own home." Remus placed a hand on his lower back, kneeling wasn't exactly comfortable these days.

"No nothing's wrong. She's just an evil, pushy woman," Sirius frowned at Remus' move, "Oi you, up off the floor. Silly man," he started to help Remus stand but before he got one foot under him the ring box that had been shoved hastily in his coat pocket tumbled out and he swore fate was trying to torment him.

Remus reached for the box without really looking at it and took it in his hand. "Here you dropped some...thing..." Remus trailed off as he noticed what it was that he was holding and suddenly he looked very, very unsure of himself.

Sirius exhaled softly and finished helping Remus stand only to pull him to a chair where he nudged him to sit down then sank to his knees again, hands on Remus' thighs. "I've had that for a long time," his voice was quiet, not a whisper or murmur but low and serious, "You remember the evening before we were told about Voldemort targeting James and Lily? The utter disaster of a meal I tried to cook?"

"I remember." Remus nodded, his voice low. "The stove caught on fire we ended up eating Mr. Chong's takeout on the living room floor, all windows open to try and air out the smoke." Of course Remus remembered that night, it had been the last evening things had been good between them before everything happened.

"I'd planned the whole evening out days in advance," he rolled his eyes, "thought for sure I could manage spaghetti, I mean it's so simple. I was going to wine and dine you in the privacy of our flat, romantic candlelit dinner, champagne and chocolate covered strawberries, the works. I'd stopped by Sparkles earlier and picked up what I'd hoped would be the centerpiece of the evening," he nodded at the box in Remus' hand, "I'd ordered it months before, spent hours choosing the right setting and then the stones. I was going to ask that night but then I almost burned down the bloody flat and well, you know me, Chinese on the floor in a smoky apartment just didn't fit the romantic mood I'd wanted to create."

He rubbed his cheek on Remus' knee, "Then everything just went all to hell. I didn't feel right asking then, because I wouldn't have James there as best man so I put it in a safe place until the threat was over. Course everything got worse and more complicated and there I was, fumbling in the dark still loving you so much but letting Peter and Dumbledore plant those asinine doubts and hurting the both of us." He sighed and closed his eyes, "The first place I went before Privet Drive was where I'd stashed it and well..."

He shrugged, "even when I was being an idiot I kept it with me. So many dreams are in that little box and a few dozen fears and insecurities too. 'Will he? Won't he? Why would he after everything? Gods what if he thinks I'm just asking because of our son? Fuck what if he thinks I'm asking because he's knocked up again?' All that and more on an endless never ending cycle in my head."

Remus sat there on the chair in silence before he started to cry. "Buggering, bloody hormones." He wiped at his eyes with the ball of his hand. "Sirius...I never expected marriage. Always told myself that you being my mate was enough, that I knew you were mine and I'm yours and that's all that
mattered."

How could he possibly explain that he'd always known that he wasn't good enough to marry. That's why he'd been so adamant that Orion would have his father's name because he'd known he would never share it. "It's...It's not something I need."

"What if it's something I need?" Oh he had his Moony's number, silly man. "Being mates, that's for us. People who know us well know it too but not others. You're mine, I'm yours, and I want the world to recognize it at a glance. If you don't want to be married to me that's one thing, I can accept that and still be happy with you as mates, but if you're doing that stupid self-deprecating thing I'm going to be very, very put out. Remus I want to share everything with you, including my name. I need you to carry my name or hell I'll carry yours because I am utterly yours everything I am, all that I have is, always has been, and always will be yours and I need to show that to the world."

Remus' sobs grew louder and he hated himself, just a little bit, for crying through a moment like this. He reached for Sirius and pulled him up so that Remus could lean his forehead against Sirius' "Of course I want to marry you. I'm yours too, completely and wholly. Always have been and always will be. Just so you know, I would have said yes in that smoke filled flat too. When it comes to you Sirius my answer is always yes." Sirius brushed his lips over Remus' and took the box from him, opening it to reveal the gold band channel set with moonstone and amber. "I kept it simple because I know you don't like flashy."

"It's beautiful." And it really was, the amber and moonstone perfect for him and made even more precious by their meaning of love, protection, healing and luck. Only Sirius knew him that well. "You're beautiful. I'll be proud to wear this ring, to be yours in this way too."

"I love you." He kissed him again, "So very much." He rubbed his nose against Remus' with a smile, "Feel like a couch cuddle?"

"Sounds like the most brilliant idea I've ever heard." Remus smiled and yes, admittedly got a little teary eyed again as Sirius slipped the ring on his finger before he got up from the chair and they moved into the informal living room and the soft squishy couch there. "Our tadpole's been in constant movement today, don't know what's up in there." He laid a hand on the swell of his stomach.

Sirius sat down, pulling Remus into his lap and nuzzling where neck met shoulder as he laid a hand on the belly beside his mate's. "Maybe the sprog had that knowing thing going and knew about Papa asking Mama to marry him?"

"Merlin help us, two children who know things before they will happen." Remus gave an exaggerated shudder. "One more like Orion who manages to slither himself out of trouble before we even know he should be in trouble to begin with."

He leaned back against Sirius and tilted his head to the side to give his husband to be more room. "Speaking of Orion, have you seen how the boy has grown this summer? Just in this small amount of time. He reaches me up to my nose now and his voice has started to change and crack. He's not our little boy anymore."

Sirius kissed the skin beneath his mouth, "Growing up is part of life but he'll always be our little boy, even when he's old and gray, even when it drives him insane." He rubbed Remus' stomach, feeling their baby's energetic movements under his hand.

"I know you're right but still...You know me, I'm a worrier about everything." Remus placed his
hand on top of Sirius' on his belly. "Feel it? Feels like tadpole's doing some sort of advanced gymnastics in there. I hope it's not the wolf." There was no way of knowing how much of the wolf this new baby would have before it was born. Remus had trouble sleeping at night, worrying that he would pass on his curse fully to this new innocent life.

"Hey," Sirius caught his mate’s chin to turn his face more fully toward him, "don't borrow trouble there Remus. Remember I'm the father so it might just be my manic energy the tadpole's inherited. And no matter what this baby is precious, loved, and will always be so."

"Of course our child will always be loved, always no matter what. I told you...worrier." He turned to the side in Sirius' lap and buried his face in the crook of his mate's neck. "Poppy couldn't measure any shifts in tadpole during the moons so I'm hoping with everything that I am that I won't have infected our baby and Severus is already working on a Wolfsbane potion for infants if things should happen for the worst."

Sirius pet his hair unable to reply. Nothing he could say would make it better, would erase the guilt Remus felt every time he thought of their children inheriting any measure of the lycanthropy or the fear of the little one on the way getting a full measure of it. He kissed Remus' temple, "Speaking of the hedgehog, Narcissa is going to talk to him, try and convince him to leave the spy game."

"Hmm, well if anyone at all will be able to persuade him, it's Narcissa. I certainly hope that she will be successful...Stubborn old bugger." Remus had told his friends a thousand times over to give up the spying, with Dumbles off the rocker as he was and with everything that had happened with Voldemort and the Death Eaters there was no reason for him to stay, only more danger.

Sirius chuckled and inhaled the masculine scent of his mate as the floo flared and their son stepped into the room, "Hey look who's home Moony." Sirius smiled, pleased to see his son looking comfortable in his skin, "How were today's lessons kiddo?"

"It was fine, useful." Orion was very grateful that his voice didn't crack as he answered, he wished it would just decide on a tone and stick to it now. The lessons with Alek had been a lifesaver, something Orion had very much needed and still did need. Alek helped him both soothe and accept the wolf, the lessons were very private to him though so he never spoke very much about them, just that they were definitely helping.

"Professor Spath, barged in and threw some sort of paper flower at Alek's head, screaming that he was a potions master not a daycare teacher...Amusing." Orion grinned doggishly at the memory before he really looked at his parents cuddled up on the couch. "Thank you for having all your clothes on this time, last time you were in this position on the couch was much more traumatizing and made me want to dive right back into the fire, floo powder or not."

"Orion..." Remus couldn't really scold him since they had gotten carried away that time and forgotten than Orion would be coming through that floo when he returned from Marauders.

"Dad." Orion replied in the same tone of voice when a glint of something caught his eye and he looked closer at the ring on his Dad's finger. "What's this then? Don't tell me you've finally manned up and popped the question Sirius?"

Sirius made an irritable growl, "Oh I am going to relish when you find your mate," he left out that Orion already had and just needed to realize it, "and I get to rub those words in your face kiddo but yes I asked your dad to marry me."

"Good, I'm happy for you, the both of you." Orion could see how much that simple ring meant to his Dad and to Sirius too." He walked forward and hugged them both. "And you just wait old man,
I don't plan to be a pillock with my mate." He winked at Sirius.

Sirius just grinned, "Plans mean nothing when you're in love Ri, you'll be a pillock without trying." His tone held experience and knowledge.

"Maybe and maybe you just say that because you're a pillock. Look at Scar and Mione, they've been together for quite a while now without cocking things up." Orion had a mouth him him, that was for sure but he figured Sirius couldn't mind too much since he was the one Orion got it from. "See you later, I'm going to shower...Please don't be naked when I come back."

Sirius shook his head and watched their son scamper out of the family living room, "I'll let him keep his illusions. Harry and Hermione have their moments, Harry's just too smart to let them last for long, unlike his utter moron of a godfather." He rubbed his chin on Remus' shoulder, "So Moony, what couple should you and I don the apparel of for Harry's party?"

"Don't Sirius...Don't put yourself down. Not anymore, not when we are going to get married and have another cub. We love each other and we're together now, nothing else matters." Remus kissed him lovingly. "As for the party...I don't know, do you know one half of a couple that looks as if they've swallowed a medium sized planet?"

"Actually Harry showed me an interesting book, old stuff, written in Old Welsh," he kissed along Remus' jaw, "did you know that Arthur of Pendragon did not in fact marry Guinevere?"

Remus blinked in surprise and tried not to get lost in the feeling of Sirius' mouth against his jaw. "I did not know that at all, every book and legend I've heard, claimed that he did. I must ask Harry to show me this book...Um but not now, sorry. Who did he marry then? Did he marry at all?"

"He did, big scandal, the muggles were shocked." He rubbed Remus' belly again, "Merlin. He married Merlin. Turns out that after the incident with Morgana, during which he'd been drugged off his rocker, he avoided women in a general sense and it wasn't until he married Merlin that everyone learned he was very much queer. Lady Gwen was his ward, who he gave to Lancelot in marriage after Lance's first wife died of illness."

"No...Really?" Remus was almost gaping. "Well, that explains the legends being told quite differently then, can't have the once and future king being a shirtlifter now can we?" Remus was very, very glad that at least the wizard community had moved forward in that aspect, no longer caring at all what kind of gender you loved. "Arthur and Merlin..."

The more Remus thought about it, the more he could picture it. It wasn't such a crazy thought at all. "I hope they were happy, both Arthur and Merlin and Lancelot and Guinevere...I really hope they were happy."

"Ah well they were, mostly, according the the book Arthur disappeared more than died when Mordred made his move to try and usurp the right to the throne from his younger, legitimate brother." He rubbed Remus' belly, "Merlin stayed behind to finish setting things into place and then also just walked off into the mists of Avalon. Lance and Gwen stayed on as advisers to Arthur and Merlin's son but the book ends with Merlin's leaving so who knows what happened, really, that enabled the Saxons to invade."

"Maybe Camelot had served its purpose or maybe magic disappeared with Merlin. I guess we'll never know." Remus cuddled closer against Sirius' chest. Knowing that Merlin was real that he had lived and loved with his king made the legends all the more precious and this book Sirius spoke of seemed to come closer to the truth than most stories did.
"It's rather fantastic isn't it? That the sorting hat once belonged to Merlin himself...Do you think if anyone actually took the time to ask, that the hat could tell us about him, about that time?" He turned his head and kissed Sirius' cheek.

"I imagine the hat would be happy to. Poor thing's always just sitting on a dusty shelf all through the year, the Sorting has to be the highlight of its year. I wonder how the hat got passed down to Gryffindor, eh well more questions to ask and get answered." He nuzzled Remus' cheek with a smile, "So love, you go as Merlin and I'll be your besotted, hopelessly devoted King Arthur, what do you think?"

"I think that sounds wonderful, you're my king so it's rather the perfect fit for you." Remus smiled back and kissed his mate again. "We need to find you an Excalibur and we need to find this Merlin some very comfortable shoes." The steadfast romantic in Remus, the one he denied having thought going as Arthur and Merlin was quite lovely actually, especially with this new knowledge.

"I think we can manage that." He smiled and summoned a throw from a nearby chair, wrapping it around them both and settling more comfortably, "Next time I talk to Harry I'll borrow the book for you. I'll have to do it sometime before next week though since that's when he's going to get the first Horcrux."

Remus' breath stuttered a little at the thought of his oldest cub going after the Horcruxes. Remus wouldn't do anything to stop him, only help any way he could but it still made him ache with worry. After the catastrophe at the Department of Mysteries things had been quiet with Voldemort, too quiet and Remus was so scared that something bad would happen. "Hm, he better bloody well come back safe and sound. Molly has made me clean the ballroom three times so far."

Sirius chuckled, "He'll have Hermione, Ron, and Bill with him. After what Kreacher told him about Reg he thought it would be a good idea to bring a curse-breaker along." His voice grew soft with regret, thinking about his brother.

"Love, you didn't know, don't do this to yourself." Remus shifted so he could look into Sirius' eyes. "It's horrible what happened to Regulus, truly horrible but you had no way of knowing. I know how many times you reached out to him, even after you left your parents behind, you reached out and he never responded. It's not your fault, never was."

"I know. I'm just...it's not guilt or even grief," He rested his cheek against Remus' letting the contact steady him, "but I regret that he'll never know Orion or this little one, that they'll never know him. It's no one's fault except for Voldemort's but the regret's for what's been lost you know?"

"I know." Remus ran his fingers through Sirius' hair gently. "There are so many that should be here, that should know our children and have their own that aren't here. I think that regret, that emptiness, it will always be there, sad as it is. All we can do is not letting it take over, be happy and grateful for what we have."

"I am, believe me I am. It just hits a little close to home today, giving Draco the Star Watch." He caught Remus' hand and pressed a kiss to the palm. "Love you, my Moony."

"I love you too my dearest Padfoot, my mate in all things." He stretched out on top of Sirius on the couch, moving so he wasn't lying directly on his stomach. "Oh by the way, let's have a small wedding, very small with only our loved ones there...I love Molly, adore her even but I don't want her to plan it."

"Oh amen to that! Small and simple. Works very well for me." He rubbed Remus' belly, smiling at
the lessened movements, "Looks like the tadpole's calmed down a bit."

"Mmm yes. Papa's voice soothes our tadpole." Remus' lips quirked upwards too, just happy that it didn't feel like a three ring circus inside him anymore.

Sirius chuckled, "Ah well we both know I can talk more than I think. How about a story then? Keep the little one calm and let you relax without getting your internal organs stomped on for a little bit."

"A story sounds wonderful. Both the tadpole and I will appreciate that equally I think." Remus smiled and curled into a more comfortable position, making the sure the throw was pulled around them both. He knew that he would be asleep ten minutes into Sirius' story but he also knew that his mate knew that and didn't mind.

He smiled, held Remus more securely, and began telling an obscure fairy tale.
"Are you sure this is the place mate?" Ron eyed the beaten up shanty that made the Shrieking Shack look like a palace.

"For the eighteenth time Ron, yes." Harry rolled his eyes and waited for Bill to finish checking the perimeter for any wards or curses.

"It really doesn't look like much does it?" Hermione looked up at the shed like building too. "Then again considering what's hidden inside it maybe it looks just as it should. Rotten and ugly."

Bill came back to them, wand in hand and a serious expression on his handsome face. "There are wards and muggle repellents around the house but they should be easily breached. No curses as far as I can pick up."

Harry nodded, "Could you bring down the wards then please Bill? I'd do it but you know, underage magic laws and whatnot, bloody bureaucratic wankers." The last bit was muttered irritably. He really hated not being able to use magic during the summer. He reached over and took Hermione's hand, squeezing gently in affection. "This was where Riddle's mother grew up, family name was Gaunt. Apparently they'd fallen on hard times a generation or two before Tom's mother came along. I looked it up."

"Looking at this hovel, I almost feel sorry for them...almost." She squeezed his hand back, too on edge to be as curious as she usually was.

Bill lowered the wards with little trouble, or more accurately he made a hole in them, a hidden hole that wouldn't alert the caster of the wards that they had been tampered with. "Just make sure to enter and exit here, between this rock and that tree and Voldie should be none the wiser."

"Good deal Bill, guess you are more than just a pretty face," Ron snickered when his brother flipped him off, "Well Harry, you're the leader of this expedition so lead on."

Harry shook his head but stepped through the hole Bill had made. They worked their way through a few other wards and a nasty trap to the loose floorboard Harry had seen Voldemort hiding the ring under in a warded box. Once the floorboard was cleared by Bill, he lifted it up and took out the long flat box, passing it to Bill to remove the wards on it as well, opening it to see the ring with the odd black stone and markings that was Voldemort's very first Horcrux. "Anything on the ring itself Bill?"

"Oh yes, a curse and a very, very bad one at that." Bill looked both troubled and appalled. "I'm not really sure I can break this curse with the tools I have with me here. It's meant to kill you the moment you put it on, by basically making your body decay, rot and die limb for limb. Do not put it on."

Harry gave him an incredulous look, "What do you take me for? Seriously Bill why would I want to wear a chunk of Voldemort's soul?"

Ron nodded, "There's a point. Why would anyone do that? I mean even not knowing it's a Horcrux that thing is really ugly." He wrinkled his nose at the heavy etched gold setting carved with what looked to be tiny death masks and dead bodies. "The stone's not even a crystal or precious, just an old rock. The only thing I can see anyone wanting to do with that is melt down the gold and sell it off."
"I don't know what to take you for, you're the one who goes on adventures beyond crazy...Maybe you have a fetish for truly ugly jewelry, just feel that you have to wear it." Bill seemed unconcerned with the looks he was getting, he'd just thought a warning to be a good thing.

"You are a very strange man Bill Weasley. Very strange." Hermione shook her head. "The ring really is ugly, but it is sort of familiar too, at least some of the designs on it, I just can't place them."

"Well we'll just take the box and get it to Bill's better tools so he can get rid of the curse on it and we can destroy the ring without worrying about it kicking us in the nads and you can do research." Ron shrugged lightly, "Now can we please get out of here?"

Harry nodded and flipped the lid closed on the box, tucking it into a satchel that he passed to Bill, and stood, holding a hand out to Hermione, "Yeah. Bill you mind dropping me and Hermione someplace for a little while before you take Ron home and get to your better tools? Someone else can come pick us up later."

"Nah, I don't mind. Besides Ronniekins can stay here and guard the hovel while I take you where you want to go." Bill blew his brother a kiss and hung the satchel over his shoulder as he took one last look around the house, still a bit gobsmacked and not in the good way that people had lived here. Even if you took away the dirt and decay this house had never been fit for housing humans.

They walked out and once they were all through the hole, Bill sealed it again before walking over to Harry and Hermione. "So where can I take you little darlings?"

Harry squeezeed Hermione's hand and gave her a little smile. He hadn't asked her about this earlier but he needed her with him for this. Just her this time. He looked back to Bill, "Godric's Hollow."

Ron stopped scowling at his older brother hearing that and his arms dropped from where he'd folded them across his chest in realization. He angled his head over at a stand of rocks and boulders to indicate to Bill where he'd be.

Bill nodded that he'd understood where his little brother would be and took reached out to hold Hermione on one hand and Harry in the other. All his teasing gone once he heard where he would be taking them. "I'll be right back Ron." He said and disapparated.

They appeared in the middle of the village square and Hermione immediately dropped Bill's arm and walked to Harry and laced their fingers together, rubbing her thumb over the back of his hand soothingly, feeling the edges of the scar Umbridge put there.

He lifted her hand to his mouth, kissing her fingers, and looked at Bill, "Thanks. We should be done in about three hours or so."

Bill nodded. "Just use your mirror, I'll make Ron hang around me and help with the curse breaking. Call him and I'll come get you when you're done." The redhead pat Harry on the shoulder before popping away again to go get his baby brother from Little Hangleton before going to his office at Gringotts.

Harry looked around the village, bustling with energy and concealed magic. There were a few muggles he spotted here and there but mostly it was wizards who walked through, nodding at them cheerfully. He spotted a tall stone obelisk up ahead in what looked to be the village square and squeezed Hermione's hand, "Let's take a look there first while I get my bearings."

Hermione nodded and held on to Harry's hand as they walked across the cobblestone square. The houses edging the square and the narrow streets were absolutely lovely. The whole village looked
a little like something from an old storybook. The magic and the muggle sides of the village blended together so seamlessly that it was hard to see where one ended and the other begun. "It's beautiful here."

Harry nodded, smiling around at the quaint little houses and stores that lined the main street. His brows knit though, when the obelisk seemed to shimmer then changed right before his eyes. He sucked in a sharp breath at seeing stone representations of his parents and a baby, him, frozen forever in smiling happiness. Somehow seeing his father's face cut out of stone made the resemblance between them seem so much clearer, though if he wasn't wrong he'd have to say that his face was a little more oval than his father's, more like the softness of his mother's.

"Oh." It was a soft exhale as she looked at the statue. What struck her the most was the absolute love and happiness that radiated off both the man and the woman as they held and looked at their baby. It was clear to Hermione that his statue was modeled from a photo and it showed just how much Harry had been loved, wanted and loved. "You have your mother's nose as well." It was such an inane thing to say but it just slipped out as she stood there with her boyfriend, looking up at the monument.

He had to swallow around the lump in his throat those words created. He was always hearing about how he had his mother's eyes and it always made him a bit sad to think that was all he'd gotten from her, sad to think that his father's genetics had been stamped so strongly on him that the mother who'd ensured his protection from Voldemort years after her death only had that one small mark, that one thing that was passed on. His voice was soft and a little rough as he squeezed Hermione's hand, "You're right," he gave a breathless little laugh, "I do."

"It's a very nice nose too. I'm very fond of it." Hermione let go of Harry's hand to wrap her arm around his waist instead, snuggling close against his side. "This is very, very odd...I have a feeling that I should bow and introduce myself, thank them for bringing such an amazing, wonderful person into the world." Hermione wondered if they would have liked her. Would they have approved of her being with their son? Would she have liked them? It was a very strange feeling to have them in front of her but...not.

His arm went around her shoulders, unconsciously echoing the effigy of his father, and kissed her temple, "The amazing, wonderful one here, Hermione, is you." They stood looking at the memorial for a few moments before he shifted and they moved on. He spotted a flower shop with a small flowering tentacula in the window and pulled Hermione in with him. He made his way to the make your own bouquet section and carefully selected stargazer lilies, pink carnations, little red tea roses, some zinnias, and fern fronds to make a bouquet. He stepped up to the counter to have the stems wrapped and pay.

The clerk studied it for a moment, taking note that he didn't recognize Harry, then, as he wrapped white, red, and gold ribbon around the stems, asked, "Would you be wanting to know the direction of the cemetery then?"

Harry blinked and nodded, "Please."

"You take a left down the next street past the square and go down to the church. It'll be there," the clerk finished wrapping, "That'll be ten pounds."

Harry fished the money from his pocket and handed it to the clerk, accepting the bouquet in return, "Thanks." He turned and held out his hand to Hermione again as they left the shop and headed for the cemetery.

For once the British weather was on their side and the sky was beautifully blue and the summer
sun was warm on their skin as they followed the clerk's direction. The church was small and made of stone and looked very old. The cemetery spreading out around it was lush and green, filled with trees that shaded the gravestones. "Where should we start looking you think?"

"Round the newer ones I suppose." He spoke softly and walked with her through the rows of granite, eyes searching out the name of Potter. When he found it he paused and studied the single large headstone bearing his parents names before kneeling and placing the flowers before it. "Hi Mum, Dad." His fingers brushed the carved words, "Sorry I've not been here before but I reckon you know at least a bit of how crazy things get for me." He felt Hermione's hand on his shoulder and lifted his to cover it, "This is my very brilliant, very beautiful girlfriend Hermione. You can thank her for me still being around down here. I'd have been a goner long ago if she wasn't always saving me from myself."

"Judging by Harry you must have been amazing people." Hermione's voice was soft as she wrapped her arms firmer around Harry. "Thank you so much for loving him, for protecting him. I promise that I'll always do my very best to do the same. Love him and protect him from everything that I can. I want you both to know that he's loved by so many people, he's so important and so very treasured. We will all do our very best to look after Harry for you." Hermione reached into her bag and pulled out a small amethyst crystal and placed it on top of the smooth stone.

Love for her almost overwhelmed him just then, tears pressing at the back of his eyes, and he brought her hand to his mouth to press a kiss to it. His eyes closed and a few tears leaked out, "I have got to be the luckiest bloke in existence," he spoke softly. "You two don't have to worry about me, though I have it on good authority that parents always worry. I've got friends, allies, a family built from those who've wriggled their way into my heart, and Hermione."

He smiled, able for the first time to say what he was about to with confidence, "I'm loved and I know that's what you wanted most for me. Thank you both for saving me and loving me enough that it stuck even through the Dursleys until I could get to my new family."

Hermione just held Harry close, squeezing her slim fingers around his hand, trying to push her love through her and into Harry. She was humbled and grateful that Harry had wanted her here with him when he went to visit his parents for the first time and she wanted to do everything she possibly could to support him. "Yes you are loved Harry. So very loved." She kissed his cheek, prepared to stand there with him for as long as he needed her to.

"I want you both to know that I'm going to see to it that both Voldemort and Dumbledore face the consequences of their actions. Not because of vengeance or anything like that but because they can't be allowed to hurt anymore innocent people. I know you'll worry but I'll be back again soon." He stroked the stone again and stood up, bringing Hermione with him, pressing a kiss to her brow. "Come on. There's one more place I want to see."

Hermione nodded and let Harry lead her her out of the cemetery, she had a pretty good idea where they were going but this was Harry's trip. She'd follow where he'd go and be there for him. "Thank you Harry for letting me meet them. From now on I think we should come back more often, when all else allows for it at least."

He laced his fingers through hers, "There's no one else I'd have wanted here with me for the first time and I agree about coming back." They drew close to a half destroyed house and he could swear he felt the chill of death still clinging to it. He stepped close to read a sign proclaiming the house having been preserved in its ruined state as a monument to the Potters and as a reminder of the violence that tore them apart.
"Oh isn't that charming, let's remind everyone even more about murdered parents and an orphaned child we don't care enough about to even check up on." He shook his head, "The statue was nice but this," he looked at the burnt out shell of the house, "I really don't think my parents would have wanted it kept standing like this."

"Absolutely not." Hermione shivered at the sight of the house. "This looks like some sort of morbid tourist trap, I wonder who decided it should be preserved like this." She pressed the tip of her tongue to the back of her upper teeth, even after almost two years it still felt a bit strange having normal sized teeth.

"It belongs to you, you know, the house. You can renovate it, tear it down or burn it to the ground if you want to. It's your choice and no one else's. I don't think it should stand here like this though. I know it's just a house but it feels so sad...I don't know how to explain it but it does."

"You don't have to explain love. I know." He studied the house a bit more, "I wouldn't be surprised if it was the old Bee who made the decision." He stepped forward, through the gate that was locked against trespassers who didn't have a legal right or permission from the owner to be on the property, feeling the wards shiver over him and Hermione for a second before letting them pass.

He made his way to the spot where he just knew his nursery had been, where the side of the house was charred, shattered, and blown out. The crib was still there, the mobile of fanciful creatures stained with soot, toys scattered about like casualties of war. He walked forward and knelt to pick up a tiny broom, a toy for a rambunctious one year old to fly around on. He closed his eyes and couldn't help but let his lips curve as a fleeting glimpse of memory seemed to tickle his mind, of him terrorizing a cat while on this very broom.

Hermione looked around too, at the tumbled toys, the brightly colored and clearly home woven carpet but what broke her was a frame, still hanging over the crib, a frame containing two pairs of tiny footprints and handprints in bright red paint. She knew she was there to support Harry but right then she just crumbled and burst into tears.

Harry's head shot up and he was beside her, arms securely around her, in an instant, "Hermione?"

Her only reply was a broken squeak of sorts as she wrapped her arms tightly around herself. She got so angry with herself but she couldn't stop crying. Her heart was breaking for what had happened her so long ago. The entire room spoke of love, pride, hope and dreams and knowing what had happened, it simply broke her. Made her wish for another time turner, a stronger one that could change everything. Harry should have had this every day growing up, he deserved this and not a grubby cupboard with monsters wearing human clothing.

Harry turned her so that her face was buried against his shoulder and swayed in place to soothe her, one hand running up and down her back in long strokes. Somehow he knew what she was crying for and though he didn't like that she was hurting, that she did, that she cared so much that she hurt for him over things long past, was a humbling gift. He kissed the top of her head, noticing that he was getting taller while she looked to be almost the same height.

Wrapping her arms tightly around Harry, Hermione sniffed against his shoulder. "I'm sorry." She really didn't mean to break down on him, today she was supposed to be the one who comforted. She wanted so badly to be there for Harry but it seemed that he was always the one taking care of her.

He shook his head, "Don't love, don't apologize. I hate seeing you cry but...I can't explain to you how much of a gift it is to me that you care so much that you, the strongest girl I know, would break down on my behalf. The crying, well I don't like you hurting especially not on my behalf, but
the love that causes it," he tightened his arms around her, resting his cheek on her hair, "means more to me than anything."

She hugged him even tighter, wetting his shirt with her tears. "I do love you Harry, more than you could ever know." There wasn't anything she wouldn't do for Harry. Her parents had spoken a lot about first love and teenage feelings this summer but she knew that wasn't it. What she felt for Harry, it was more than love and she knew, absolutely knew that she would feel it for the rest of her life. Harry was it for her, no one could ever compare.

"I've managed to make another of your shirts wet, you should pack a raincoat when spending time with me." She sent him a watery smile as she tried to pull herself together.

He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and gently dried her face, "My shirts dry love." He kissed the tip of her nose, "I don't mind it, not when you've been there for me when I break apart."

"I'll always be there for you, though I think I've the lead in breakdown's so far." She tilted her head up so she could kiss him. "When did you get so bloody tall anyway? Soon I’ll have to stand on my tippy toes to kiss you."

"I blame Molly's cooking but anytime you want a kiss I'll happily bend for you," he brushed his lips over hers, "and of course you're maybe one or two ahead in breakdowns, you're a girl which means you're more in touch with your emotions than we silly, smelly boys are."

"Well said." Her red rimmed eyes sparkled a little. "Nice save with the emotions touch there, any mentionings of hormones and I may just have had to kick your bum, smelly boy or not. Thankfully you smell rather nice for a boy, seem to have discovered this whole thing called personal hygiene."

"Well I have this incredible girl who loves me you see, and I like to spend as much time close to her as I can because I love her back. If I stank then she'd not want me round so good hygiene habits are quite important to me." He ran his fingertips over her cheek with a soft smile.

That caused her to chuckle softly. "Good to know and I do like to be able to sniff you without gagging." She hugged him again before releasing him, she couldn't stand here clinging to him much longer. Harry could have more he wanted to see.

He started to chuckle before something brushed against his magic. His brows knit and he tilted his head, frown deepening at the unstable, almost malicious feel of the odd energy. "Hermione do you feel that?"

She didn't at first, not until she really concentrated and felt the brush against her magic. "I do now, what do you think that is?" She tried to pinpoint where it came from but her magic wasn't strong enough for that.

His eyes narrowed, "I don't know but it feels almost as old as I am," he closed his eyes and tracked the energy before holding out his hand to Hermione again, "Come on, let's check this out." He followed the dark energy further into the house, down into the basement, and found himself staring at foundation stones, one with unfamiliar runes etched into them that the energy was centered around. "Hermione have you ever seen those kinds of runes before?"

Hermione leaned in closer to the foundation stone to get a better look at the runes, reaching into her bottomless bag, she pulled out pen and notebook to copy the runes down. "The runes seem to be based on normal magical ones but they aren't exactly the same and I can't read them though. I've never seen or felt runes look so...Malicious." She looked up to meet his eyes before exchanging her notebook for a normal muggle camera, taking a few pictures of the runes on the stone. "What is
this Harry?"

He circled the stone, jaw tense, but careful not to touch or brush up against it, "It feels like a curse but I don't know what it might do." He backed away and coaxed her to her feet as she put everything back into her pack. "I think we'd better go."

She nodded and held his hand as they made their way out of the basement, the feeling of the runes prickling the back of her neck as they walked. It was a horrible feeling, the rune covered stone feeling almost like a living entity, something completely full of hate.

Harry didn't speak again until they were outside the gate once more, the negative energy dissipating as soon as they were outside of the property's boundary wards. "That was sincerely creepy."

"Oh yes, beyond creepy even." Even though the day was still warm and sunny, Hermione had to rub her arms to get rid of the goose-bumps there. She felt chilled to the bone and almost dirty, like she needed a shower. "If it's a curse then maybe Bill will recognize the runes, or Sirius, he was a rune genius according to Orion."

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, "We'll ask Bill first, since we'll be seeing him first most likely," he guided her away from the place his parents had died, pulling out his communication mirror to call Ron.

"Hey mate, ready for a pick up? Please tell me you're ready for a pick up. You would not believe how weird it is to hear my brother and a bunch of goblins speaking in excited Gobbledygook over this ring mess." Ron face was pleading rescue from the insanity.

"Yeah Ron we're ready for pick up, we're heading for the apparation point right now."

"Thank Merlin. Bill!" Ron's head turned, "Time for you to fetch Harry and Mione!"

"I'll be there." Bill looked up from the ring almost reluctantly, it was one of the most intriguing curses he'd ever seen. Dark and horrible of course but intriguing none the less. "You stay here with Boklek and touch nothing." Bill narrowed his eyes at Ron in warning. "I'll come back for you as soon as I know where to drop the cutie couple off."

He walked outside where he could apparate and turned up in the same square where he'd dropped them off.

Harry tucked the mirror away on Ron's grumble about not being that stupid with a chuckle and headed for Bill with Hermione. "Hey Bill. Thanks for this again by the way, you know, before I wind up giving you even more work."

"No need to thank me, I'm having more fun with this than I've had in ages." Bill grinned happily. "I have a little to talk to you about regarding the ring but I think that conversation is better had in more private settings. So where can I take you lovebirds?"

"I think to your office, we can floo back to the Burrow from Gringotts or the Leaky. Save you from popping all three of us back home." Harry sighed, "And you may not thank me after what I've got to tell you about what we found in the basement of my parents' old house."

"If I have to stay late you will be the one to explain our missed dinner date to Fleur." Bill grinned again and took a hold of Harry and Hermione. "Let's go then little ones."

They popped into the alley behind Gringotts and Bill took them inside through the employee
entrance and led them to his office. It wasn't big or grand but it was his and Bill was proud of it. "I'm getting some tea, anyone want anything?" Bill needed to collect himself a little, it wasn't easy to side along apparate several people at once, especially not several times in one day.

Harry flopped into a visitor's chair, waggling his fingers in hello to Ron, and pulled Hermione down into his lap, "Yes, by Merlin yes. Hot tea sounds good."

Ron frowned in concern and scooted his chair closer to his friend, "You alright there mate?"

"Yeah, it's just been a day full of ups downs and surprises."

Hermione nodded and curled up in Harry's lap, breathing out in relief that they were away from whatever that was in the basement.

It wasn't long until Bill came back, levitating a pewter tray loaded with teacups and sandwiches in front of him. Once everyone had their cups and chosen snack, he sat down in the chair behind his desk. "Tell me Harry, have you read Beedle The Bard? The story about the Three Brothers? Or heard about something called the Deathly Hallows?"

Harry gave him an arch look, "No, no, and no. Who's Beedle the Bard, what story about three brothers, and what's a Deathly Hallow?"

Ron chuckled and drank a bit of tea, "Beedle the Bard is just a storyteller, the story of the Three Brothers is one of his tales. He's sort of like that muggle...Anderson I think Hermione said his name was."

"H.C Anderson." Hermione nodded and looked at Harry. "You know, the ugly duckling, the little mermaid, the princess and the pea only to name a few. A story teller." She got a considering look on her face and bit her lip. "Oooh wait a moment." She picked her bag up from the floor and stuck her arm inside it, rummaging around. "I have a Beedle copy here, borrowed it from Luna before the summer." She pulled the book out and handed it to Harry. "Haven't had a chance to read it yet."

"Okay...Well read the story about the three brothers and we can talk more after that." Bill sipped his tea, amazed that there were children who hadn't grown up with Beedle and silently wondering what a pea had to do with a princess.

Harry took the book and looked at the table of contents for the right page, cheeks a little red with embarrassment. He'd never read or even heard the Anderson tales though he was aware of them, and of the Grimm's brothers' tales, but he'd never been able to read them for himself nor had he ever been read them. It reminded him that even among muggles he was far from knowledgeable. He flipped to the page that had the story Bill was talking about and read it. It was short, a little smattering of a fable, so he was able to read it in short order then look back to Bill, "Okay, so what does this have to do with what's got you excited?"

Bill picked up a quill and a piece of parchment and scribbled down a little doodle. "So the brothers each got a gift from Death right?" He turned the parchment so Harry could see it. "An invisibility cloak." He pointed to the triangle he'd drawn. "A stone." Another point to the circle inside the triangle. "And lastly a wand." The tip of the quill nudged the straight line inside the ring. "Together these items form the Deathly Hallows and if one wizard has all of them he or she will be the master of death itself." Bill swirled his chair around and picked up the ring and swirled back again so he was facing the three teens. "Now this is where it gets interesting. Don't worry, the curse on it is broken." He held out the ring and pointed to the same symbol he'd just drawn, printed on the gold band of the ring. "I think this is the resurrection stone...So Harry...Now you have a stone and a certain cloak...All you need is the wand." Bill's blue eyes shone as he looked at Harry.
It took two, maybe three seconds before Harry burst out, "Are you crazy?"

Ron just settled back, smirking into his teacup. He'd known Harry was going to have this reaction and it was fun getting to see Bill blink in shock.

"Completely aside from the fact that that ring is getting destroyed, you have got to be mad if you think I'd want the blasted wand. Master of Death? Why in the name of Gawain's smelly feet would I ever, ever want that?" He shuddered.

Ron grinned, "Told you Bill."

Bill sighed and handed his younger brother a jingeling bag of coins. "Yeah, yeah...So I gave him too much credit." He looked back at Harry and leaned further across the desk. "Gawain's lacking foot hygiene aside, it doesn't matter if you want it or even believe it's possible. A certain Bee wanting to go down in the history books and a certain Snakeface who's running out of Horcruxes believes it and believe me. The both very much want that power. Dumbledore knows you have the cloak right? If he finds out you have the ring too...Well..." He drifted off, still looking at Harry intently.

"He can kiss my round rear cheeks. Neither one of them will be getting their hands on my dad's cloak, I'd see it burned before that, and I'll be destroying that ring once I'm back at Hogwarts. Besides they'd have to have that stupid wand too wouldn't they?"

Ron choked on his tea, "Stupid? Mate the Elder Wand is the most powerful in the world, undefeatable."

"Good for it." Harry rubbed at his temple and leaned his head on Hermione's shoulder, "Sorry. I don't mean to snap."

She turned her and kissed his temple. It had been an overwhelming day and it was definitely understandable that Harry's patience and temper was a little stretched.

"It's okay mate." Bill leaned back in his chair. "Everyone who knows you, knows that power and beating death is not your thing. We're just letting you know what we found out, as you asked me to." He laced his long fingers together beneath his chin.

"They haven't gotten very far lately but we have to remember that both Dumbledore and Voldemort are very powerful in their own rights, one of them might already have the wand or at least clues to where it is. I'm with you, the ring should be destroyed, as quickly as possible because these three things together are very, very dangerous. No one is supposed to have the power over death, nothing good can ever come of that."

"Boy have you got that one right," Harry sighed, "I appreciate it Bill, I really do. I'd destroy the ring now except for one little problem."

Ron grimaced, "Voldemort would feel it right?"

Harry nodded, "Yeah, and it could tip him off to us destroying them one by one and then he'll get really desperate, even more than he is now and that is not a good thing. Better to destroy them all at once." He sighed, "Bill is there anyone who might know about this Elder Wand? I mean who might know who has it now so we can warn them about Dumbledore or Voldemort. I can tell you now, Voldemort doesn't have it right now. He's still got the brother to my wand."

Bill shrugged. "Don't really know, I suppose Ollivander might know something since he's a wand master. I only know of one now living person actually speaking about blatantly craving that wand
and that was Grindelwald, good luck getting to speak with him.” He finished his now lukewarm tea. "I'm sorry but I don't know how to help you with one."

"I've already got that part covered actually. I'll ask Grindelwald before I ask Ollivander." Harry rubbed his cheek against Hermione's shoulder, "You've been a big help already Bill. I hate to bring up another problem but this one's not urgent like the ring. Pretty much a take care of at your leisure."

"Hit me with it, might as well get all the goodies slapped at me at once." Bill's boot clad feet hit the desk as he crossed his legs.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Okay so Bill had a brain underneath all that red hair but he was still an arrogant prat most of the time. A charming, arrogant prat. She reached for her bag again and handed Bill the notebook with the copied runes on it as well as her digital camera with the pictures of them.

Bill actually paled a little when he looked at them. "Where did you find these?"

"Etched into a foundation stone in the basement of my parents' house in Godric's Hollow." Harry's voice was weary and he wrapped his arms around Hermione's waist a little tighter, "I'm not going to like what you're going to be able to tell me about those runes am I?"

Serious blue eyes flicked up from the runes to meet Harry's eyes. "No Harry, you're not." Bill pondered how to break this to Harry, the boy had been through so much already. "It's a curse, a very nasty, sneaky one as well. These runes are dormant until the intended person, animal, object enters the house, just by the energy of the...we'll I'm going to say person the runes are activated as is the curse. As long as this energy is in the house, no one else can leave, you're stuck there inside."

He grew silent again. "Like if the curse activated when Voldemort entered your house...Your parents and you couldn't leave, couldn't run...Trapped as long as Voldemort was inside as well."

Hermione made a distressed sound deep in her throat and twisted so she could wrap her arms around Harry tightly.

Ron watched as Harry's jaw tightened and his friend's fingers shook as he lifted them to pet through Hermione's hair. He could see that that simple action grounded him but there was still fury lighting the bright green of Harry's eyes but underneath that was old, soul deep pain. "That would explain why they went to Godric's Hollow rather than Potter Estate, why they probably let themselves be convinced it was safer. The old man set them up then made it so they couldn't run." His voice was soft, with shards of ice beneath growing exhaustion.

Ron got up to lay a hand on Harry's shoulder and looked at his brother, "Would the curse still have the signature of the one who set it?"

Bill nodded. "Even after centuries and with the most skilled wizard there's still always a trace. The darker the curse, the deeper your core signature is etched into it. It's a price you have to pay for dealing with evil."

Hermione held Harry tight, mouth pressed to his hair before she leaned her cheek on top of his head and turned to Bill. "So if there was to be an official investigation with Aurors and a Ministry controlled Curse Breaker...Dumbledore's signature could be recognized?"

"Absolutely, by anyone who has at least half a brain anyway...Which rules out most of the Ministry employees." Bill closed the notebook, not wanting to look at the runes any longer.
Harry gave a weak chuckle, "I can't request an investigation just yet, that'll have to wait until I'm seventeen and fully inherit but the day I turn seventeen Bill, I'm going to hire you and Gringotts to accompany two Aurors on an investigation of the house in the Hollow. Put one more nail in the old bastard's coffin."

Ron nodded, "You going to be alright mate?"

"Yeah but right now I feel like a rag that's been beaten against a river rock then wrung out."

Hermione went back to pressing kisses against Harry's hair.

"I'm putting my foot down now. As the responsible and awesome adult I am, I'm putting a stop to this day and sending you home. You can use the floo in here, I'll unlock it so you can pass through. Go. Home. Now."

Ron eyed his brother, "Responsible adult? Who fed you delusional potions?"

Harry laughed and nudged Hermione up before getting up himself, "He's responsible, when he's not trying to prove that he's awesome. Ron you go on through first please? I'm counting on you to stop me from landing on my face."

"Aye-aye mate," Ron waited for Bill to unlock the floo then grabbed a pinch of powder, calling out and stepping into the grate to go home.

"Rest up Harry, as best as you can anyway." Bill dropped the ring back into its box and handed it to Harry. "Just let me know if you need anymore help, this is much more fun than old grannies cursing their silver."

Hermione gave the tall redhead a hug in thanks before pushing Harry into the grate, holding out the floo powder to Harry.

He gave her a warm smile and took a handful, calling for the Burrow. It was the usual spinning and dizzying trip and then he fell out of the Burrow fireplace, Ron's hands catching his arms and holding him steady until he got his feet under him again, "Thanks mate."

"What are friends for?" Ron nudged him out of the way so Hermione could floo through and step out.

Hermione stepped through gracefully and she manished to banished every ounce of soot clinging to her before she dragged any of it out in Molly's pristinely cleaned house Floo travel, and apparation she could handle without trouble. It was just the blasted flying that didn't agree with her. "You both made it through alright then? No wrong turns anywhere?"

Harry smiled, "I learned my lesson about that the one time."

Ron puffed up indignantly, folding his arms across his chest, "Hey I've been flooing home all my life. I've not had a wrong turn since I was eight."

Before Hermione could fire back Harry took her hand and gave Ron a look, "No arguments right now alright? Please?"

Ron relaxed his battle-ready posture, "Yeah sure mate."

"Fine, don't really know what I'm supposed to say to Ron when I can't yell at him but I suppose I shall figure something out." Hermione took the edge off her words with a smile and by leaning in
so she could kiss both of their cheeks. She loved Ron too, very much and forever, just in a different way than Harry. "I'm just going to run up to Ginny's room and change, I feel...well I want to change."

Harry nodded and squeezed her hand, "Yeah. I think I'll change myself," he kissed her forehead, "I'll be downstairs when you're done."

Hermione nodded and gave him a smile before going up the stairs and into her friend's room where she found said friend poured out on her bed, face in the pillow.

"Ginny, please don't tell me you've been here all day...Pining." Hermione did her best to tone down the amusement in her voice as he pulled her shirt over her head and placed it in the laundry basket, letting her trousers follow.

One bleary eye looked up from the pillow. "But I miss him."

"Mmm, and smothering your face into the pillow will help a lot with that." Amusement faded into sarcasm as Hermione dug through her trunk for a fresh set of clothes. "Why don't you use your mirror? Go somewhere private and have one off together? Anything has to be better that his." She motioned toward the redhead on the bed.

"Hermione! Don't talk about having one off when you stand there in your underthings." Ginny was shocked and sounded so much like Molly that Hermione had to laugh. She slipped a soft dress over her head.

"There better?"

"Is that what you and Harry use your mirrors for?" The horror slowly melted into intrigue.

"I'll never tell. Just get out of the bed and do something. You won't miss Neville less by moping." Hermione sent Ginny a look and walked back downstairs.

Ron was walking out of the kitchen, a sandwich in hand, and he pointed at the couch when he saw her, speaking quietly, "I think he's half-dozing off but fighting it, stubborn prat."

"Thank you." She walked over and hugged Ron before going to the couch and looking down at her tired boyfriend. "Why don't you just go asleep? After today you need it love."

Harry opened his eyes and held out a hand in entreaty, "Stay with me?" He really didn't want to fall asleep alone, fearing that his nightmares would come even with Occlumency.

"Scooch over." She waited until he's scooched back more against the backrest before climbing onto the couch and half way on top of Harry, resting her head on his chest and having an arm tightly wrapped around his waist. "I'm not going anywhere, you just rest and I'll be here."

His own arms went around her in a secure hold, and he let his eyes drift shut to sleep off some of the weariness of the day. "Love you Hermione."

"Love you too Harry." Hermione wasn't really tired but she was fully comfortable to stay where she was, listening to the steady thump of Harry's heart beneath her cheek as he got some much needed rest.

Ron watched them for a moment before leaving a note for people coming back into the house letting them know that Harry was asleep on the couch and needed the rest then he hurried upstairs to finish his sandwich and work on his standard defense homework for a tick.
Chapter 54

Kingsley looked up as one of the Aurors assigned to the investigation of the Dursley residence came in. Savage was a good man, honest, with a core of honor that had him volunteering for the heart-breaker cases. Right now, the look on his face said that he'd run up against one of those, "Savage? You look like someone just kicked a crup puppy in front of you."

"In all honesty Sir, I almost wish someone had. Then at least I could have done something to make the crup puppy better afterwards." Savage stood in front of Kingsley's desk, hands clutched around the parchment scroll in his grasp. "Things have taken a rather unexpected turn in the investigations on the Dursley case Sir. If you would read this." He handed the scroll over to his superior.

He took the scroll warily. He was not enjoying his sudden position as Head Auror since Rufus decided to put his all into vying to be the new Minister. He was just glad he and Tonks still took cases though she took many cases solo these days. All the heart-breaker cases crossed his desk now at some point and he had a bad feeling about this.

Opening the scroll he began reading, not at all surprised to find that Umbridge had been the one to sign the order for the dementors to visit Potter's former guardians. He was, however, shocked when the first mention of abuse cropped up and then began to read more intently. A cupboard under the stairs with evidence of years of habitation, blood soaked into the pallet inside. Far too much blood, especially as some of it appeared to have been smeared onto the walls and underside of the stairs in macabre drawings. It was as if the one shedding the blood had nothing else and such an abundance of the blood that it just made sense to them to use it to bring some sort of life to the dark and dreary underworld they'd been pushed into.

There was more, a tiny upstairs bedroom with several locks and a cat flap on the door, locks facing outward, cat flap opening inward, bars on the window, and more old blood soaked into a thin mattress. The small space that someone lived in surrounded by broken toys and games that someone had taken to trying to repair, likely out of boredom.

Two very ugly little spots in an otherwise painfully boring suburban muggle household.

On the surface, aside for the cupboard and the little bedroom, it was like any other magicless household with a spoiled rotten child, lace and flower patterns, dust free from constant cleaning of a housewife, an armchair well used for the husband, the largest bedroom, obviously Dudley Dursley's, stacked full with toys and games and clothes strewn about the floor, empty crisp bags, just the typical detritus of a spoiled teenage boy. All so clean and neat, except for those two rooms and he was only half way through the parchment.

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, "Did you perform the Walls have Eyes spell and record the results on crystal?"
"Of course." Savage pulled out a crystal and placed that as well on the desk. "It's already been logged and placed under the anti-tampering lock." The Auror swallowed. "The blood is Potter's, his signature is the one in the cupboard and small bedroom as well. The signatures and the blood, it goes back years Sir, well over a decade."

Savage knew that Kingsley would understand where he was going with that comment. Potter had been abused to the point of bleeding since toddlerdom. "Also Sir, I am afraid that this is not everything, there is more." He picked up another scroll. "We found this near the foundation of the house, on the inside of the outer wall."

He took the other and read it, his eyes flaring for a few moments before they set into hard and cold anger, "Dumbledore. I shouldn't be surprised." He noted the curse, "An exacerbation curse. Has it been removed yet?"

"Not yet, everything needs to be documented beyond questioning. The Gringotts people have promised to remove the curse once everything is dealt with." Savage sighed. "I've posted Donahue and Hanson outside the house, in case any muggles try to enter and fall under the curse."

Kingsley nodded, "I want you to personally see to the security of the blood and, after the case is over, its removal and destruction. The last thing anyone needs is for Potter's blood to be stolen for use in some insane potion." He rubbed his temple, "Keep the extent of the abuse under wraps as much as you possibly can. The media would have an absolute frenzy and I do not want to even think about Potter's reaction to it becoming public knowledge."

"Yes Sir." Savage nodded then looked insecure for a moment. "Permission to speak off the record Sir?"

"You have it Savage," Kingsley copied the scrolls for his own records, handing the originals back to Savage.

"Dumbledore needs to be stopped. This goes well beyond trying to talk to a student about dark magic and dark artifacts. It goes beyond abuse as well, if it had been anyone else than Potter then Dumbledore would be staring down attempted murder charges right now. I have a niece Potter's age and the fact that she's lived at Hogwarts under this man's roof makes me sick. No matter what the Ministry thinks I believe it's time to take off the silk gloves and show the public what kind of man Albus Dumbledore really is. Right now he has a lot of supporters willing to hide him and work his causes in secret, because they still believe that he is a good man." Savage silenced and looked down at the desk top.

"You're not wrong. There is, currently, an operation in effect to apprehend him by appearing to work his cause, however he has yet to contact any of the operatives in person." He looked down at the crystal and thought of a toddler finger-painting on dingy, dusty walls in his own blood.

"Pass off your other cases to Dawlish for now. I want you working this one exclusively. Potter doesn't have what you'd call a high view of Aurors and I somehow doubt he has much of a good view of the muggle police force either."

He met Savage's eyes again, "Even with his magic healing him something would have been visible to teachers in the muggle primary schools, I want you to find out why nothing was ever done or if anything was even reported."

"You got it Sir. I'll be on it. Can I keep Donahue and Hanson with me?" Savage was satisfied that Kingsley actually listened to him. He could absolutely understand Potter's lack of faith in the legal authorities, growing up the way Potter had, Savage wouldn't trust anyone at all if he was in Potter's
Kingsley went over the two in his head and nodded, "Yes. They're good men," never mind that Hanson was female, all the Aurors in general were referred to as men. It wasn't politically correct but what could you expect from a society who still dressed like they were living in the Victorian age. "You know the drill for reporters questioning you on active cases. I sometimes wish we could just turn them into the vultures they are and be done with it."

"Oh I very much agree. Still, I'll stick with the boring no comments and no-nosy charms. If that's all for now Sir. I should get back into it then. The longer that house sits there, knowing what's in it...It doesn't sit right with me. I want the curse removed so the house can succumb to an unfortunate gas leak explosion already." Savage gathered his scrolls and documents to file them in Archives before he left the building.

Kingsley sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. He just hoped that they could put off informing the Weasleys, and Merlin save them all, Lord Black as long as possible. That lot would raze the Ministry down to the foundations for negligence in the monitored welfare of a magical child. He would not want to be in Dumbledore's shoes if Black ever got a hold of him either.

Sirius stood up and stretched with a smile, looking behind him at Remus still curled up in bed, snug as a bug in a rug. His chuckle was interrupted by the owl tapping on the window, today's Prophet held in talons. He went to the window and took the paper, handing the owl a treat before unrolling the parchment, and promptly losing his smile.

"BOY-WHO-LIVED-TO-BE-ABUSED!!!!!! an article by Rita Skeeter

My faithful readers, just last evening I found myself investigating the most horrific, ugly, hidden truth of our time. Harry Potter, our intrepid Hero, was badly abused under his muggle relatives' care."

Sirius' jaw was tense as he read the article, his hands so tight on it that his nails were tearing into the parchment. A few words really struck out at him 'finger-painting in his own blood on the walls of his cupboard' in particular twisting the knife, but his fury absolutely skyrocketed near the end when Skeeter called Harry's sanity into question.

"One does wonder, dear reader, if we should be placing all our hopes on Mr. Potter considering this unfortunate upbringing. How could it not leave an indelible mark on his character and mind? Perhaps his lack of action on our behalf is, in fact, a passive act of vengeance to his damaged mind for our lack of action on his behalf for so long? It is a question that lingers in this reporter's mind."

Remus blinked away and smothered his yawn into the pillow as he tried to figure out what had woken him up. Suddenly hispliant and sleep warm body grew tense and he shot straight up in bed looking around wildly. "Sirius, Sirius what's wrong? You're growling."

Not playful or passionate growling but lethal, angry, rumbling growls that showed that the Grim was inside Sirius Black no matter which form he chose to use. "What's happened? Tell me please?" He crawled across the bed until he could place a trembling hand on his mate's shoulder.

Sirius had by now crumpled the paper up and thrown it across the room and his hands were flexing, wanting something to rip apart but there was nothing. He swallowed, trying to calm his temper enough to vocalize beyond a savage growl. One hand loosened and reached up, covering Remus' gently. "I don't think you really want to know Moony."
He closed his eyes, his mate's warmth behind him, the ring beneath his touch leeching the anger out of him. "Rephrase, you don't want to know, this is one of those things no one ever wants to know." He hung his head, his other hand coming up to rub over his face, "Fuck."

Getting out of bed, Remus pulled a dressing robe over his sleeping pants, not bothering to tie it since his stomach looked ridiculous when he did. He walked around the bed and with a smothered groan he sunk down on the floor in front of Sirius. "From watching you here I think I need to know whether I want to or not. You're hurting so much love." He rested a cheek on Sirius' thigh.

The door to their bedroom slammed open, making Remus almost jump out of his skin as their son barged inside, very much not in control of his wolf. "Have you read this shit?" Amber eyes glowed and fangs bared as he waved a copy of the paper around.

Sirius sighed, reaching down to hook his hands around Remus' elbows and lift his mate into his lap, wrapping his arms around him, "Yes I've read it Orion, rip it to shreds if it makes you feel better, burn it, crumple it up, whatever works that's not finding Rita Skeeter and peeling the skin from her body."

He felt Remus tense and leaned his head on his shoulder, "Or give it here and destroy the one crumpled in the corner since your Dad hasn't read it yet and, much as I'd rather he not know about it, much as I'd rather you hadn't learned about it, he needs to know. And what in the name of Merlin are you doing with your own copy of the Prophet anyway?"

"I need to know what's going on the world, how else am I going to take over it when the time comes?" Orion was still absolutely pissed but he still handed his Dad his copy of the prophet. Then he scribbled a spell down on a piece of paper and handed that to his Father. "Could you please cast this spell on the paper in the corner?"

Orion hated that he couldn't practice magic. He was thankful that Sirius did as he asked without question and then he took the charmed paper, slowly starting to tear thin strips out of it, making the newspaper scream in a loud, female voice that sounded as if it was in agony.

When Remus looked up from the paper in his hands, his eyes were the same burning amber as his son's and he was stiff in absolute rage.

Sirius eyed his son for a moment before rubbing the back of Remus' neck with his hand, "I knew it was bad, I could smell the blood coming from that place but I didn't know it was that bad. Fucking Mab Moony, why didn't any of the muggles around notice and help, forget wizards there's no way that no one heard or saw what was going on, why didn't they help?" He hurt, right down to his soul thinking of their cub in such a desperate, deadly situation and no one who could even noticing or doing anything to help.

"There has to be an explanation, reason for it." Remus struggled to get Moony under control, knowing it wasn't good for the baby to get so upset. "Muggles aren't cruel, aren't bad. My Mum was muggleborn, look at Mione's parents. Something, someone must have kept them from seeing, kept them from acting and helping."

Orion continued tearing into the paper, the screaming getting worse with each tear.

Sirius' hand smoothed over Remus' belly just as the communication mirror on the bedside table chimed. He met the two pairs of furious amber eyes in the room before reaching over and answering it, "Yes?"

"Have I mentioned lately just how much I loathe Rita Skeeter? And don't try and tell me you
haven't seen the paper, the screaming in the background says otherwise." Harry's face was already weary and strained though it was barely before breakfast. The light he was in was muted and low.

"Where in Tartarus are you?"

"The attic," Harry's eyes cut up quickly, "You move those you little twat and I swear I will exorcise you," he nodded then looked back into the mirror, "more accurately I'm barricaded in the attic. Hermione's not awake yet, thank Merlin for silenced kitchens, so I am avoiding the rest of the house until they calm down."

"Please, please Orion stop making the paper scream." Remus begged before looking back at Harry through the mirror. "We've read it and believe us, the loathing and hatred for Skeeter is alive and thriving here too."

He knew that the last thing Harry wanted was pity so he put a lid on the words, apologies and tears just dying to get out. "You may be able to hide from the others but Hermione will find you, do you want to come over? We have more room, you can have your own and we promise not to pressure or prod...It's better than an attic and a poltergeist." Remus wanted to take care of Harry, make things better even if it only meant providing a place where he could be alone.

"Hermione I don't mind. It's the rest of the lot I'm avoiding. Molly's about to go on a rampage, aided by Bill and Fleur, Arthur looks as if he might just blow something up, Ginny came in just as the paper arrived so Ron's currently physically restraining her but the look on his face is one of 'I'm going to rip someone's spine out' when she wakes up Hermione'll be pissed no doubt but she'll keep her head...mostly. That said, yes please. Snuffles is keyed into the wards here so if he could apparate me out before one of the red tide makes it up here that'd be good."

Sirius gently shifted Remus to the bed and got up, handing him the mirror, "You've got it cub, just leave a message for Molly and them to avoid extra etiquette lessons."

"Those aren't so bad actually but yeah, I don't want them to worry."

"I'll get a room ready for you, bring Mione if you want to, we have the room." Remus held the mirror as Sirius got dressed so he wouldn't be picking up Harry in pants alone. "Get ready now and write that note to the family and Snuffles will be there in a tick." He gave Harry a smile no matter how much it hurt. None of what had happened was Harry's fault and Remus would do his very best to make Harry know that, make things feel as normal as possible.

"Thanks, see you in a bit. I'm going to get my girl." The mirror went back to its reflective blank.

Sirius looked up from where he was fighting on trousers, "Orion glaring at something won't make it burst into flames, I'd go get my broom ready if I were you. Knowing Harry he'll be wanting a fly."

Just as Sirius said that the remains of the paper in Orion's hands did burst in to flames, causing him to let out a very undignified shriek and drop it, stomping out the embers. "Bloody, fucking hell!" He looked up at his parents with startled eyes. "Right...Broom." He walked out the room.

"This day is just getting better and better." Remus rubbed at his eyes. "You go get our lion cub and his girl...I'll go check on our firestarter." Remus walked over to their dresser to find some clothes that fitted his balloon formed shape.

Sirius caught him for a quick kiss, "Watch it on the stairs love. Be back soon," that said he tugged a t-shirt on over his head and apparated into the Weasley attic just as a seething Hermione Granger
slipped in and Harry finished putting what he'd used to barricade the door back into place. "Ready then?"

Harry nodded, giving his godfather a weak smile, "Oh yeah. Note's on Hermione's bed since I imagine Ginny'll be right there soon as Ron lets her go."

"That would be my guess as well." Hermione's face was a pale mask of fury and she was already planning a million and one ways to make Skeeter pay once and for all. "I'm ready to go when you are." She could fully understand Harry's need to get away for a while.

Sirius put a hand on each of their shoulders then apparated them out and into the entry hall of Black Manor, "Welcome to the, renovated, ancestral home of the Blacks, formerly the de Noirs and blah, blah, blah you get the idea."

Harry chuckled softly, "Thanks Sirius."

He ruffled the disreputable mop of black hair on his godson's head then eyed it, "Are you growing your hair out?"

"Er yeah sort of," he ran his hands over his scalp, "I can't keep it out of my eyes when it's shorter but if it's too short it looks like a scrub pad so I figure I'll grow it out and be able to pull it back." Not to mention his girlfriend liked to fiddle with his hair and he liked her hands in it.

"I like it, it looks good on him." Hermione was firm in her judgement as she put a wayward lock of Harry's hair behind his hair. Then she looked around the grand entry hall with open curiosity. "I can't believe how nice it is, how airy and welcoming. I'm not trying to offend everyone but with what Harry told me about Grimmauld Place I kind of was expecting the worst.

"Hence the renovated bit," Sirius waggled his brows, "and why we didn't move in immediately after my acquittal."

Harry smiled a bit, "It looks good." He spotted Orion loping down the stairs, "Great Merlin is that Ri? He's shot up like a weed."

Sirius grinned, "Voice is cracking too, it can be plenty funny at times."

Orion opened his mouth to berate his father but of course that was the moment his voice cracked really badly, leaving him sounding like a squeaking mouse. Instead he glared at Sirius and walked over to lift Hermione off the floor and twirl her around in greeting before setting her on her feet and clasping Harry on the shoulder. He was so tall he looked eye to eye with his big brother now. "Good to see you Scar, really good and I'm glad that you're here."

"Pup," Harry pulled him into a hug, "good grief Pansy'll fall down in shock at the sight of you." He eyed Sirius, "You were taller than my dad weren't you?"

"I was. You will be looking up at your little brother, sorry." Sirius' grin was utterly unrepentant.

Harry just shook his head and clapped Orion on the back, "You'll probably wind up big as Alek. Think you're up to a fly?"

"Think? Psht, I know I can outfly you, anytime, anyday." Orion swept his now shoulder length black hair into a secure ponytail. He was still a little wild eyed about the impromptu fire but his Dad had managed to calm him down some and he'd spoken to Alek via floo as well. "I'll be outside, just come out when you're ready to be beaten out of the air." Orion tossed his head and sauntered out the door.
"Oh Merlin...Parkinson will have her work cut out for her when school starts. I have a feeling popularity among boys and girls will find Orion this year." Hermione looked amused.

Sirius grinned, "That's my boy."

Harry snorted, "I'd say so since he's showing definite signs of developing an ego the size of Hogwarts. Where do I stow my stuff so I can teach him a lesson in flying that'll flatten the ego a bit?"

"Come, I'll show you." Remus turned up on the landing waving both Harry and Hermione up and toward him. "Welcome, despite why you're here it's so good to see you. I've made up rooms for you."

Hermione walked up the stairs next to Harry and hugged Remus tightly when they reached him. The man looked good pregnant, he looked happy.

Remus walked in front of them down a softly colored corridor until he stopped in front of a broad oakwood door. "This is you Harry." He opened the door to a room done in soft greens and blues.

And right across the hall we'll have you Mione." This room was done in silver with jewel colored accents. "Take all the time you want to get settled." He beamed at them both.

"Thank you Remus." Hermione was just about to go inside when something caught her eye. "Remus J Lupin...Is that an engagement ring?"

"Um...Yes." Color flooded scarred cheeks.

Harry looked down at Remus' hand and smiled, the first easy, completely unshadowed smile of the day, "Well I'd say it's about time Padfoot got off his duff." He moved to give Remus a hug, "Congratulations Moony."

"Thank you." Remus hugged Harry back tightly, silently trying to give his eldest cub some of his strength through the hug. "You're both welcome when the day comes of course. It will be very small, only family attending."

Hermione nodded to herself, Remus was definitely not the grand party kind, or someone who wanted to be in focus.

"We'll be there, no way I'd miss you making an honest man out of Snuffles." His lips twitched at the sarcastic 'very funny' coming from down the hall, "Now I don't mean to dump my things and run but," he grabbed his broom, "I have a pup to teach a lesson." He kissed Hermione's cheek and dashed out just as Sirius came back in. "Feel free to watch me decimate him!"

Sirius wrapped an arm around Remus' waist as Harry's footsteps disappeared down the stairs. "Do we watch or do we three scheme out the details of the lawsuit that we're going to make Harry press against Skeeter and the Prophet?"

"We scheme and we're going to floo your attorney right away and see if there's any way we can slap Skeeter with the mouth-binding spell due to the fact that Harry is still a minor and she's printed details of an ongoing investigation." Remus flushed a little. "I might have had the time to do some thinking when you went to get them." He turned his head and kissed Sirius' cheek.

Sirius picked Remus up in a little half twirl, as a full one would prompt a lost breakfast, and planted a kiss on his lips, "I love that brilliant mind of yours Moony." He looked at Hermione, "Like to join us in our nefarious plotting of Skeeter's downfall?"
Hermione looked like Christmas had come early. "Do you even have to ask? I want to nail that...that...cunt to the wall." She looked shocked by her own choice of words but she meant them. She hated Rita Skeeter and the poison that woman continued to spew without any thoughts of the consequences.

Sirius barked out a laugh, "Hermione it's easy to see why Harry adores you. You just looked like Prongs in the headlights saying that. Come on then, let's go to the library to plot and plan and make sure Skeeter is ruined."

Impulsively she gave Sirius and Remus a hug each before she followed them to the library to do what she did best...Research. Oh yes, Skeeter was going to go down, this was one article she would wish she never had written.

--------------------------------------------

Harry followed the pouting Orion back into the house feeling lighter and much more content with his lot in life now that he'd gotten to fly off some of the stress. "I told you I was going to win. You've slowed down in the air with all that new height, you're not used to maneuvering with it yet."

"I'll learn. Before school starts, I'll be an ace again. This is the year Slytherin will win the Quidditch Cup." Orion said stubbornly while still pouting, a small smile lit up his face though. "Still, thank you for a brilliant flight. It was a lot of fun. I needed that."

"You weren't the only one," he ruffled Orion's windblown hair, "So how much do you want to bet all three of them are in the Library plotting?"

"That's one bet I won't take, it's a given they're all there." Orion straightened his ponytail with only a sigh, he was used to Harry messing it up by now. "Um Harry...something happened this morning. I set fire to the disgusting Prophet just by looking at it. Dad and Alek says I shouldn't worry about it but I do."

Harry smiled and squeezed his shoulder, "They're right. You were angry, very angry. It was accidental magic, really nothing to worry too much about. I can tell you that you feel more balanced, like your wolf isn't trying to crawl out of your skin anymore and even so soon after getting that angry it's settled again. Your control is already worlds better."

Orion flashed him a relieved smile. "Alek has been amazing, is amazing. He explains things in a way that puts things in perspective. You've made a good choice hiring him as Headmaster, he will take care of the students. Spath is brilliant too and it's always beyond amusing watching and listening to them." Orion chuckled when he thought of the blatant UST between the two men.

"I can imagine," Harry's tone was dry, "With luck they'll jump each other soon and put it all out of everyone's misery." He went upstairs to put his broom away, Orion dogging his steps, "Romantic intrigue at Marauders...somehow it's all too fitting." He grabbed a set of clean clothes and stepped behind the Chinese screen in his room with the old fashioned water basin and pitcher to wipe away the sweat and stink from the exertion of the flight. "So what else have you been up to Ri?"

Orion shrugged. "Not much actually. Owling with Pansy, trying to bleach the memory of the parents doing it on the couch in front of me out of my mind. Studying under Uncle Sev and visiting Dennis as well as having him over here." He ran a tongue over a sharp fang. "How about you? I know you went after a Horcrux but I mean more casual things, what have you been up to Harry?"

"Etiquette lessons, homework, dance lessons, helping the others with the chore punishment Molly gave them," he pulled the clean shirt on, "helping Molly cook, up until today and the Horcrux
retrieval day it has been a blessedly normal summer. Oh that and befriending Sirius’ Auror cousin.”
He pulled his trousers on and walked back out from behind the screen, "Remember the one with the pink hair?"

"Oh yeah...I remember her. The Nymphomaniac one." Orion nodded. “I didn't speak very much for her but from what I saw and heard she seemed nice. It's a little sad I don't know her...She's family."

He shrugged. “Maybe it will change now that Sirius doesn't have to be in hiding anymore. Have you seen this house Scar? It's huge. When we first moved in I thought I would get lost in it. Dad walked around like a little mouse the first week. You know how he is, always thinking he's not good enough. I am so glad he and Father are getting married, maybe then Dad will finally get that Sirius loves him no matter what."

Harry shook his head, "What is it with the brainy ones? Hermione's like that too. I think it'll just take some time Ri, that or a soul bonding whichever comes first. So, give me the tour, ending at the library." He prodded Orion's shoulder, "I invited Tonks 'don't call me Nymphadora' to my birthday party so I'm pretty sure a family reunion is in the offing."

"That's good, I look forward to meeting her again in less official circumstances." Orion grinned. "Come on then big brother, just follow the magnificent Orion and I will show you every nook and cranny before we join the vengeful trio in the library." Orion wrapped an arm around Harry's neck and ruffled his hair before dragging him out of the room to give him the grand tour.

Harry let Orion's natural brightness set him at ease as he was given the tour. Black Manor was indeed huge and he could see Remus acting like a church mouse for a few days, overwhelmed, until Sirius poked and prodded him back out of it. They approached a pair of oak double doors and he heard the plotting going on within.

"Right, so not only will it ruin her career but the Prophet would either have to go bankrupt or fork over the majority shares to Harry."

"That's the gist of things yes." Remus nodded and Hermione looked very pleased with herself as she met Sirius' eyes.

"She will stew in her own misery, forever regretting her greed." Hermione almost cackled.

"Mate, your girlfriend is scary." Orion whispered to Harry, eyes wide.

Harry grinned, "I know, isn't she wonderful?" He opened one of the doors and stepped in, "What's this? Plotting without me?"

Sirius jumped in his seat, "Oh hey cub. Have a good fly?"

"Uh-huh. You're really slipping Snuffles for me to startle you like that."

"You know what old age does to a dog." Orion grinned and walked over to sink down in a chair. "It's sad but we try to humor him as best as we can."

Remus reached out and pulled rather harshly on Orion's ponytail. "Be nice pup."

"Hi love." Hermione beamed and waved Harry over.

He went to sit next to her, pressing a kiss to the corner of her mouth, "Hullo pretty girl. So what's this plan to ruin the vulture?"
Hermione's grin was evil as she talked Harry and Orion through the plan they had concocted to make Skeeter regret that she was ever born. "It's fullproof as well, no way she can ever fight this. Skeeter is done. Ding dong the witch is dead."

"Really scary." Orion mouthed to Harry and watched Hermione with trepidation.

Harry kissed her, "I love you."

Sirius just grinned at them and leaned his head on Remus' shoulder, "The most brilliant ones are always the scariest Orion. It's what makes them so wonderfully special, take your Dad for instance. Utterly brilliant and when he got into his evil Marauder skin the castle trembled I tell you."

Orion raised a disbelieving brow, he couldn't see anything scary about his loving, gentle Daddy. "If you say so." He scratched behind his ear like a wolf would. "I guess I can see it though, Pansy can be bloody terrifying when she sets out to be."

Remus smiled and brought his fingers to Sirius' hair, raking them through glossy tresses lovingly.

Sirius made a happy sound, leaning into the touch, "So Harry, we have your full permission to be evil?"

Harry broke the kiss, letting himself play with Hermione's fingers instead, "Have at it. Roast her, toast her, make julienne Skeeter fries. I will sit back and cackle over her demise."

"I'll make the necessary floo calls right away, no reason to wait. The quicker the bitch goes down the better." Remus kissed Sirius before getting up from his seat. "I'll be in the study." He waddled out of the library to get things started.

"He walks a little like a wounded duck doesn't he?" Orion waited until his Dad had closed the door behind him before he voiced his observation.

Sirius scowled at his son, "Ori-" he went silent when two pillows his Orion in the face one after the other from Harry and Hermione's direction. "Well that says it all."

"Don't you dare say that about Remus when he's carrying your sibling." Hermione frowned. "Just wait until your mate is pregnant, I will be sure to remind said mate of what you just said. I have a very good memory."

Orion gulped loudly. "I didn't mean anything bad by it. I love Dad, you all know that."

"Of course we do but Remus is self conscious enough without being compared to injured waterfowl." Harry's tone was gentle, the reprimand already delivered. "Just remember that okay kiddo?"

"Okay, I'll be careful what I say." Orion looked properly chastised. "I don't get why Dad is like that? He's awesome, brilliant, strong and loving. How can he not know that?" Orion really was baffled. His Dad was amazing in his eyes, the one he loved absolutely most of all, the one who had looked after him all his life.

Sirius opened his mouth but didn't quite know how to answer that. It was Harry who provided it.

"When you're told by the majority your entire life that you're worth nothing or plain, you start to believe it. After a while it just becomes less painful to believe it than to convince yourself that you're not worthless or ugly. Then when you find someone who sees nothing but good and beauty in you, you can't really believe it because you've spent so long believing the opposite and you're
terrified that as soon as you start believing that someone, they'll change their mind. It's not logical at all, makes no sense whatsoever, but it's what happens when you get beaten down so much for so long."

Orion's jaw set. "I wish I could travel back in time and kick the arse of everyone who has ever said anything like that about Dad. He is nothing but wonderful and beautiful, inside and out. I couldn't be prouder that he's my Dad and as soon as the Bee is finally gone I will shout it to the ceiling for everyone to hear. That Remus Lupin, then Black is my Dad and I love him."

Hermione reached out and ran her fingers over Orion's cheek. "Remus knows you love him, that's all that matters. Just continue to let him know that."

Sirius ruffled his son's hair, "It took years for idiots to push your Dad down, we'll just have to spend as many pulling him back up."

Harry nodded, "He's got all of us, plus the little tadpole on the way to keep levitating him right back to where he ought to be."

Orion nodded. "It was just me and Dad...and Uncle Sev of course for a very long time. I am so glad we've got all of you now." He looked strangely vulnerable as he turned to Sirius. "I know I don't say it nearly enough but I do love you Papa, I am so grateful you found your way back to us...To Dad. There was no one else you know, not even a single date. He always waited for you, loved only you."

Sirius tugged his son in for a strong hug. "That went both ways, even when I was being a stupid bastard. I am a lucky, lucky son of a bitch that he forgave me and let me come back."

"Of course he did, even scared he loved you. You belong together." Orion hugged his father back, leaning his head on Sirius' strong shoulder. "You're my goal, any love less than the one you have for each other isn't worth having."

Hermione listened to Orion, amazed that he could voice what he said aloud. She leaned in and whispered in Harry's ear. "He really has grown this summer hasn't he?"

Harry nodded, smiling proudly for his little brother, "In all ways yes and we're only a month in."

He turned his head to give her a smile, "Not so much a puppy anymore. Parkinson is going to have kittens."

"Oh yes." Hermione nodded. "Do you think she'll recognize him at your masquerade party, with the way he's grown I mean?" She leaned in to kiss him, happy to see Harry smile again after the morning's article. She felt no remorse at all to have been a part of ruining a person's life. Skeeter deserved everything she had coming to her.

"Not a chance in Morgana's knickers. That's going to be fun." He met her halfway and his arms came around her, pulling her close.

Sirius noticed them and coaxed his son to let go, angling his head at the door, the silent message being to give the two teenage lovebirds privacy. He ruffled his son's hair as they made their way to Remus' study and heard him getting the balls rolling.

Remus looked over his shoulder and smiled at his family as he talked to Sirius solicitor and Arthur over the floo. The ball was rolling and before lunch, Rita Skeeter would watch her life and career crumble around her ears, never to be rebuilt. She'd be lucky if she'd be able to avoid Azkaban after this, much less get another job.
Sirius came over and kissed him just beneath the ear, "I love it when you're ruthless." He moved to lean on the desk and watch his Moony work while talking Quidditch with their son.

Orion spoke eagerly about teams and moves with his father until his dad finally ended his floo calls, the fire returning to normal orange. "It's done. Sadly the damage is done when it comes to Harry but Skeeter will never be allowed to print something like this ever again....Or print anything at all for that matter. She's done for."

"I say we strike up the band for that then." Sirius smiled happily at Remus, "My devious Moony, how I love thee. Shall I count the ways?" He went over to perch on the arm of his mate's chair, "That's one evil vulture shot down. I'd say it calls for chocolate for celebration yes?"

"I never turn down anything that has the word chocolate in it and I know your boy here doesn't either." Remus smiled back and got up from in front of the fireplace with a smothered moan. Leaning over to press a kiss against Sirius' lips. "I hope Harry is okay, well as okay as he can be during the circumstances."

Sirius caught Remus' mouth for a longer kiss before prodding him to sit down in the chair, "He'll bounce back. I think he hates the fact that everyone knows what he lived through more than Skeeter's slurs on his sanity." He sighed, "I can't blame him." He pulled his wand out and called out an accio that had a box of Belgian chocolate truffles zooming into his hand. He opened the box and held one up to Remus' lips.

Remus made a delighted sound in the back of his throat and sucked the truffle into his mouth, licking at Sirius' fingers as he did so.

"Ok~ay." Orion got up from his seat. "I think it's time to leave you two to it. I have an owl to send to Pansy anyway. Have fun but don't be too loud, remember that you have visitors." Orion slipped out of the study and left his parents to it. Once they got started with chocolate and finger licking it always ended in naughtiness and Orion did not want to witness it first hand.

Sirius chuckled and leaned in to lap a smear of chocolate from the corner of Remus' mouth, "Am I horrible for not being the slightest bit repentant that our son knows exactly when to vacate the room?"

"No, not more horrible than I am anyway." Remus looped his arms around Sirius' shoulders and captured his mate's mouth with more vigor. Sharing the chocolate between them and kissing Sirius with his entire being, showing his mate how much he loved him.

Sirius made a happy hum and twined his tongue with Remus' his hands sinking into the sandy brown, graying hair, keeping the kiss tender, his entire heart in it. He shifted and moved his arms to lift Remus up for a quick transfer to the loveseat in the study, never breaking the kiss.

Remus made a surprised noise that Sirius was able to lift him at all without throwing his back out in Remus' inflated state but he wrapped his arms around his lover and let himself be manhandled. Once they were seated on the loveseat, Remus broke the kiss to nip, kiss and lick his way across Sirius' jawline and down his neck. Closing his teeth gently over Sirius' pulsepoint, the wolf in him rising to the surface slightly.

Sirius angled his head to allow Remus to nip and bite as much as he wanted with an encouraging noise, his hands slipping under Remus' shirt to run over his back then around his ribs to first caress the hard mound of his stomach then up to stroke over the firm pectorals, fingertips brushing over his nipples. "Love you."
"Love you too." Remus' reply came out as a breathless moan as he arched into Sirius' touch as much as he could with his belly bump. Now pregnant his nipples were even more sensitive than usual and he shivered with pleasure as Sirius brushed against them. His hands came up to bury themselves in Sirius' hair and he mouthed at the hollow behind Sirius' ear, sucking a bright purple mark there, marking his mate.

He eased the shirt off of Remus and tossed it somewhere over his shoulder, his hands now stroking over the exposed skin of his arms. He shifted, kissing his mate's shoulder when Remus made a sound of disappointment at the loss of his neck to suck on. He kissed along one arm, licking softly and worshipfully at the scars his mouth encountered, both the old and the newer ones from Remus' time at Umbridge's mercy, until he reached his lover's hand and kissed each fingertip. He gave the opposite arm the exact same treatment, ending with fingertip kisses again before placing a kiss right over Remus' heart.

Remus couldn't take his eyes away from Sirius, his heart speeding up underneath Sirius' lips. Sirius made him feel loved and treasured and in Sirius' arms he could almost feel beautiful. His hands went to Sirius' shirt, unbuttoning it slowly and leaning down to kiss every inch of skin that was exposed to him. "You are so lovely Siri. So beautiful. I could touch, taste and lick for hours and hours and never get enough."

"Next time we get a chance then, I'll just lay myself out for you to do as you please," He shrugged off his shirt, glorying in the feel of Remus' hands on his skin. He was missing a few of the Azkaban tattoos now because they'd been magic suppression tattoos that had been taken off when he'd been cleared but the identification tattoos were still there as were the runes branding him as a, now former, inmate of Azkaban. He'd keep them, as reminders of what he'd been through as well as what his stupidity had cost him, reminders not to do it again. His hands pet over Remus' belly again and he smiled, bending to scatter kisses over the taunt surface. Such a precious gift, one he didn't deserve but damned if he was going to let Remus and their family slip away from him ever again. He ran his tongue over a pale stretch mark and plucked at the stretchy waistband of Remus' trousers.

Remus made an encouraging sound and slanted his hips forward, into Sirius' touch. His mate mate him ache, made him want...Always want in every possible way. His hands traced the tattoos on Sirius' pale skin before he leaned in and followed his fingers path with the tip of his tongue. Sirius' skin was smooth, warm and spicy underneath his tongue and Remus couldn't stop the purring sound of contentment rising from his throat as he continued to taste his mate. "When we're in our bed and the house isn't housing our cubs and girlfriends I am going to spread you out and rim you until my jaw aches, taste you inside and out and make you come over and over again."

Sirius shivered at the sensual promise in that tone, "Oh I am going to hold you to that Remus, and then I'll return the favor but for now," he started tugging the trousers down when a short knock had him freezing.

"Hey Remus is-" Harry broke off as he opened the door, blinked a couple times, then averted his blushing face, "Well that answers half the question. Sorry to interrupt but I was looking for Sirius and Orion, er...next time hang a tie on the door?" He backed out quickly and shut the door.

Sirius rested his head on Remus' belly and his shoulders shook heavily before he started laughing, "Well he took it better than Orion at least?"

Remus made a strangled, mortified sound and his face was bright red in embarrassment. "Yes, less screaming about going blind and needing to be obliviated...We really do need to remember locking charms Siri, this is beginning to be a bad habit, scaring our cubs minds." Remus inched off Sirius'
lap, the mood definitely broken. He looked around the floor and found his shirt by the fireplace, going over to get it and pull it over his head. "Love you though."

He walked over to Sirius again and placed a kiss on the tip of his nose. "You should go see what Harry wanted in the first place."

Sirius buttoned his own shirt back up and gave Remus a peck on the lips, "Will do love," he plucked four more truffles from the box and placed them on the desk blotter before banishing the box to its storage place, "Don't want to spoil the rest of the food for today. Stay off the floor for the rest of the day okay?"

"I'll do my best." Remus promised. He couldn't guarantee it though since being on the floor was quite a necessity if a floo call came or if he had to make one. "I think I'm going to take a slow walk in the garden. Feeling a little stiff today." He rolled his muscles and placed both hands at the small of his back, trying to smooth out his aching muscles.

"Okay love," he gave Remus a smile, "I'll give you a back rub later this evening, though we must keep it PG for the kiddies." He blew Remus a kiss and went in search for Harry, who he found being laughed at by Orion.

Orion was red in the face and gasping for breath from laughing so hard. "Welcome to the club Scar...You're not really a part of the inner circle until you've seen my parents go at it. I swear, no self control for those two...Oh hi Sirius, deflated enough to be able to walk straight?" He blinked at his father innocently.

Harry's hand got to the back of Orion's head before Sirius' did. "Ri you're getting more perverted than Fred and George are. That's not a good thing."

"Forget the twin terrors, he's getting worse than I was and that's saying something. Sorry for scarring you cub."

Harry rolled his eyes, "I wasn't scarred, unlike the puppy here. I was embarrassed, just like you would be if you were to walk in on me and Hermione. I do realize sex is a big part of you and Remus' relationship you know, the impending happy occasion is proof of that."

"As I said...No self control. Like rabbits they are." Orion was completely unrepentant about his comments but he did dance out of both Harry's and his father's reach, not wanting another whack to the back of his head.

"And please Scar, if you feel the urge to get down and dirty with Hermione while you're here, remember the the locks, every door here has them...Ow!" He rubbed the back of his head gingerly and turned to meet Hermione's dark gaze.

"Behave. If anyone really needs etiquette lessons it is you." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Shape up or I'll tell Parkinson about your abhorrent behavior, she can punish you much better than I ever could."

Orion actually cowered a little under that threat. Pansy could be vicious.

Harry grinned, "That's my girl," pride echoed in his voice.

Sirius chuckled, "So Scar, what did you come a-knocking for?"

"I was going to ask if you and Orion wanted to have a run. You know, since animagus magic isn't detectable by the Ministry and it's been a month since I've stretched my paws."
Orion's face lit up. He loved running, it soothed the wolf inside him at the same time as he connected with it as he became one with the forest as he ran. Scents fresh in his nose and the ground soft underneath his feet. He couldn't transform but he could run with the best of them regardless of that. "I'd love to go for a run." He looked at his father pleadingly.

"I wouldn't mind it either." Hermione nodded. She loved her tigress form and the opportunity to stretch out properly was a very tempting one.

Sirius grinned, "Sounds good. We'll stop by the garden and tell Moony before we run off though so he can put my collar on."

Harry lifted a brow, "Your collar?"

"Yeah. Well I go out for runs and stuff while the pup here," he gave Orion a noogie, "is at Marauders and in case something goes wrong I wanted a way for him to let me know he needed me so the collar gives me a buzz when he calls."

"That's actually very smart." Hermione sounded almost surprised and she got an apologetic look on her face. "I mean it must feel like a safety line for the both of you, that you'll be aware if he needs you, so that you can get to him quickly."

"If he didn't I would refuse to go to Marauders." Orion said. "I know Dad is strong and can manage well on his own but things can happen and he should absolutely not be alone in that case. Me and Sirius just want to look out for him since he's rather bad at looking out for himself...Too busy caring for everyone else."

Sirius nodded and exchanged a look with Hermione before looking over at Harry, "It's a common syndrome methinks."

"Oh yes." Hermione agreed and looked at Harry softly. "Very common indeed."

"Less chattering, more running please." Orion bounced in place. "Let's get Sirius leashed so we can go, I'm feeling the call of the wild here."

Harry chuckled and caught Orion around the neck, pulling him away and to the garden, where Remus was rubbing his back and walking among the flowers, "Hey Moony. Ow, not in the ribs pup."

Remus looked up at them from where he wandered the garden. He smiled at the sight of both his cubs with their arms around each other, even though Orion's pointy elbows seemed to be in play. "What's up that brings all of you out here?"

"We're, ow," Harry twisted and caught Orion's arms from behind, keeping the elbows from jabbing into him again, "those things need to be registered as lethal weapons. Anyway we're about to go for a run so we've stopped by to let you know and-"

"To get me collared," Sirius walked up to brush his lips over Remus' cheek as Harry and Orion wrestled. Orion had the wolf strength but Harry had years of getting away from Dudley as well as being a bit more slippery on his side.

"What he said." Harry hefted and had Orion flipping into the air, landing behind him in a crouch.

Remus shook his head with a smile at the cubs' antics and accioed the collar from his and Sirius' bedroom. "Turn into Pads then and I will collar you love." He kissed his mate before he transformed. Then he turned to his son and Harry. "Make sure to stay within our grounds and the
wards. The last thing a muggle needs to see is a teenage boy, a Grim a lion and a tiger running through the English countryside."

"Sir, yes sir," Harry ducked under a swing from Orion and shifted, the speed from the time in the Department of Mysteries still with him. He shook out his mane and sat waiting as Sirius transformed into the Grim and stood patiently waiting while Remus put the collar on.

Padfoot gave Remus' cheek a lick once it was done and nuzzled his hand.

Remus scratched him behind the ears lovingly and watched as Hermione transformed as well. "Have fun running."

Orion grinned and walked over to hug his Dad quickly before he tossed a sneaky look Harry's way and took off running, long legs barely touching the ground as he stole the lead.

Harry stretched and padded over carefully to Moony, flopping onto his back, exposing his belly so as not to worry the wolf, and rubbing his great head against Remus' foot with a purring rumble. Then, quick as lightning, he rolled up and was chasing after Orion.

Sirius gave a playful bark and followed suit.

Hermione buffed her head against Remus' side with a purr before stretching her body and bounding after the others.

Remus smiled fondly as he watched them disappear among the trees. He was so happy to see that Harry was smiling even after the horrible start of the day and he was very happy to have Harry there with them. Remus knew that Molly and Arthur were Harry's guardians but he couldn't help the fact that he still counted Harry as his own cub. He certainly loved Harry as his son.

The communication mirror in his pocket chimed and Ron's tinny voice came from it, "Moony? Padfoot? Anyone there?"

Fishing the mirror out of his pocket, Remus activated it and answered Ron's call. "I'm here Ron."

He walked over to a marble bench and sat down so that he would be able to talk to Ron properly. "How are you?"

"I'm alright. Er I called to check and see how Harry's doing. Mum's having kittens with worry over his emotional state and Ginny still looks like she's about to go find Skeeter and skin her."

"Harry is doing well, better than I feared he would. He's in his animagus form right now and out running with Sirius, Orion and Hermione. He's been able to smile again so you can let Molly know that." Remus spoke softly, seeing how worried Ron was about his best friend as well. "Also you can tell Ginny that she can retract her claws. Skeeter is done for, before sunset she will find herself without a job, sued and completely unable to scramble her way back on top. Also Harry will find himself a major stockholder in the Prophet."

Ron smiled a bit, "Never piss off a Marauder and definitely never piss off Hermione. I'm glad he's smiling and you can bet I'll let Mum know. I still sort of want Skeeter tied to a stake and left out as lesser-dragon chow though. Fred, George and I knew a little about what went on in that house," his lips tightened, "from when we got him out just before second year. George saw the inside of that cupboard and..." he shook his head, "let's just say Harry needed some treatment and refused to have Mum or Dad find out. Made me promise not to tell anyone."

"You're a good friend Ron, don't feel bad about keeping Harry's confidence safe. This should never ever have become public knowledge and I too wish I could make Skeeter pay worse, take it out of
her own flesh. Make her hurt as Harry has hurt." Remus tightened his hand into a fist in his lap. "If the Dursleys weren't already dead I can guarantee they wouldn't have lived beyond nightfall." His voice was cold and clear, he really would have killed them without remorse for what they had put his cub through, consequences be damned.

"Technically they aren't dead, they were Kissed by the dementors and if anyone deserves that it's them. I just wish I could have done more to help Harry before is all. Never felt like enough, just patching him up after the summers. You though, need to cool it Mr. Moony, no upsetting the sprog or Padfoot'll be hovering like a gnat the rest of the day."

"Just being there for Harry is enough Ron, be there for him, listen when he's ready to talk. I promise it means more to him than you think, to know that he has a best friend that is firmly in his corner. Oh and I promise you that I am completely calm. It's not Moony who would have ended their pathetic lives and bathed in their blood. It is all me." Remus smiled serenely at the redhead in the mirror.

"I know that but I also remember a few thousand cousins having been pregnant and the constant 'don't get upset it's bad for the baby' bit they got from healers, old hands at the pregnancy bit, and village wise women. Your wolf is scary Professor but you're scarier." Ron blew a bit of hair out of his eyes, "I'll let you go back to whatever it was you were doing. Just give Harry my best and tell him I'm working to keep the Furies from going off."

"I'll be sure to tell him when he returns." Remus smiled at Ron again, more warmly this time. "I promise to take it easy, no upset for the baby today. As you said, Pads would hover, causing more stress than calm." He chuckled lowly. "Tell Molly and Arthur that we're taking care of Harry for them and that he's as alright as he can be during the circumstances. Do take care of yourself too Ron, you're very important to both my cubs, not to mention Hermione."

"The only thing I'm in danger of here is papercuts and the occasional concussion if I say something stupid so no worries there. And Mum and Dad know you'll take care of him. Soon as she read the note he left Mum went from rushing round the house making loud threats to cleaning like a madwoman so it set her mind a bit at ease. See you soon and tell Harry that an owl from Sirius' pink haired cousin dropped something off for him." He gave Remus a salute then signed off.

Remus pocketed the mirror again and sat on the bench, breathing in the scents of the garden flowers and feeling the tadpole move lazily, no wild gymnastics today. Feeling that he'd done what he could to stretch and soften aching muscles he decided to go inside and make himself a spot of tea.

Harry padded in behind Sirius and Orion, Hermione at his side. He'd decided to remain in lion form for a little while longer while the others had shifted back to human. It made him feel stronger and though he knew the others didn't see him as weak or pathetic, he needed to feel it for himself and as a lion he felt strong and able to protect himself unlike how he'd been before.

Hermione kept her fingers in Harry's mane as they walked inside, slowly running her fingers through soft fur. She loved Harry in every form and if this was what he needed at the moment then she would support him fully.

Orion was panting lightly, he was good at running but it was a challenge to keep up with four paws throughout the woods. It was fun though and Orion would go another round in a second if offered.

Remus looked up from where he sat in the kitchen, a steaming cup of tea in front of him and a book
open in his lap. "Welcome back. The tea is hot and there are biscuits in the pantry." He smiled at
them. "Harry, Ron says hi. He mirror called to ask how you were doing and to tell you that Auror
Tonks' owl has dropped off something for you, a letter or a parcel of some sort."

Harry purred loudly and rested his leonine head in Hermione's lap at that bit of news. It was the
pass to see Grindelwald.

Sirius chuckled and got down the biscuits before pouring tea for them all, even the stubborn lion,
"I think he's pleased about that."

"I do believe so yes." Remus smiled too at the loudly purring lion.

Hermione cradled Harry's large head and continued to rake her fingers through his mane,
scratching behind soft, furry ears. He truly was a beautiful lion, strong and golden with a dark
mane and gleaming green eyes.

Orion drank his tea happily, dipping biscuits into the hot liquid, amused at his brother's purring.
"Should we pour your tea in a bowl Scar, perhaps make a litterbox for you as well?"

Harry shifted position, not taking his head out of Hermione's lap, so he could whack Orion in the
face with his tail at the litterbox comment. Prompting Sirius to laugh and set the tea for Harry on
the floor along with three biscuits.

He ruffled his son's hair as Orion was spitting out lion hair, "He can sit on you and keep you down
like this kiddo, remember that." He sat down in the seat next to Remus, kissing his cheek, "Hullo
love."

"Hi there darling. Have a nice run then?" Remus shifted so Sirius could sit closer to him as he tilted
his head up to steal another kiss from his mate. His lips twitched in amusement as Orion continued
to sputter and pick lion hair out of his teeth. "You did deserve the whack Ri."

"I know...Was worth it though." Orion smiled and rinsed his mouth with his tea.

Harry made a chuffling sound that probably translated into laughter and sat to keep rubbing his head
on Hermione's knees in between lapping at his tea.

Sirius took a sip, "The run was good, and seeing Scar and Stripes have a wrestle off the side of a
hill was amusing. I didn't know a lion's eyes could get so wide or that a tigress could eep."

Remus chuckles turned in to right out laughter at Hermione's glare at his mate at that.

"It was a steep hill alright, I've never been good with heights." She defended herself and buried her
blushing face in Harry's warm fur.

Harry purred for her and nuzzled her cheek before giving Sirius a glare and making a reprimanding
chuff.

"I'm sorry cub what was that? I don't speak lion," Sirius grinned at him then blinked as he found
himself staring at human Harry who was flipping him off.

"Stuff it Snuffles, unless you want to be blue," Harry, pulled a chair over extremely close to
Hermione's so their sides were pressed together and he could play with her hair.

"He'll do it too," Orion looked excited. "Remember Bill, granted he saw Hermione in the buff but
you're teasing her and that is almost as bad in Harry's eyes."
Hermione groaned at that reminder and turned even redder, turning her face into Harry's shoulder.

Remus hid his smile against the rim of his teacup. Orion still needed to learn a filter, what to say out loud and what to keep to himself.

Harry cocked a brow, "I'm starting to think we need to glue you to Lady Malfoy's side to teach you tact kiddo but yes, my vengeance when it comes to Hermione is swift and cruel." He smiled at Sirius, "Remember more Orion's hair than Bill's skin."

Sirius shuddered, "Oh point made."

"The hair...That was just cruel Scar. I still have nightmares of a pink mass of hair chasing me, wanting to eat me." Orion groaned and shuddered as well. "Doesn't help that Dennis' brother took about a hundred photos, immortalizing my shame.

"One would think you would have learned your lesson then Ri." Hermione looked up from Harry's shoulder but didn't pull away from him.

"What lesson?" Orion just looked confused.

"The reason I hexed your hair was because, after biting Blaise, you did the exact same thing you bit him for, to a lesser degree true but still." Harry swept his teacup up from the floor and nibbled on a biscuit looking profoundly innocent.

Sirius just stared for a moment and murmured to Remus, "How does he manage to pull off that innocent look?"

"James was the same remember? That's why he was the front man when we were questioned about our pranks, no matter what he had done, James always pulled off the completely innocent look." Remus smiled. "It's a gift I suppose."

"I'll say. Scary. Harry how did you manage the hair though, I'm curious."

Harry shrugged, "Not too hard, a couple of mixed triple W products, an anti-counter ward and voila. Candy floss hair."

"Should have known the twins had something to do with it, directly or not." Orion grumbled and ran a hand over his hair, as if checking that it was his normal glossy black tresses and that the pink monstrosity hadn't returned. "Speaking of the twins, have they seen their dragon this summer or are they driving everyone crazy? I still don't see how they will handle it when Draco goes back to school this fall and they have graduated."

Harry chuckled, "They've seen him, visited for his birthday and once a week since, taking him out on dates and actually wooing him. It's amusing when a pink rose is flown in via owl when I'm talking to him via floo and he blushes. He's so gone and he doesn't really even know it."

Sirius nodded, "Not surprising. I wouldn't doubt that the twins will figure out something to let them visit while he's at school either, plus they'll be there every Hogsmeade weekend I'd wager."

"Oh they will be there." Remus said, voice sure. "They owled me several weeks ago and asked if they could rent the Hogsmeade house now that we're living here. They're not planning on letting Malfoy out of their sight for long I think."

"As strange as it is, the three of them really work." Hermione was still leaning against Harry. "A few years ago I never would have believed it but Malfoy really does care about Fred and George, I
don't think even he knows just how much he cares."

"He probably doesn't," Sirius sipped his tea, "he didn't exactly have the best role model of true and enduring love in Lucy. He'll realize it when he's ready to move past his fears of himself."

Harry nodded. He understood that, to a degree, "Fred and George will keep chipping away at him until they have their bunny rabbit." His lips twitched, just a bit, "By Merlin I felt sorry for him. A rabbit of all things."

Hermione couldn't help but giggle a little at that. "Yeah, I can really understand that he did his best to keep his form a secret. Parkinson is a wolf and he's a fluffy, pure white bunny rabbit. Not exactly a fierce creature. If Ron weren't scared of the oozing genital boils he would still have a field day with all the rabbit and prey jokes."

Orion snickered. "Well it is funny when you think about it. The feared Prince of Slytherin, a velvety soft rabbit."

Sirius coughed to hide the laugh that wanted to escape, "Well his name does mean dragon, I suppose that's fierce enough."

Harry lifted a brow, "Weak Snuffles, very weak. Ron's still pulling to call him Mr. Cottontail among the New Marauders. I'm saying we call him Argh."

Both Hermione and Remus burst out in snickers while Orion looked more confused than ever. He didn't get it at all but apparently his Dad thought it the funniest thing ever from the way he was going red in the face from laughter.

"Any references to his bunny body will result in a pissed off Malfoy and a pissed off Malfoy will result in vengeful twins who don't like to see their dragon upset. See, it's a vicious circle." Orion tapped his fingers on the tabletop, he always had a hard time keeping still, some part of him had to be in movement, even if it was only a fingertap.

Harry grinned, "He'll have to deal with it. Argh, cottontail, or long-ears, all the nicknames seem to reference the animagus form except mine. We'll have to drag Malfoy to a sleepover or something where we can introduce him to muggle movies so he'll get the Argh reference."

"Yeah well, good luck with that." Orion snorted but then he grew thoughtful. "Actually, the twins would probably relish the thought of a sleep over so I take that back. Involve them and you can get Malfoy to watch anything."

Hermione just shook her head, Orion was incorrigible.

"And scar the rest of us in the process, eh we'll stick to Mr. Cottontail then."

Sirius chuckled and shook his head as Hermione changed the subject, drawing Remus into an academic discussion as Orion drew Harry into a quidditch debate. Harry still looked a little stressed round the eyes but he was relaxing more and more the longer he was here making Sirius feel confident his godson wouldn't wallow or let the knowledge that the world now knew what he'd been through bring him down. He laced his fingers with Remus' and just smiled, listening to the conversations and relaxing into the atmosphere.
Chapter 55

Harry looked up at the imposing facade of Nurmengard prison and blew out a long breath. Tonks had only gotten him a pass so Hermione and the Weasleys would have to stay out of the prison while he went in to speak to Grindelwald. He walked up to the wizard on guard and pulled the pass out. "Hello, I've a pass to speak to Gellert Grindelwald."

The guard looked him over with a raised eyebrow, taking the pass and studying it intently, casting several charms on it to determine it was legit. "What is ein kinder as yourself visiting Grindelwald for? He is not a nice man." The guard wasn't really looking for an answer though as he lowered the wards to let Harry inside. "You'll have to leave your wand and anything that can be used as a weapon here, nothing magical allowed in Grindelwald's cell."

Harry nodded and removed his wand, the communication mirror, and emptied his pockets, even taking off his wristwatch before standing still and letting the second guard scan him for anything that Grindelwald could use against him or to escape. Finding nothing he was then lead through the prison, up several flights of stairs, to the top most cell.

"Herr Grindelwald is in here. Your conversation vill be listened to. Call vhen you are ready to leave."

Harry nodded his understanding and stepped in when the guard opened the door. He looked around and his gaze landed on the almost skeletal figure sitting in a cold stone corner, what little hair he had stringy and gray. "Mr. Grindelwald."

Surprisingly sharp golden eyes looked up and locked on Harry's form but the man made no motions to move or even recognize that he had a visitor. Grindelwald stayed in his corner silent and still for a long time before those eyes slid back to Harry again. "To what do I owe a visit from ze British Isles then?"

Harry stepped forward until he was a few paces away and then sat down Indian style in front of the one time 'Dark Lord'. "I'm hoping you can help me. It involves Albus Dumbledore and getting his scrawny chicken neck into Azkaban."

A dry chuckle rose from withered bones and flesh. "Albus Dumbledore, the defeater of evil, Dark Lord vanquisher. What has the man done to step on your toes? And why should I know anyzing about him? I have been here a lifetime already."

"Defeater of evil my arse, he's nothing more than a manipulative, glory seeking, arsewart worse than Voldemort himself." It was an irritable mutter, "I'm hoping something he's done may have been picked up during his time with you. A condensed version of the Vitae Fit Mea?"

"Ah, so you are wonderng if I taught him my evil vays zen...I am terribly sorry to disappoint you but it vas rather ze ozzer vay around. Vhat has he done vith the Vitae Fit Mea? If I know, I might help." Gellert shifted a little in his corner, spindly, long fingers lacing together bony knees.

"Condensed it so that the potion fit in a goblet and the only thing needed to set the bond in place was a drop of his victim's blood in it." Harry described everything he'd seen in Remus' memory of when Dumbledore had bound Orion's life to his whim down to the smallest detail, even the position of books and other things in the room knowing that detail was important in rituals. "Right now the one he bound to his whim is buffered a bit with a potion made with freely given dragon's blood but we still have to step lightly so as not to push the old hornet into pushing past that buffer."
"I see...Binding a lifeforce to yourself, very tricky business." Long, crooked and yellowed nails tapped against his knees. "What you need to do is basically recreate ze ritual. Brew ze potion have ze victims hair and Albus' blood. If you have zat ze binding can be reversed."

"Oh well, why not have it be something hard," sarcasm rang loud and clear before Harry shook himself out of the special loathing he felt for Albus Dumbledore, "Is there anything else you can tell me about Dumbledore himself, strengths, weaknesses, possible hidey-holes? Anything would help."

"I do not know what you expect me to say. Ze Albus I knew vas a young man, prideful, ambitious...Lovely." Gellert's eyes grew distant and wistful for a moment before the sharp edge was back. "I vill tell you what I know, you decide if it is useful or not." With that Grindlewald started to tell Harry the things he knew about Albus Dumbledore.

Harry listened carefully, employing his occlumency to be certain he'd remember everything Grindlewald was telling him. It was sad, the way Grindlewald had been caught up in his ideals and beliefs that he shouldn't care for an English wizard romantically, creating a misunderstanding between them so that when he had finally given in to his own heart Dumbledore hadn't trusted it.

Worse when Ariana had been killed, giving Dumbledore the chance, in Grindlewald's shock and regret, to disarm and 'defeat' him. At the end of it Harry nodded his understanding, "Thank you Mr. Grindlewald. I know it's hard to relive the past."

"Young man, ze past is all I have. It is less hardship remembering it zan living in ze now." Grindlewald looked around his cell, stone walls, stone floor, stone ceiling. Everything dark and dreary and humid. "I wish you ze best of luck in your endeavours. Be sure to remember your vand when you leave, a wizard is nozzing without it...I hope you do not have ze misfortune of having one with ze core of Thestral hair." Grindlewald started to hum softly under his breath and seemed to sink back into his own world again, not caring what happened to the outside world.

Harry stood up and called to the guard, leaving with pity in his heart for the one time powerful wizard reduced to living in his own head. He followed the guard back down and reclaimed his belongings, running his wand through his fingers before holstering it, wondering what Grindlewald had meant about a thestral hair core to his wand. He stepped out of the prison and breathed in before going heading down the long road where Hermione and the others were waiting.

-----------------------------------------

Charlie dodged a slashing tail with a soft yelp then ducked as another rope snapped and the very pissed female Changewing spit acid in his direction. They were having to move her from her current den because the mountainside had grown weak and dangerous and as Changewings had softer scales and more fragile bones than most dragons she was in danger of injury if there was a rock slide. Unfortunately she wasn't exactly accommodating.

Blaise although having grown more knowing of dragons and their ways was not allowed close when the handlers were moving the Changewing but he stood a little to the side watching the events with worry. The dragon was well and truly pissed and her growls and roars were setting the other dragons off as well, them picking up when another of their species felt unease. The acid spit was really a nasty thing too and Blaise hoped that Charlie wouldn't get in the way of either tail or spit.

Charlie cursed as one of the novice handlers leaped up and tried to tie a rope around the Changewing’s snout, acid catching his leg. Charlie grabbed another rope of his own, fashioned a fast lariat and tossed the rope around the idiot's torso so he could pull him out of the danger zone.
while other handlers swarmed in to continue trying to subdue the female. He passed the novice off to the healers, confident that they'd save his leg, then jumped back into the fray.

"That," Harry stepped up quietly beside Blaise, "is one pissed dragon." He smiled when the black haired boy spun and gaped at him, "Hello Blaise." He angled his head at the Weasleys behind him, "We were passing through and came to visit."

"Passing through...right because this reserve is smack in the middle of so many traveling routes." Blaise was still gobsmacked, eyes wide as he looked from Harry to the Weasleys and back again. "I'm sure Charlie will happy to see you though, as soon as they get the Changewing under control."

Blaise looked down at his dirty denims and plain t-shirt, glossy hair in a messy ponytail since he'd been working. He'd never shown himself as anything other than perfectly put together to Harry or to Charlie's family and he felt a little bit embarrassed at having been caught unawares.

Harry hummed and studied the fight with the dragon before them, hearing Molly squeak as Charlie dodged a claw swipe, "Yeah. I'd call this bad timing. Molly'll -shit!" He grabbed Blaise and practically threw him over to the Weasleys as the Changewing escaped the handlers and headed right for them. He landed on his arse just as the Changewing reared in front of him, her nostrils wide, temper flaring, mouth open. The only thing seeming to stop her from spewing acid all over him was a scent around him. He took the opportunity to speak to her, "Milady, I would greatly appreciate it if you don't kill me."

Flapping her wings and whipping her tail the dragon sent another handler into the stone wall. "I have no quarrels with you human but they are taking me away from my den, the place I chose for my eggs. I will not be forced away." She let out another angry roar.

Molly was squeaking in alarm at Harry alone in front of a very angry dragon. She desperately wished there was something she could do other than to stand frozen in fear.

Ron pat his mother's shoulder, even though he was pale himself, "It's okay Mum, really. She won't hurt Harry, not while he's talking to her."

Harry eyed the mountainside and spotted the problem, "Milady they wish to help protect you, the escarpment above your den is loose and could fall with the next rain. They can not speak the old tongue and so could not tell you."

The Changewing whipped her head around and looked closely at the mountainside herself. "I did not know that was what they were doing, loose stones could crush my eggs when they come. It is a bad den." The dragon calmed down and folded her wings back against her body, looking as apologetic as a giant, lethal dragon could look.

Harry got to his feet, relaxing and looking around her at the handlers gaping in shock, "Uh, you can put the ropes away now. I'll tell her that one of you can show her to a safe den."

Charlie's jaw was just hanging loose as Harry turned back to the dragon and spoke in Parseltongue again. He watched the Changewing nod then Harry look around her again, "She'll go with 'the old grizzled one' but she wants me to come along in case anything gets 'lost in translation' again."

Blaise snickered as he dared to come closer again. "Old and grizzled huh...It is really bad when even the dragons call you old, they live for thousands of years." He pat the chief handler's shoulder before letting him go with Harry and the Changewing.
Molly came forward and practically jumped on her son, hugging the life out of him. "Oh Charlie, this is so dangerous and you do this everyday...Don't you think it's time you move back home?"

Charlie grunted and pat her on the shoulder, "Well not every day Mum. Usually it's just feeding the juveniles and orphans and checking up on the denned dragons. We normally don't have to move them."

Ron watched Harry and the old handler walking, the dragon following behind sedately, and shook his head, "Mum you've been on Charlie to move back home since he took this job. I think he's pretty much here to stay."

"I will never give up hope that my baby will come home." Molly hugged Charlie again. "But you will return to Wales when the Hogwarts term start yes?" Her eyes slid over to Blaise who was looking over the damage the pissed dragon had done, the grooves in the ground and the cracked rocks.

"Of course I am," he returned his mother's hug and met the eyes of his father, Ron, and Hermione who'd all come along apparently. "So what brings you to Romania?"

Arthur clapped his son on the shoulder, "Harry had to pop by Germany and, as we were on the Continent, we decided to come and visit."

Molly finally released Charlie and moved to duck under Arthur's arm, pulling her husband's arm around her shoulders. "We had the time and the means and we wanted to come see you. It was Harry's idea and we jumped on the chance."

Blaise stayed where he was, still a bit unsure and uncomfortable when it came to his mate's family. Not sure he really belonged. He was happy for Charlie though. He knew his mate loved and missed his family, having them visit must be great.

Charlie turned and looked at him, holding out a hand, "What are you doing all the way over there? I promise my family doesn't bite, well Ron did when he was little til someone bit back but he's been broken of it now."

"Oi!" Ron stuck his tongue out at Charlie, "No picking on the poor lonely redhead here."

"Aww, poor little Ronnie, you'll be home with Luna soon enough." Hermione stepped close and wrapped her arm around her friend. "Until then I'm here to keep you company...at least until Harry gets back."

Taking Charlie's offered hand Blaise stood next to him, greeting the Weasleys a little bit shyly.

Ron studied Blaise and nodded, "Well the she-wolf and Mr. Cottontail will be glad to hear this report. You're looking alright Zabini. Ow!" He rubbed his arm where Hermione pinched it.

Charlie shook his head and murmured into Blaise's ear, "That's his way of saying he's glad to see you."

"Mmhm..." Blaise looked rather doubtful at that but he didn't say anything. He did find it amusing though, how Granger and Weasley's friendship was so much like his and Pansy's, right down to the pinching. "Draco really will hurt you if you keep up with the Cottontail business." Blaise chose not to say anything about him laughing until Pansy spelled his mouth shut when he'd found out about his friend's animagus form.

Ron snorted, "He doesn't scare me, never has. Now she," he pointed at Hermione, "she scares me.
My sister scares me. The she-wolf scares me. Malfoy? Nah."

"That's your mistake then. Draco can be more furious than any other woman...And if you tell him I just said that then it's me you need to worry about." Blaise felt like biting his tongue, especially when he saw Weasley's glee at his words.

Harry came up and rejoined them just then as Ron was bent double laughing his bum off at something, "Okay what did I miss?"

"Z-Zabini said Ma-hahahaha-Malfoy could be more furious than any o-ahahahaha-other woman," Ron's face was turning red in his hilarity.

Harry's lips twitched and he had to look away to keep from laughing himself though his shoulders shook suspiciously. "Well...I wouldn't want to repeat that round Fred or George."

Blaise groaned, there was no way that this wouldn't find its way back to Draco one way or another and then Blaise was dead. Draco was an expert in vengeance, and when he was working a plot for revenge out he had the patience of a saint.

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek not to laugh. "No, I think Fred and George are very happy that Malfoy is not a woman."

Ron snorted, "Not that it would matter. They bat for both teams before their bunny wabbit came along. Ow!" He rubbed the back of his head and looked sheepishly at his mother. "Sorry Mum."

"Ron really, do the etiquette lessons make any impression at all?" Harry tilted his head and looped his arm around Hermione's waist.

"Sure they do. I just don't see any reason to filter round friends."

"You don't filter period. I think we need to double your lessons." Molly crossed her arms over her chest as she looked at him. "No more teasing or putting your brothers...Beau down. You're not too old to be put over my lap and you're certainly not too old to be grounded, that would mean no visits to or from Luna. Leave their love life and love interests alone."

Blaise blinked, his hand still in Charlie's Molly Weasley could be almost as scary as his own mother...Almost. There was no one quite like Livia Zabini.

"Oh yeah, my Mum scares me too," Ron grimaced, "I'm just teasing a bit and I'm not doing it in front of the dastardly duo or their Malfoy. Nor would I, no one wants a Swamp Ron repeat."

"No, we definitely don't," Harry wrinkled his nose.

"I definitely second that, Swamp Ron was a punishment for everyone, not just Ron." Hermoine shuddered as she remembered what a slimy, smelly, disgusting mess Ron had been that day.

"Swamp Ron? Is that the farting incident? When Pans and Dray helped Orion plan?" Blaise raised a pitch black eyebrow in interest.

Charlie almost roared with laughter at the way his brother's face turned bright, blazing red and he leaned down and in to catch Blaise's lips in a quick kiss, "I adore you."

Ron folded his arms and muttered, "Why am I always the one being picked on?"

"Because you set yourself up for it," Harry reached over and yanked Ron over to his other side,
punching him companionably in the arm, "But we'll stop now since I know why you're being more outrageous than usual."

Ron rubbed the back of his head and gave Harry an awkward, thankful smile, ignoring Charlie kissing his incubus. He was being worse than usual, it was his way of keeping his mind off Luna and missing her.

Blaise hummed in pleasure against Charlie's lips, wrapping his arms around his mate's neck and turning the kiss from quick to long and deep. When Charlie touched him, he didn't care who was watching. Charlie was the only one, the only thing that mattered.

Hermione almost blushed at the intensity of the kiss and turned her eyes away, it felt like an invasion of privacy to watch it.

Arthur coughed quietly, hating to interrupt but he was just a tad bit uncomfortable seeing his son snogging his boyfriend. It was odd when it still felt like yesterday that a little gap-toothed Charlie was looking up at him, an injured kitten in his hands and pleading to keep it.

Charlie jolted and blushed, slowly ending the kiss with soft brushes of lips against Blaise's until he could lift his head just a bit, kissing his mate's brow and whispering, "How about we hold that thought for when my parents aren't watching? It's a little bit of a mood killer there."

"Well we can't have that now can we? I very much like your mood alive and thriving." Blaise licked his lips as if savoring the taste of Charlie but he did release him from the death grip he held around Charlie's neck and took a step back, straightening his ponytail. Then he turned to Arthur and bowed. "I'm sorry if I made anyone uncomfortable but look at him, how could I possibly resist?" Blaise's dark eyes were large and gleaming with honesty. "I could pin it on the Incubus genes but...Meh, I would want him either way."

Hermione turned her head against Harry's shoulder and chuckled.

Harry saw Molly's face positively light up at Blaise's words and smiled even as he prepared to silence Ron in case his best friend said something beyond off color.

Ron tilted his head and studied Zabini for a moment, "Huh, you really mean that," his mouth slowly stretched into a grin, "Well alright then. So Charlie, we getting a tour or is it straight to your...is it a hut or a cottage?"

Charlie stared at his little brother before laughing. Ron was one of a kind, even in giving his unequivocal approval. "You are such a prat. It's a hut, main room, bedroom and bathroom only. I'll give you lot the tour though Mum and Dad got it once before, things are always changing."

"Oh I want the full tour either way." Molly looked eager. "As you say, things are changing and it's all very interesting to see." She wasn't lying but it was the chance to spend more time with her second oldest child that held more allure than the dragons, though they were fantastic.

"The Fireball that was in the Triwizard Tournament has hatchlings if you want to see them." Blaise gave Harry a wry look, having heard from his mate what Harry had done.

Harry perked up and grinned, "Absolutely yes," he looked at Charlie innocently.

"Yeah, yeah you miscreant. I'll take you and Hermione to visit her. Yuri might have kittens about it though since she tries to fry most people who come near but since she already knows you..." he gave Harry a pointed look.
"What? I just talked with her, offered my condolences and sympathy."

Ron snorted, "That's your story mate and you stick to it."

Arthur chuckled softly. He doubted Harry would ever actually admit to freeing the dragons but that was a good thing as it kept him from getting into trouble.

Hermione smiled at Harry's innocent look and laced their fingers together, she didn't particularly want to be fried but she doubted that would happen with Harry there. He had a certain way with dragons and it wasn't all about speaking Parseltongue either.

Molly just beamed and waited for Charlie to have time to give them the tour.

Charlie shook his head, "Let me go talk to Yuri. Blaise would you take them to the mess hall? I'll be there in a bit as soon as I finish speaking with the 'old grizzled one'." He had to snicker.

"I am never going to let him live that down." Blaise grinned even as he nodded at Charlie that he would bring them to the mess hall. "There will be food if you're hungry, lunch today is Romanian stew, it's spicy but very good, hot and filling. Just follow me." He walked down the slopes of the reserve as if he'd lived there all his life, no insecurity or hesitance showing.

Ron nodded again, finally convinced and content with Charlie's mate. Blaise Zabini looking mussed and at home on a dragon reserve? Never would have thought it but happy about it? He'd never have even, in his weirdest dreams come up with that but there it was and that made Ron happy, because Blaise made Charlie happy. "So this stew, what kind of meat's in it?" He asked as he practically bounded after Zabini.

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Charlie gave his mother a hard hug, "It was good to see you, and how you managed to convince Yuri to let me and Blaise attend Harry's party I'll never know but I could swear he looked as if he'd just faced a horntail without any protection."

"Oh he was very reasonable once I took him to the side and spoke to him." Molly smiled angelically and hugged her boy back before standing on her tippy toes to kiss his cheek. "We look forward to seeing both of you again on Harry's birthday. Please be careful Charlie, I don't know if my heart can take many more altercations like the one you had with that dragon today." She petted his cheek before moving back to Arthur's side.

Ron grinned and punched his brother in the arm, "Yeah, Harry really saved your bum there so don't do it again unless he's here to save you. Oi ger off!"

"What's the magic words?"

"Absolutely not!"

Harry shook his head as Charlie kept Ron in the headlock and gave him a noogie. Ron would never learn.

"Come on Ron, just say it."

"Bloody hell no."

"Say it or I'll toss you in the spit pit."
"Ugh fine. I'm a pretty pink princess please put me down." Ron face was red as Harry burst out laughing when Charlie released him. "You sir are evil, pure evil."

Hermione chuckled as Ron finally was released and straightened his ruffled hair and clothes with a flush to his face. "He's a big brother Ron, it's practically part of the job description to be nasty to your smaller siblings."

Blaise just stared at Charlie with an adoring expression on his almost too pretty face.

Charlie shook hands and exchanged a back patting hug with his father, "Take care Dad."

"You too Charlie. Don't work too hard and forget to spend time with your lad."

Charlie grinned, "Never happen." He moved on to Hermione, lifting her off her feet, "You keep my brothers in line won't you?"

Eeping slightly as her feet left the ground but then she laughed and wrapped her arms around him in a hug. "Absolutely, I will do my best to keep them on the straight and narrow."

Molly discreetly wiped at her eyes, she always hated goodbyes, especially when it came to her babies but she was glad they had come to visit. She was also happy that she would get to see Charlie and Blaise before too long again.

"Oi put down my girlfriend if you please," Harry stood with his arms crossed over his chest, smiling at Charlie.

The dragon handler chuckled and set Hermione down gently before ruffling the dark hair of his 'adopted' brother, "You realize of course that Yuri is going to keep after you to join us here after seeing you playing with the fireball's hatchlings."

Harry snorted, "He'll be disappointed. I like the dragons Charlie, don't get me wrong, but this isn't my sort of life."

"Still, he'll try," he pat Harry on the shoulder, "I know you probably won't be able to keep out of the 'saving people' pool so just take care of you and the family okay?"

"Always," Harry punched Charlie lightly in the center of his chest.

Charlie stepped back and looped his arm around Blaise's waist as his family gathered around the shoelace portkey, "See you lot at the end of the month."

"See you then yes, remember to come in costume." Molly waved eagerly with one hand and gripped the portkey with the other. There wasn't long before they seemed to flicker and then disappear as the portkey activated.

"Your family really is something." Blaise smiled. "It was nice to see them though, even Ronald. He wore less of an arsehat today."

Charlie laughed, "Yeah. He's always going to be...well him but you're part of the family now so he's got your back and you've got his approval, which means less arsehatting." He pulled Blaise over to the couch and settled on it, pulling him down against him, "I'm glad they visited."

And that made Blaise happy, anything that meant something to his mate, that made him glad was a good thing and it made Blaise happy. He nuzzled against Charlie's side. "Part of the family huh? Well I guess I can live with that." Blaise's flippant words were contradicted by his beaming smile.
Charlie just smiled and bent his head to press a kiss to the corner of Blaise's mouth, "I've got to say though, I fear for the world if my Mum and yours ever start planning anything together."

"Mordred yes." Blaise's eyes grew large. "Mamma and your mother together is more scary than anything I can think of. Your mother got Yuri to yield within minutes, that's a scary feat on its own. And my mamma...she would turn the male half of the populace into her personal harem."

Charlie laughed and locked both his arms around his mate, nuzzling his neck, "I suppose you and I will just have to elope when the time comes then won't we?"

Blaise grew still and turned to look at Charlie carefully. "You want that? You see that in our future? Not the eloping but the...other thing." Blaise wanted that more than anything, to marry Charlie, not just matebond with him but he hadn't been sure it was what Charlie wanted. Sometimes it still felt as if he'd forced himself on Charlie a little, that his mate never had a choice but to get stuck with him.

Charlie shifted so they were facing each other more fully and cupped Blaise's cheek, "Yes, I want that. I want to marry you, not just be your mate but your husband as well." With his other hand he took Blaise's and placed it over his heart, "You've taken root in here. I don't doubt that I'll still be learning new things about you long after I'm old and grizzled and you're gray and still gorgeous but I've come to know who you are at the center and I love you."

"I love you too, everything about you and all that you are." He leaned into Charlie's touch, rubbing his cheek against it before scooting closer and wrapping his arms around his mate. "You are my mate but I also love the man, so very much. I would be proud to be your husband Charlie, to carry your name. I'm already yours, completely and fully and it would be great if the world knew it too."

Charlie's own arms went around his mate's lithe body, "After you graduate then, you, me and Gretna Green. Gives me a little bit of time to get your ring forged."

"Sounds perfect and very much yes to Gretna Green." Blaise spoke against the skin of Charlie's neck since he was still wrapped around the other like a vine. "Our mothers will kill us when they find out but I think it will be worth it to dodge them planning something together. Anything that involves Mamma turns into a circus, she is physically incapable of keeping anything at all small and simple."

Charlie ran his hand down Blaise's back, "I'm sure your Mum won't be too put out and mine has all the others to plan a wedding for. We'll placate your Mum by asking her to throw an 'after the fact' party."

A black brow rose. "Have you met your mother? The woman who is currently planning Britain's grandest sweet sixteen party? I'm thinking she will be plenty put out but hopefully she won't stay upset for too long. Mamma I can handle, if she's in a new relationship when it happens then she will not even notice."

Charlie chuckled again, "Mum will be put out but she'll understand, after a week or two." He kissed the edge of Blaise's jaw.

"Mmm," Blaise hummed happily and tilted her head up a bit so he could do a fair share of kissing of his own. "We have almost two years to plan our eloping strategy...I think practicing for the honeymoon is much more important."

"Well they do say that practice makes perfect," Charlie's hand slipped down until it was cupping the perfection of Blaise's arse as he nibbled and sucked lightly on his mate's earlobe.
"And we do want perfection, don't we?" Blaise purred and shifted so that he was straddling Charlie, tilting his mate's head up so that he could lick his way into Charlie's mouth, flicking the tip of his tongue against Charlie's.

Charlie hummed and sucked on Blaise's tongue, his hand squeezing and kneading the firm buttocks of his mate while his other snuck up under Blaise's shirt to stroke over the smooth mocha skin of his stomach.

A shiver of the delight went through Blaise and he broke the kiss to pull his own t-shirt over his head, letting it drop to the floor before leaning in and using his lips, teeth and tongue on Charlie's strong, proud neck.

Charlie let his head drop back, giving Blaise as much room as he wanted, his hands now freely roaming the toned torso of the incubus in his lap. They smoothed over his chest and his voice was deep and husky as he rubbed Blaise's nipples with his thumbs, "How far love?"

"As far as you'll have me baby...I think we're reaching the end of the road of this particular journey." Blaise went back to worshipping Charlie's neck, his fingers working their way beneath Charlie's shirt, stroking and scratching at smooth, warm skin.

Charlie stood, hands on Blaise's arse, lifting him against him, "Bedroom then. I don't think either of us want any interruptions."

"No, definitely no interruptions. Now I want you all to myself." Blaise had his legs tightly wound around Charlie's waist during the short walk to the small bedroom. He continued to place kitten licks and kisses on any surface of bare skin he could reach.

Charlie's kicked the bedroom door shut and locked it before steeping to the bed and laying Blaise down on it, more than ready to take this step with the man he loved. Anyone who needed him for the next few hours could take a short walk off cliff.

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Harry stepped into Ollivander's and looked around, knowing the old wandmaker was in there somewhere. "Hello?"

After a slight shuffle Ollivander poked his head out of his work room and looked at Harry. "Ah Mr. Potter, what a pleasure to see you back at my humble shop. How has that holster worked out for you? Keeping the leather smooth and pliant?"

Harry gave him a slight smile, "Yes sir. I hope things have been well for you."

"Things are...how they are, no more or less than one could expect." Ollivander stepped out fully to stand behind his counter. "I'm guessing you are not here for small talk with an old man. What is it that I can do for you Mr. Potter?"

"Well since you're the expert in wandlore and such I was hoping you could tell me about the Elder Wand," at the shuttered look in Ollivander's eyes he held up his hands, "I don't want it trust me. It's the last thing I need piled on me. I'm...you know about V- He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and how he's desperate to live forever and...well Dumbledore, I want to keep them from getting their hands on it."

"The Elder Wand, the Deathstick...I think you are a little too late in your quest Mr. Potter. Albus Dumbledore is the Master of the Elder Wand, has been for the last fifty years or so. This wand can not be gifted or sold. It needs to be won, earned. It has a history bathed in blood. It is without a
doubt the most powerful wand in existence but one can wonder if the price isn't too high."
Ollivander looked at Harry from over the frames of his glasses that had slid down his nose.

"Oh wonderful," Harry sighed and pressed his fingers to his temple, then frowned and looked back
to Ollivander, "Fifty years? That would..." he trailed off and thought of what Grindlewald had said,
"Sir what's the core of the Elder Wand?"

"The Elder Wand's core is Thestral hair...Very tricky to use, very tricky but very potent magic. It
can only be used by a wizard or witch who's seen and accepted death."

Harry snorted, "Well Voldemort's out then. So Dumbledore took the Elder Wand from Grindlewald
and has been using it for the past fifty odd years." He sighed, "How do I get around it?"

"What do you mean get around it? If you want it out of Dumbledore's hands then you must win if
from him, claim it turn its allegiance to you. After that you can use it or destroy it as you see fit." Ollivander looked as if it hurt him physically to talk about the Elder Wand being destroyed.

Harry grimaced but nodded, "That is what I'll do, if I find myself facing him and winning against it.
I will destroy it. That kind of power," he shook his head, "doesn't belong to any one man or
shouldn't anyway."

Ollivander didn't look as if he exactly agreed with that but he didn't say anything. He was old and
more than content with the wands he made himself. "Power corrupts Mr. Potter, always has and
always will. You can start out with the purest intentions and end up darker than you ever imagined.
As I said earlier, everything has a price and one way or another you will end up paying."

Harry chuckled, "Yeah I know. Thank you sir, for your help. Not just today but every time you've
helped me. I appreciate it."

"I am just a simple shopkeeper, it is what I am here for. Take care young Mr. Potter and remember
that the burdens don't lie on your shoulders alone." Ollivander gave Harry a serious nod before
turning his back and going back to his workroom, closing the door behind him.

Harry left to stop by Gringotts so he could pick up the Horcrux resting in the vault that had been
Bellatrix's. The right of conquest may disturb him a bit but Merlin knew in this case it was useful.
Thinking about the Elder Wand and Dumbledore, he blew out a long breath. Hermione and Ron
were going to blow a gasket over this.
"WHAT?!" Ron's eyes were wide and horrified, "The old bastard has the Elder Wand?!"

Hermione wasn't as loud as Ron but she wore the same horrified expression before it gave away to smoldering anger. "I don't know why we're even surprised, it's exactly something the old slimehog would want." She flailed her hands in anger, gesturing in thin air. "We can't let him know that you have both the other Hallows, the loony-bee must be getting desperate now. After that wretched article Skeeter wrote he is losing even his most loyal followers."

Harry's nose wrinkled at the mention of the article but he wasn't as touchy about it as he had been, not now that everyone else important to him had calmed down and not made a big deal out of it. He stepped forward and caught her hands, kissing each one, "Since he gave me Dad’s cloak he already knows about that. He won't find out about the stone though. Who'd tell him anyway? He's in hot water with the Goblins right now as it turns out."

"Really?" It was terribly petty but that actually made her perk up some. "What has he done to turn the Goblins against him? They are not exactly high on morality and decency so it must have something to do with cold hard cash or deceit in some way." Hermione looked at Harry questioningly, still squeezing his hands.

"Turns out Dumbledore was embezzling from Hogwarts, taking funds that were marked for orphaned muggleborns or children whose families just couldn't afford to send them to school and absorbing them into his own accounts. The scholarship fund is Gringotts run, the goblins the official proxies for all the kids. Embezzling from Hogwarts' scholarship funds, according to Bill, is the same as stealing from the goblins."

Ron's eyes nearly popped out of his skull, "Bloody hell, you never steal from a goblin, ever. Not if you want to live anyway."

Hermione's grin was absolute evil and only the fact that Harry held her hands kept her from rubbing them together. "He keeps setting himself up doesn't he? He must have known that the Goblins would find out at some point. They are vigilant about keeping track of their money. I want him to suffer, I want him to suffer so badly and luckily he's bringing that suffering on himself."

Hermione remembered that cursed foundation stone at Godric's Hollow and that was the last drop that made the cup run over for her. She hated Dumbledore, truly, really hated him and she would live to see him completely ruined. That was a promise Hermione had made herself.

"He is slipping, that much is obvious," Harry sat down, gently pulling Hermione into his lap, "Hermione, I don't suppose you happened to do any research into Thestrals did you?"

"Not much more that the lessons we had with Hagrid on them. I've spoken to Luna about them of course and read one or two books on them for fun. When I want to have something easy to read before bedtime but I haven't done any downright research no." She settled into his lap and crossed her legs as she relaxed, Harry's lap was a very comfortable place to be.

Ron tilted his head, "What are you thinking mate?"

"Ollivander said something that's got me thinking, about there always being a price to be paid. The Elder Wand is power in a stick basically and power always exacts a heavy toll when you use it. The wood itself, even magically charged, really wouldn't cause problems but thestral hair...I'm wondering if the wand's been messing with Dumbledore's head."
"That would actually make a lot of sense. Thestrals aren't considered dark creatures but they are not light ones either since they are about death." Hermione bit her lip. "No one is supposed to wield such power as the Elder Wand, it must have consequences in some way. And now that he's on the run I am guessing he is forced to use it more and more. The more he uses it the greater the backlash."

Ron hummed, "You're not going all understanding and sympathetic on him are you mate?"

Harry shook his head, "No. Even before he got the wand he was a manipulative user. He's just losing his touch at it after having the wand for a long time. I will never be sympathetic to him, ever. Not after everything he's done to the people I love."

"Good, he doesn't deserve any sympathy or pity. That man only deserves pain." Hermione's mouth was set in a stubborn line. She tried her best not to hate and not wish pain and misfortune on people but Dumbledore was a glowing exception.

Harry tilted her face toward him and kissed the frown away, "We're here, free and happy while he's ducking and running and shagging his arse to keep out of all the hands wanting to ring his neck. No need to dwell on him more than we already do. Think about the good things happening today, like the Invocation Sirius and the others are pulling on the Ministry." He grinned widely as he imagined exactly what the expressions of the old farts would be.

Those words made her smile. "It's brilliant, I imagine that the Ministry will sound like a panicked chicken farm today when Sirius and the others walk in. It is something that needs to be done though and I am so happy that you told Sirius about the Invocation." She looked at Harry. "But Harry please, please don't mention Dumbledore, shagging and arse in the same sentence, I can already feel the nightmares coming."

Ron just shook his head as Harry laughed and kissed Hermione again. He wiggled his foot and picked up the little note he'd been writing to Luna before Harry had returned. Sure she was just over the hill but he liked sending her little notes with Pig every day, it was just something he liked doing, letting her know she was on his mind.

Sirius' brows rose as the entire Ministry was wrapped in a blinding light as they finished the Invocation and suddenly several sheafs of paperwork literally exploded before their eyes. "Okay, I'll say that worked." He looked over at Xenophilius who was studying the patterns the exploding paperwork made.

The blond man tore his eyes away from the shredded paper bits, they looked just like Dungdunders did when they released their scales in signs of danger. "I would say so yes, unless they have gotten their hands on frink parchment of course, those have a mind of their own and can explode for no reason but since it looks as if the old stodgers are about to choke on their tongues I do think it worked." Xenophilius tilted his head and watched the wizards and witches curiously, they were turning the most fetching shade of purple in their anger, maybe he should get Luna a dress in that shade.

Narcissa, hand tucked into the crook of Severus' elbow, scanned the room with extreme pleasure, "Indeed. However I move that we vacate the premises post haste before they regain what little brain power they possess. I'm certain Amelia can handle them accordingly, yes?" She looked to the presiding witch of the Wizengamot who rounded out their little Invocation group.

"Of course Narcissa, it will be my pleasure in fact. I know how to handle them." Amelia Bones'
smile was as warm and friendly as a shark's. She looked forward to putting them into their place, they had forgotten what a Ministry of Magic was really about but she would delight in reminding them. "You lot should go though, just as Narcissa says, the last thing we need right now is for a regular fist fight to break out, we've done what we set out to do and now it is time for me to clean up the mess."

Sirius smiled as Severus gave Amelia a short bow of respect before turning to lead the lady on his arm out of the chamber. Since Narcissa's visit, and subsequent convincing to leave the life of a spy behind him and try for a better life, with her, he'd softened. Not too terribly much, but enough that it made a difference. It was almost scary to see but also a very good thing. He wondered how it would translate to his post as Hogwarts professor. Lord Black turned and offered his arm to Augusta Longbottom with a charming grin as the others filed out as well, "Lady Longbottom, may I escort you out?"

She eyed him speculatively before looping her own arm through his. "Why not, it's been too long since I had a strapping young thing on my arm. People may think that I lost my touch." Augusta quirked her lips up in an amused smile as she strode out with Sirius as if she was a queen, back straight and head held high. This was the most fun she'd had in a long time, she loved stirring things up a little when it was needed.

"Oh never let that be said," Sirius followed the group out of the Ministry, which was in utter chaos, a wide grin on his face, "This was absolutely too much fun, necessary but by Merlin fun. I thought Trevelyan was going to expire right before our eyes."

Augusta practically cackled. "Oh I wish he had, then at least he would have been good for something in his wretched little life. He would have provided us with amusement. Amelia would have had to clean up the mess though so it might be better he lives to be tortured another day."

"True, true," Sirius nodded, "Joking aside I'm relieved it worked. Now perhaps things can actually improve for everyone."

"I believe it will, starting from scratch is something very much needed. Now they can concentrate on helping people as they are supposed to do instead of only helping themselves and furthering their own ambition." Augusta took a deep breath when they exited the Ministry. "It really is a rather remarkable day, even the air feels fresher."

He nodded. "Yes. It does," his face lit up and his smile widened as he spotted his mate and son across the street looking through trinkets on a tinker's cart, "Hello what are they doing here?"

"That I cannot answer but you should go and join them. I should get home to my Neville anyway, he is transforming Longbottom Hall's garden into something truly magical and I have to watch him so that he doesn't work too hard." Augusta shone with pride as she spoke of her grandson.

Orion turned around and caught sight of Sirius, waving happily and poking his Dad's protruding stomach to get his attention and show him that Sirius was close.

Sirius pat Augusta's hand as Remus turned and their eyes met, the love in them flooring him as it always did, "Give Neville my best then. Good Day Lady Longbottom," he stepped away and went over to his family, pulling a bit on Orion's queue of hair, "No poking the belly." He curled his hand around the back of Remus' neck, "Hello you," and brushed his lips over his.

"Hi there." Remus smiled warmly as he return the light kiss, he had seen Sirius that morning but he was always happy when they met again after having been apart, even if it was only for a short little while. The twelve years that they had been forced apart made every moment with his mate
precious. "Did everything work out the way you planned it? Lady Longbottom looked pleased so
I'm hoping it wasn't a disaster."

Sirius pet the swell of Remus' belly, "Went perfectly. Place lit up like Filibusters and paperwork
exploded. Successful day I'd say." His hand trailed down to lace fingers with his mate's, "What
brings my two point five out and about by the by?" He shifted to give Orion a hug.

"Molly is at the Manor, doing more planning and preparations for Harry's party. Let's just say that
our house turned very crowded and very loud there. Orion and I needed a bit of a breather and we
haven't been to London in a very long time. It was a good day for an outing." Remus rubbed the
back of Sirius' hand with his thumb.

Orion rolled his eyes, loud and crowded was understatement.

Sirius smiled, "So it is. Do you want to stay in the wizarding bit or go further?"

"Eh, since I look like I've swallowed a beach ball and a glamour is too hard to hold up with most of
my magic is rerouted to the tadpole, I think it's best to stay in the wizarding part." Remus pat his
swollen belly with his free hand. "I like to be able to walk and have fun without worrying today."

"Alright then," he pressed a kiss to Remus' temple, "How about we have some ice cream at
Fortescues then pop to the real Magical Menagerie." He referred to the wizarding zoo just down
Silver Beam Street.

"Cracking!" Orion bounced around them, still keeping up with the bouncy ball tendencies even at
fourteen and in alpha training.

"It sounds as if those plans have been approved." Remus chuckled at their son, happy that he still
allowed himself to be excited and happy when he was out with his parents. "Ice cream sounds like
a dream and it's always funny to see which animals and creatures cower away from me and Orion."

Sirius laughed, "Love I think they all cower away from our little alpha in the making." He grinned
at the tongue Orion stuck out at him, "Now to the ice cream parlor. I think there's a chocolate
sundae with someone's name on it." The way Remus' expression grew delighted and Orion's
thrilled whoop made his heart very nearly soar. This was why he'd survived Azkaban and
everything else, to have this right here.

--------------------------------------------

Harry looked at Ron, shaking his head at the horns sprouting from his head and the furry hooved
legs as well as the Grecian style upper robe, "Okay remind me again just what you are?"

"I'm a satyr you berk. Only Mum made me cover the upper half, normally they don't do clothes."
He eyed the wilder than usual hair that had been charmed blond, the make up on Harry's face, the
dark glittery blue cape with the shiny black leather epaulets and high stiff curling collar, soft black
leather gloves, the black leather waist coat over the navy blue silk skirt, the black breeches, and
hessians, "And what the bloody hell are you?"

Harry smiled, "Jareth, you wouldn't get it Ron."

"I get it though and you look very, very handsome as the Goblin King." Hermione stuck her head
into their room to make sure the two of them were decent before she entered the room in a flowing
white dress, her hair spelled a darker brown than her usual locks and for once non frizzy, it hung
lose down her back in shiny waves. She held a matching white face mask in her hand but she hadn't
put it on yet. "You make a very nice Satyr too Ron, just skip the nymph orgies at the party, I don't
think Luna would approve.

"Hey I only want to tickle one girl's feathers and that's my Luna's." Ron grinned, "You look nice though, I'm guessing you and Harry match or something?"

Harry stepped over to Hermione, bowing over her hand, "Always, she's always my match Ron."

Hermione smiled and dropped into a deep, flowing curtsy, holding her skirt out with one hand as she did so. "My partner and perfect match in everything that matters." Her brown eyes shone with love. "Happy birthday Harry." She rose and pressed her lips lightly against his.

"Thank you luv," he returned the kiss before gently nuzzling her cheek, "You really do look stunning. I can't wait to dance with you tonight." He stepped back when Ron cleared his throat and picked up his own black mask, putting it on and giving her a smile. "So do I look mysterious enough that people won't guess who I am until the unveiling?"

"Mate you've gone blond, no way they'll figure it out." Ron rolled his eyes.

"No one will figure it out," Hermione agreed, a thrill running down her back at the sight of Harry in full costume and mask, he really did look absolutely gorgeous. He would have both ladies and gents hanging off of him tonight. That thought alone triggered her jealousy. "Unless you look someone deeply in the eyes of course, there's no hiding that brilliant shade of green." She tied her own white mask over her eyes and nose, for once feeling very pretty, perhaps because she was pretending to be someone else.

Ron put on his own leafy green mask, "What about those things you were talking about once Hermione? Those cone-acts?"

Harry's lips twitched, "It's contacts Ron, and actually Molly thought of that too when I told her about the mask I was hoping for since I can't wear my glasses with it." He tapped one eyehole with his nail, making his friends jump a bit before they noticed it was covered with glass.

Ron moved closer and eyed him, "Huh, your right eye looks blue."

Harry grinned, "Tinted glass," he offered Hermione is arm, "May I escort you down stairs Lady Sarah?"

"Of course, it would be my honor Your Majesty." Hermione smiled and placed her hand on Harry's arm as they started to walk down the stairs. She firmly ignored Ron rolling his eyes at them as he followed them down.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs Harry grinned as he saw a very pregnant Merlin standing next to King Arthur and a very dapper wolf. He lead Hermione over to them, "I was wondering what you two were dressing as."

"This was Sirius idea and of course I jumped at the chance to be a legend for a night." Remus smiled and wrapped his dark blue cloak around him tighter, though there was nothing he could do to make his belly look smaller.

Orion grinned. "I'm just embracing my inner nature." He was very smartly dressed in a black victorian cut tux, black leather gloves with silver colored claw tips. It wasn't real silver since he didn't want to poison his Dad by touching him. Only his mouth and chin showed from beneath the beautifully detailed wolf mask. When he turned there was a fluffy tail attached to his trousers, a tail that moved when he did and bobbed as he walked. Polished, knee high leather boots completed the outfit.
Sirius grinned, "How could we resist? Moony looks too good preggers to cover it up with a silly glamour."

Ron shook his head, "You two are entirely to-" he perked up as his mother, dressed as a shepherdess with two tiny sheep following her around bleating every now and again, led a battle formed veela, and an ancient Greek hunter into the hall, "Luna!" He pranced, because that's what satyrs do, over to her, "You look amazing!"

"Thank you, look very handsome too." Luna ruffled her feathers, her face mask portraying a rather lethal looking beak and her fingers ended in long, sharp talons. She still smiled her sweet Luna smile though, making a startling contrast between her costume and herself.

Ginny came down the stairs in a white Grecian style dress, a braided golden belt around her waist and golden bands braided into her long bright red hair that fell over one bare shoulder. Her mask matched in white and gold. She headed straight for Neville and kissed him on his cheek. "You make a dashing Orion Nev." Her lips curled into a smile beneath the mask.

"Far too lowly for my goddess Artemis however," he kissed her hand, "You outshine me by far."

Harry smiled, "Everyone looks wonderful. The rest of the Burrow family are already in the ballroom so what say we join them?"

Ron tangled his fingers with Luna's talons, "Sure. Lead the way King Jareth."

"The court follows the king." Luna added and smiled again following as Harry and Hermione walked toward the ballroom, Molly's sheep running around their feet.

"No eating the sheep Orion, they're fake, only charmed to move." Ginny smirked at the younger boy.

"Ha ha ha, you're so very funny." The wolf tail attached to him wagged irritably.

Sirius chuckled and brought up the rear with his mate as they entered the ballroom. As Harry'd said the Weasleys were all there, minus Charlie who'd be arriving with Blaise and the other Slytherin's of the 'pride' and he had to shake his head at Percy, dressed up like some ancient stuffy bureaucrat standing next to Oliver Wood in a Quidditch uniform, wearing Seeker gear, "Keepers, so few have the brain cells left to be creative. The satyr's an exception but yeesh."

Remus chuckled quietly, secretly agreeing with Sirius.

"A much, much more important question here is, what in the name of Mordred's dangling dong is Percy doing here with Oliver Wood?" Ginny's eyes were wide behind her mask. "Last time he visited which granted is a while ago but still...Then he still was with Pen."

Ron looked back at his sister, "Why don't you ask him your goddessness?"

Neville cleared his throat, "Um, I saw Penelope out with a Ravenclaw from her year in Diagon last week. Maybe the distance was too much for her?"

Harry chose not to mention that he'd often seen Percy in the Gryffindor stands watching Oliver like Ron watched his food so he had a feeling that had been building for a while truthfully. He gave Hermione's cheek another kiss as she was snatched away by Fleur and went to talk to the Mad Hatter and the Cheshire Cat. He eyed the lazily swishing pink and purple tail and shook his head as bits of George disappeared and reappeared randomly, "I'm almost afraid to ask how you've managed that."
George grinned widely. "Believe me Harry, I don't think you really want to know. Some things you should just applaud the result of and forget how they came to be." He reached out and groped Fred's bum with a disappearing arm, looking absolutely innocent and wide eyed.

There was a snort from the doorway and Draco walked forward to them, black trousers and coat, a white high collared shirt with a neatly tied cravat. A huge pocket watch hung by his coat pocket and velvety white rabbit ears were perched among platinum tresses. As he walked you could see the equally white and fluffy tail as well.

Harry blinked, "I don't believe it. I absolutely do not believe it. How in the hell did you get convinced to come as the White Rabbit Malfoy? I'd have thought you'd be sending stingers at someone's bits for having the gall to so much as suggest it."

Fred sent a grateful look to the heavens and murmured something that sounded like 'thank Merlin for the underage magic laws' because when he and George had first spoken to their dragon about costumes, he was certain Draco would have hexed their bits with extreme prejudice.

Draco raised his chin and looked very much like the pureblood he was, even with rabbit ears on top of his head. "It was suggested that I should own the rabbit, take it back and take the power over it. That and I remembered how great I am in any form so...here I am."

George grinned in open admiration at their dragon. How someone could make arrogance and pompousness be so damned sexy he didn't know but Draco certainly pulled it off.

Harry shook his head, "Well so long as you're not killing the two terrors, more power to you." He spotted Narcissa in the flowing, gossamer gown and golden crown with the delicate wings draping down her back and his brows lifted behind his mask, "Merlin, is that your mother?"

"Hm?" Draco looked across the floor. "Yes, that's Mother, queen of the Fair Folk." There was a clear note of pride in Draco's voice as he watched his mother. She really looked like a queen, every inch of her regal and powerful.

"I am sorry I wasn't there when Snape saw her like that the first time because that reaction had to have been penseive-worthy. She looks amazing."

Fred had to laugh at Harry's tone, purely clinical and unaffected, "Harry you are so incredibly shackled to Hermione."

He lifted his shoulders in a shrug and smiled as he noticed a dark Fae King join Narcissa's side, "I know, and am very pleased about that. Okay I see Snape, a very draconic Blaise, Charlie in his handler gear following that dragon tail, and Blaise's mother. Where's Pansy?"

Draco shrugged. "She doesn't want to be recognized so she's making sure she won't be I suppose. When the time is right she'll steal the show though, she can only keep a low profile for so long after all. She's Slytherin and we like to be seen and admired for how much better we are than the rest of you." He looked over at Blaise again. "I can bet that Blaise only went as a dragon to get Charles to handle him in public, this is as much bondage as he can get away with in a crowded room."

"Okay I really did not need that mental image, so I'll bid you adieu and let you and your kitty and hatter have fun," Harry walked away, smirking as Fred and George immediately took the opportunity to sidle close to Draco's sides, Fred reaching up to play with one long white ear. He scanned the room and went to talk to Mr. Weasley, who'd been somehow conned into a priest's cassock, while they waited for all the guests to arrive.
Pansy peeked around the doorway and carefully adjusted her blazing red half mask before looking down at herself to make sure everything was in place. The white, off the shoulder dress with the skirt that teased around her calves, the black corset that went over it, the killer red shoes, it all worked wonderfully. She carefully repositioned the hooded cape then slipped into the ballroom.

Orion was having fun, really a lot of fun. Almost no one recognized him, not after the way he had shot up in height over the summer. Of course the wolf costume gave him away a little but it was still fun to keep people guessing. He’d seen Blaise and cottontail Draco but he hadn’t seen Pansy, he hoped that she would show. He’d missed her over the summer, owls and mirror calls weren’t the same as meeting face to face. He walked over to the refreshment tables to have himself some punch, dancing and tricking people was hard work, he was thirsty. A flash of bright red caught his eye and he found himself following a red cloak across the floor with his eyes.

Pansy had spotted the white ears of one of her idiots across the floor and was heading in his direction when she felt a tingle at the back of her neck and turned to see a tall boy in a wolf’s costume watching her. She tilted her head in amusement. What were the odds of there being a wolf being here when she'd chosen her costume in direct contradiction to being a she-wolf?

Orion couldn't help but stalk closer, his eyes never leaving the redclad form. Something about her called out to him and he hoped it wasn't just because she was Little Red Riding Hood, he wasn't that far gone in wolfism. As he came closer to her his nose twitched and a strange shiver ran down his back. He didn't know what the shiver was all about but it was a scent he would recognize anywhere. "Of course it was her." A slow, lazy smile curled his lips upwards as he came to stand close to her.

Pansy tilted her head up and turned fully toward him, he was lean but held the promise of becoming wonderfully broad and powerful with long dark hair tied back in a queue. She wondered if his eyes were naturally amber or if it was a glamour charm. Either way he looked good whoever he was. Her lips curved up in a sly, teasing smile, "Oh my a big bad wolf.

Amber eyes widened under the mask only to narrow just a quickly again. He looked closely at Pansy and took in her scent and then he nearly broke out tapdancing. Pansy didn't recognize him...The shrewdest bitch of Hogwarts didn't know him. Keeping his mouth shut, he bowed and held out his arms in a silent question of a dance.

She chuckled, "How can I refuse such a roguish invitation, though if you won't offer conversation you'd best be a good dancer Mr. Bad or I'll leave you and your paws on the dancefloor." She stepped closer and slipped her hand into his, eyes widening fractionally at the strange little tingle that went through her at the contact even through gloves.

Smiling wickedly behind the mask, Orion tightened his clawtipped fingers around hers and pulled her out to the dancefloor to give her the dance of her life. For once all those boring dance lessons would be somewhat useful. His other hand settled on the low of her back and once again that strange shiver went through him as they started to move.

She hid the hitch her breath made in the back of her throat and followed his lead, his very smooth lead. There was something familiar about him, at least she thought so, but there were several people here she didn't know from Potter's school so he could just be reminding her of one of her acquaintances. Still in addition to that curious thrill there was an air of familiarity about him. "Well I must admit that you certainly aren't disappointing."

Orion grinned again and took a firmer hold on her as he suddenly dipped her, almost all the way to
the floor before slowly pulling her up again. He was never disappointing.

Remus was staying off the dancefloor, not wanting anyone to accidentally bump his stomach with an elbow or side. Right now he was looking at the dancing couples, admiring all the fantastical costumes when he caught sight of his son. Remus shook his head fondly. Such a show off...Definitely his father's son in that aspect.

Sirius drew up beside his mate and handed Remus a cup of Fizzy Gingerjuice before looking out at their son, "Well, well looks like the Big Bad Wolf has found himself a Little Red Riding Hood." He sipped at his butterbeer, "I seem to remember dipping you like that once and then getting a whack on the head for it. Something about you not being a girl."

"Wasn't then and aren't now. Nothing girly about me." Remus took the cup and smiled up at his mate. "Besides I was always terrified you would drop me on my head when you did things like that. After all James dropped Lily...Twice." Remus placed one hand on his belly and looked back at their son. "Do you by any chance recognize our wolfy's little red cloaked lady?"

"I, Mr. Moony, was never James and always the better dancer. Drop you indeed," Sirius sniffed indignantly before studying the lass his son was dancing with, "Hmm not sure but I'm thinking it's little miss Parkinson."

"It is little miss Parkinson and what makes it better and so much more amusing is that she's not recognizing her strapping wolf as her little puppy." Remus laughed and looped the hand that was not holding his cup through Sirius' arms. "And no...you're not nearly as great a dancer as you think you when you have some firewhiskey in you so yes...There was a substantial chance that you'd drop me."

He razzed his mate then watched as Orion spun his Red Riding Hood under his arm, "This is going to be interesting when the masks come off at midnight. Think she'll kick our sneaky little sprog in the bum?"

"Don't know yet, it is a possibility, I doubt miss Parkinson is too fond of surprises. Also it depends on if Orion can manage to stay on good behavior all the way to midnight, he might get a little too excited at the prospect of having one over Parkinson."

Sirius chuckled, "There is that." He leaned in and kissed the corner of Remus' mouth, "What do you say we go chase a pair of teenagers off one of the benches in an alcove and hold our own little court for a while?"

"That Lord Black, sounds like a splendid idea. Some canoodling between the nobleman and the commoner halfblood under the stars and only the flowers as witnesses." Remus' smile was teasing as he started to move toward the large open French doors, leading outside.

Harry chuckled as he swept Hermione into another dance. He was monopolizing his girl but that was fine with him, "Looks like the Once and Future King and his magician are absconding with each other."

"Don't they always?" Hermione laughed and followed Harry's lead. "From the book you got that time in Hogsmeade shows that it's been about Arthur and Merlin all along. I would not be surprised to see the King of Albion rubbing his sorcerer's feet out there though.

He smiled, "Not surprised at all no." He twirled her out then back into his arms, "Parkinson's arrived and is dancing with Orion. I'm not too sure she knows it's Ri though. He's changed a lot since she last saw him and with the mask you'd be hard pressed to know it's him. Especially since
"he's not the only wolf around," he angled his head at Alek, who was dressed in gold and white, leaning against the wall, and glaring at Johann as he danced with one of the other male Marauder professors.

"Oh it will be fun to watch how it plays out. To see if Parkinson figures it out before reveals. Almost as much fun as to see how long it takes before Alek goes to rip Johann out of his partner's arms. You know you're too pretty to be real Potions Master is dancing with all these other men just to tease and be dickhead right? He keeps looking over at Alek all the time."

Harry nodded, "Yeah I know it. I think Alek does too so you never know what'll happen." He pursed his lips as the music changed to a waltz and Alek strode out onto the floor and, instead of heading for Johann, he went to tap Orion on the shoulder. "Oh now things are getting interesting. I may have to go tell Johann to collar Alek if he makes a scene at this party. Molly would skin him."

Pansy was analyzing her dance partner, trying to place him, when she saw a man with wolf eyes come up behind him and tap him on the shoulder, a low growling voice pleasantly asking to cut in. Her hands tightened on her partner's shoulder and hand, not really liking the thought of dancing with someone else. That was both the mysterious tingle and her possessive Slytherin side coming out to play. She wanted to keep a hold on her black and silver wolf.

Orion looked over his shoulder at Alek and then back at Pansy who was gripping him much tighter that she had a few moments ago. He did his best to reign in his triumphant smirk but he was sure his scent radiated smugness to the other wolf. "I'm sorry Sir." He said almost as low as a whisper. "It seems the Lady has made her choice." As he twirled Pansy around he did send his mentor a happy grin.

Johann had watched the events play out and had now moved on to dance with a sweet young girl that he hadn't a clue who it was underneath the mask. He just wanted to dance, that was all.

Pansy saw the large man cut a glance over at the insanely pretty blackbird dancing with Susan Bones and spoke to him, "Perhaps you should go claim the one you really want before his attention is all tied up in someone else instead of trying his tactics."

Alek laughed and made Orion pause again to murmur just below human hearing, "Good choice whelp." Then he turned and decided to do much as Orion's lady suggested.

Not being able to help himself, Orion leaned in a little closer so he could sniff at Pansy's neck, the scent of her almost made him dizzy but he didn't know why. Shrugging it off he smiled again and set out to twirl her all across the ballroom.

Pansy shivered a bit at that action and met the boy's eyes, the shade of that amber tickling her memory as they danced.

Johann had just let the girl go, a strapping thing of a boy waiting for her at the edge of the dance floor when he felt the presence of his Headmaster closing in on him.

Alek laid his hand on the potion master's shoulder, "Dance with me."

Pale blue eyes locked on gold ones, testing the waters before he turned and placed one of his own hands on the larger man's shoulder and the other went for Alek's hand. "You better not step on my toes."

"I'm big but I do know how to move and use my size you know." Alek began leading the other man into a country dance, "Why a blackbird may I ask?"
"They are picky about their nests, unassuming and unremarkable but carry a secret treasure around in the sound of their song." Johann knew that Alek knew how to use his size, even in human form the man moved like wolf he was. Johann never seemed able to keep his mouth shut around the other though, always teasing and goading and shouting.

Alek hummed, "Admittedly accurate though you are not as 'unremarkable' as you seem to think."

"Aber nein, you are wrong Headmaster. All of my life people have seen me as a peacock but regardless of my feathers I am nothing but a simple blackbird." Johann replied and followed Alek's lean seemlessly as they moved across the the polished dance floor.

"I'm not referring to your feathers, feathers fade with time and age, what makes you remarkable is much more lasting."

Harry lead Hermione over to the punch bowl and handed her a glass of the shimmering red punch, "Looks like they won't be blowing up the ballroom then."

"But this is better, no damaged furniture and two gorgeous men giving into their attraction to each other...Oh yes, much, much better." Hermione smiled and took the glass, letting the punch soothe her. She was hot from the dancing but she didn't want to trade even a minute of it away. "I'm getting the evil eye from all over the place for monopolizing your time, there's a line out into the gardens of hopeful souls wanting to dance with you."

"I'm getting a few dirty looks myself," he angled his head at a grouping of boys and men loitering across the floor looking at him like he killed their puppy. He reached up and tucked a wayward sleeked curl of hers back into place, "They can look and glare all they want. I am sticking with my beautiful lady."

"And I'm right where I want to be, being with you so all the piners can just eat their heart out." Hermione smiled and rose up to place her red, punch stained lips against his in a short kiss. She knew herself well enough to know that she was possessive of Harry, she loved him so of course she wanted to spend as much time as she could with him.

"Too right," he tangled his gloved fingers with hers, scanning the ballroom again and catching sight of a priest cornering a shepherdess against the wall, little charmed sheep running around bleating their heads off. He had to chuckle when Molly froze them so she and Arthur could properly kiss.

He saw the White Rabbit plastered against the Cheshire Cat's side while the Mad Hatter played with his ears, the cat's tail wrapped around the hatter's leg, there was a dragon pinning its tamer to a column, a Greek goddess snogging her hunter slightly hidden behind a decorative plant, a Seeker was snogging the wig off a ministry legend, the swan princess and her prince dancing to music all their own, and of course a satyr prancing about with his veela.

Harry spotted Titania being hovered over protectively by her Oberon while speaking with what appeared to be a high elf priestess who was on the arm of a very tall leprechaun. A couple steps away was Tonks, because no one else in the world would wear that sort of costume so confidently, shifting from foot to foot in worry. He looked over at Hermione, "Do you think we should poke our nose in over there or leave it?"

Hermione followed Harry's gaze to the very, very pink creature he was motioning toward. There were dark pink tights, pink hotpants, a pink corset and a lot of pink feathers. The half mask was pink too, glittery and beaked. "I'm all for poking our noses in. She looks nervous and she's supposed to have fun." Hermione's browd furrowed beneath her mask. "What's she supposed to be
Harry tilted his head, "I'd bet on a flamingo," he tugged Hermione gently along with him and drew up beside the flamboyant Auror, hearing Narcissa speaking lowly and somewhat sharply to the elf he presumed was Tonks' mother. "You know you're supposed to be having fun right?"

A pink beak turned Harry's way and the flamingo suddenly threw her arms around Harry. "There you are! Happy birthday kiddo." She pulled back and looked Harry over. "Very nice, always had a thing for David Bowie." She grinned but sobered quickly. "I have been having fun...It's just...not fun whenever those two get together. I'm not even sure they know what the fight is really about anymore." She looked over at the tense faces and rigid postures. "It's always like this, maybe we shouldn't have come."

Harry's lips tightened and he turned Tonks around, looking over at Hermione, "Lady Sarah would you be so kind as to find our flamingo here a wildly handsome bloke to dance with while I deal with the party poopers?"

Hermione nodded and reached for Tonks' hand, pulling the feathered, pink girl with her across the floor until she could introduce her to the young, handsome History Professor at Marauders. She basically pushed the two together and herded them out on the floor before she carefully started to make her way back to where Harry was, turning down several offers to dance on her way. It had to be the costume, Hermione couldn't see why anyone would want to dance with her otherwise.

Harry, Gryffindor that he was, stepped between Narcissa and Andromeda just as barbs were getting vicious and just flat out asked, "What in Merlin's knickers are the two of you fighting about?"

Severus cocked a brow, though you couldn't see beneath his mask and set his hand warmly on Narcissa's lower back as she jolted a bit and stared at the temporary blond that had to be Potter. He'd honestly not known what to do or say when Narcissa and Andromeda had begun bickering politely then it had grown into outright fighting, not a hint of politeness to be seen or heard. Had it been two students he'd have known exactly what to do and say but two sisters, one of whom was the woman he was dating? That was far outside the realm of his experience.

Blue gray eyes widened behind a flower covered mask as Andromeda broke off mid barb. The young man who stood between her and her sister was mostly a child still but the power radiating from him was staggering and it made her falter in her planned sharp reply. Instead she reached for Ted, needed her husband's presence to ground her. Andromeda hadn't been aware that they had been drawing attention to themselves.

Harry folded his arms across his chest, "Well? What are you fighting about? Or have the two of you been fighting so long you don't even know why you're fighting?"

Narcissa narrowed her eyes, though she was uncomfortable with the pressure that she felt coming from Potter he was still a boy, "This is not your business."

"Actually it is, see I've grown very fond of the flamingo now blushing at being complimented on her feathers and the white rabbit watching us now with twitchy nose and worried eyes is, oddly enough, family," he met the ice blue eyes of Narcissa, "and so are you and the creepy 'uncle' by your side. So, what is the issue?"

Andromeda opened her mouth to answer before closing it again. What was the issue? Other than over half a lifetime of bitterness and hurt? Andromeda's family had turned their back on her without exception and she still hurt over it. Even if asked she honestly didn't know if she could forgive. She'd never have thought that her little Cissy would have stood with the others as they
burned her name off the tapestries but she had and so far as Andromeda was concerned she could now continue to stay away. Andromeda had done just fine on her own, raised a beautiful and brilliant daughter.

Narcissa looked away, mouth and jaw tight. Andromeda was still bitter and she did understand but why couldn't her big sister understand her point of view? She'd not yet been betrothed to Lucius nor had she been out of school. If she had stood with Andromeda and not with the family she'd have faced much worse than simply having her name burned off the family tree. She'd still been under the guardianship of her family and just before she turned seventeen they'd created the betrothal contract, one stronger than the one they'd drawn up for Andromeda. Her older sister breaking the betrothal contract only resulted in disownment, had she broken her own to Lucius it would have cost her her magic. She'd had to keep an eye on her safety and then on the safety of her son. Why didn't Andromeda understand that?

Harry looked between the two women and the concerned look on the leprechaun's masked face, the lines forming around Snape's mouth and sighed, drawing the two sisters' attention to him, "The two of you are sisters, bound by blood and childhood experiences. You're supposed to love each other and not let old, petty differences keep you apart now that you don't have to keep up an asinine appearance of mutual disgust to protect yourselves anymore.

"Lucy's dead and the only other free adult Black left is currently outside canoodling with or rubbing the ankles of his very male, very pregnant fiance. You've got a chance to be family again, to fix what's been hurt and torn and bleeding. I don't have any blood family left, for years I was alone and I'd have done anything, given everything for what you have, for what you can have if you'll actually bother working at being family again."

A blush of embarrassment and shame tinted Andromeda's cheeks as she listen to what the young man said. She looked out over the floor at Nymphadora dancing with a tall man and at the nephew she didn't even know. Hurt and and an overwhelming sense of loss flowed through her. She'd loved and looked after her sisters growing up and she missed them. She even missed Bella, the sweet curious little girl she had been before her mind slipped and she got poisoned by the thought of pureblood supremacy and her love for a madman. She cleared her throat and gripped her husband's hand tighter. "I'm sorry...You have a beautiful son Narcissa. You must be proud."

Narcissa shifted to lean just a bit on Severus and nodded, "I am," her gaze met her sister's for a moment before flicking over to Draco, who was watching her like a hawk, his two miscreants on either side of him doing much the same, all three likely ready to swoop in and 'save' her, "He's not at all like his sire. Something I am grateful for." She gave her attention back to Andromeda, "You must be proud of your own child. She's quite lovely and very...bright." She blinked as Andromeda's husband stifled a laugh at that description.

Andromeda chuckled and squeezed Ted's hand again. "Bright is one way to describe Nymphadora yes. But you are right, we are very proud of her and the choices she has made." Her smile grew fond as she watch her daughter dip the man she was dancing with before twirling him around with flourish. "Things haven't been too easy for her but she's never let it hold her down or keep her back in any way." She looked at her husband and then at her sister. "I do not believe you have ever met formally but this is my husband Theodore Tonks."

Ted smiled and held out a hand, pressing a charming, chaste kiss to the back of Narcissa's, "Pleased to meet you properly." His eyes gleamed in good humor. He found forgiving easier than his wife did, it was the Hufflepuff in him, "Tell me is it true you accidentally turned Sirius Black's hair purple when you were ten?"
Narcissa's eyes went wide, "She told you about that? I was certain Aunt Walburga was going to turn me inside out and Sirius cried for days about looking like a girl."

Harry snickered, "Purple hair? Excuse me but I have a dog to bait now," he wagged his finger, "Remember no fighting, it's a party, have fun." he caught Hermione and murmured in her ear as he tugged her toward the door to go annoy Sirius.

Laughing, Hermione followed behind Harry, leaving the sister to renew a very tentative bond but a bond none the less. "My hero, the peacemaker." Her long skirts swished around her feet as they walked to the large open doors leading to the terrace. "You lead, I'm not going to watch if they are doing something naughty."

Harry wrinkled his nose, "Okay. I'd hate for you to be exposed to that." He followed the sound of soft laughter around to see Sirius, with Remus' feet in his lap, murmuring into his ear. "It's safe."

"Thank goodness." Hermione giggled and stepped up until she stood next to Harry, listening to Remus praising Sirius' foot rubbing skills.

"I knew those long fingers were good for something Pads, glad to see they're finally coming to their proper use." Remus' voice was filled with love. He had one hand on his belly and the other on the backrest of the bench he was resting sideways on, feet in his mate's lap. The air around them was filled with night blooming flowers and the stars were out, blinking down on the two men in the garden.

"I could say something very, very off color to that but you'd hit me," Sirius kept rubbing Remus' ankles and feet, "I'm tempted to tie you to the bed for the rest of your pregnancy Moony, save your ankles some grief."

Harry exchanged a look with Hermione, "Speaking of off-color," he said as they walked over, "You know there's benches in the ballroom."

"Since it's our house I was vaguely aware of that yes." Remus' tone was dry as he looked up at the newcomers to their little haven. "The ballroom doesn't have fresh air and stars though. How are things going in there? I hope you're having fun." He wiggled his toes in Sirius' lap. "And you, if you were to chain me to bed you might have a different thing to rub and relieve." He smiled a crooked smile.

Sirius chuckled, "As if that would be any hardship."

Harry rolled his eyes, "Things are good, now that Narcissa and her sister aren't sniping at each other anymore. By the way Sirius," he grinned at the wary look his godfather gained at his tone, "I hear that you once sported purple hair."

"What is this and why have I never heard of it?" Remus' amber eyes sparkled. "You've always proclaimed very loudly I might add that purple is the devil's own color and shouldn't be touched by as much as a kilometer long stick."

Hermione laughed and looked at the blushing Sirius with amusement.

Sirius growled at Harry, "There is a reason for that opinion. It's not like I wanted the purple hair and I was four at the time. It was very much not of my own choice and where in the name of Mordred's socks did you hear about that cub?"

Harry smirked, "Apparently Narcissa's sister told her husband and Mr. Tonks wanted to confirm it so he asked Narcissa, in front of the entire ballroom."
Sirius groaned and hid his face, "I'll never be able to show myself in public again!"

"Oh stop being a dramaqueen." Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. "I had teeth growing down my bloody chest in front of half of Hogwarts and I still walk the halls proudly. If there's any comfort you've done much more silly and ridiculous things that sport purple hair when you were but an ankle biter. Suck it up and be a man, you're about to be a father of two and husband."

Remus looked at the pretty girl with wide eyes.

Harry beamed, "That's my girl. Plus you know Snuffles, I gave Orion the pink candy floss hair so really, purple hair is far from the end of the world."

Sirius wrinkled his nose, "Yeah but it didn't go away and no one was able to charm it back to the right color. It had to grow out my natural color and everyone would stop my mother on the street and go 'Oh what a lovely little girl.' I've not got a thing against the female of the species but I don't really like being called a girl either."

Remus laughed, he couldn't help himself, Sirius looked so disgruntled, the man was even pouting. "Oh poor baby, I bet Walburga was loud to put them straight though, she would never have been undignified to have a daughter, she had the next heir of the honorable house of Black thank you very much." He reached out and petted Sirius' cheek. "There is absolutely nothing girly about you now though, even though you were the prettiest creature I'd ever seen when I met you on the train to school the first time."

He sighed and turned his head to kiss the center of Remus' palm, "I suppose I can live with being pretty then, since it got your attention." He leaned into his mate's touch again, "Still purple is evil, I stand by that."

Harry laughed quietly and moved to a bench across from them with Hermione, "So round about when do you two plan to tie the knot?"

Remus exchanged a smile with his mate before looking over at the couple opposite them. "Next weekend, the first weekend of August. You are of course required to come, the both of you. We couldn't get married without our cubs there. It will only be the closest family and very, very small. We want to be married when the baby comes and when we go to Hogwarts this fall to teach." The two of them had talked things over in detail, studied it from all angles before deciding to accept Minerva's offer, deciding that with a newborn and Orion there, Hogwarts would be the safest place for them.

Harry's eyes went wide, "Say what?"

Sirius smiled, "You, cub, are looking at the new Professor of Transfiguration and Remus will, as he's utterly brilliant, be taking up the post of Defense Professor once more."

It took two seconds, maybe three but then Harry surged to his feet, pumped both fists into the air and almost screamed, "YES!"

Hermione made a squeal of joy and jumped up to join Harry in an impromptu dance. "Finally someone competent to teach us, praise the fates!"

Remus was blushing so hard a beet would have looked anemic next to him.

Harry lifted Hermione by the waist and twirled her round before they settled back onto the bench, a wide grin on his face, "That is an awesome birthday present. I look forward to actually learning again in DADA."
"Me too, Merlin do I ever." Hermione still beamed. "Also, they couldn't have gotten a better replacement for Professor McGonagall in Transfigurations than you Snuffles. This year might actually be worthwhile learning wise at Hogwarts. It will be brilliant having the both of you there, along with Orion and the new little one."

Sirius chuckled at his red faced mate, "Why thank you Miss Granger. Would now be a good or bad time to tell you I'll also be taking the post as Head of Gryffindor House too?"

"Oh my...I don't believe Gryffindor House will never be the same." Hermione was laughing. "The students will adore you though, you will be right there playing pranks with them instead of holding them back. Is Professor Snape aware of this development?" She tilted her head curiously. Hermione knew that Snape and Sirius had become something akin to friends but that didn't mean that the rivalry between them wasn't still strong.

"I have no idea."

Harry shook his head, "I doubt it. If he knew then he'd be here baiting Sirius to insanity."

Sirius wiggled one of Remus' toes, "Yup the Hedgehog probably would yes."

"Oi, watch the toes, that tickles." Remus' foot jerked in Sirius' hold, it was strange but he had very ticklish toes.

"I think it's a good thing he doesn't know then. Better he's inside having fun with his Titania than out here baiting Snuffles." Hermione's smile turned wicked. "Besides, won't it be a nice surprise for him the first day of term?"

Sirius and Harry's snickers actually harmonized.

"Should I worry?" Neville came into view by his lonesome, "Anything that has those two snickering like that can't be good."

"No, I don't think you need to worry." Hermione smiled at him as Sirius and Harry continued to cackle and Remus rolled his eyes. "You might want to raise your protective shields at the welcoming feast back at school though." She smiled at Neville. "Are you out here all goddessless?"

He shook his head, "I was sent to get you. It's a few strokes til midnight so everyone needs to be in the ballroom for the unmasking and after that himself there has to blow out the candles, make a wish, and then open the mountain of presents stacked up on the table Molly just had brought in."

Harry stopped laughing and shifted a bit, "Er...mountain?" He was still awkward with presents and positive attention from a lot of people.

"Harry have you seen the number of people here? Everyone cares for you and has brought at least one gift. I would say mountain would be accurate yes." Remus' eyes were warm as he watched Harry. He poked his mate and asked Sirius to help him on with his socks and shoes again if they were going to head back inside.

Hermione reached out and ran her fingers over the back of Harry's hand. "There's only friends here Harry, only people who care. It's your birthday and you deserve every single gift."

Sirius nodded as he wiggled the socks and shoes back onto his fiance's feet, "You deserve to be spoiled cub, plus it's the big one six, only a mountain of gifts would do."

Neville grinned, "And those of us who've gotten a gift from you relish the chance to give you one."
His own birthday had been the day before, he'd put his foot down against a party as he was even less comfortable as the center of attention than Harry was, but more than a few owls had appeared with gifts and Hedwig had flapped into his greenhouse with seeds and one seedling of exceptionally rare and hard to propagate magical plants. He didn't know how Harry had managed to get them and he knew they had been obscenely expensive. "So man up my friend." He slapped Harry on the shoulder.

Harry shook his head and laughed gently as he stood, holding his hand out to Hermione. "I almost miss the shy you Nev."

Hermione chuckled at that and took Harry's hand, allowing herself to be pulled up from the bench and ready to follow Harry wherever he went. "We love every version of you Neville, shy or confident it's all the same."

Remus rocked back and forward on the bench he was sitting on, gaining momentum until he could heave himself up from it, glaring daggers at anyone who might say anything about his method of getting on his feet. "Right, we should go inside then before Molly loses patience and comes out herself to herd us in, sheep and all."

Sirius slipped an arm around Remus' thicker waist, "Indeed. Harry lead the charge."

Harry stuck his tongue out at his godfather but lead the group back inside, spotting Molly bustling about a table that really did have a mountain of gifts on it and a gigantic chocolate cake, "Bloody hell."

"That's my line mate," Ron the satyr came up, his feathered love on his arm, "I think Mum outdid herself on that one."

"I'd say." Hermione watched the cake with wide eyes before grinning. "Now, now Remus, Harry needs to get at least one piece before you get your paws on that cake."

Remus blew her a raspberry and tore his eyes away from the grand chocolate cake.

"Oh good, you're here." Molly's eyes had found Harry and she hurried over to him so that she wouldn't lose him again. "The clock is about to strike midnight and you should announce the reveal."

He gave her a nervous smile, "I should?"

Sirius laughed, "Yes, it's tradition that the guest of honor announces the reveal. Just pop up onto the dais in front of the band and count it down."

Harry puffed out a breath, "Um, still can't cast a tempus since it's summer so someone have a watch I can use to count it down?"

Remus smiled and reached into his pocket and pulled out a simple and slightly scratched pocket watch. "This was my father's watch and now I want you to have it, it's only right to pass it on to my oldest cub." There wasn't anything special or expensive about the watch but Remus had treasured it all the same and he really did want Harry to have it.

Harry blinked and let Remus pass him the watch, running his thumb over a scratch on it and looking at the watchface for a moment before stepping close and catching Remus in a hug. "Thank you. I'll take good care of it. Promise."

"I know you will." Remus hugged back as much as his belly allowed him to, patting Harry on the
back. "We are so proud of you cub, so proud and we love you so very much."

Hermione wiped her at her eyes discreetly, happy for Harry.

"I love you too, all of you. I'm one lucky, lucky prat to have you." He gave Remus one more gentle squeeze and stepped back, watch in hand, "I guess I'd better go start the countdown."

"Yes, time stops for no one. Get up there." Remus smiled and watched Harry climb up in front of the band.

Orion watched Harry take the stage and he felt a sliver of anxiety go through him. Hoping that Pansy wouldn't hex him too badly when she found out who he was.

Harry looked out over everyone as the band stopped playing, and cleared his throat as dozens of pairs of eyes lit on him, "Well I was told that as the guest of honor I have to count down to our reveal." He looked at the pocket watch Remus had given him, "It's about a minute til midnight so, until the last ten seconds I suppose I'll bore you with inane babble.

"I want to thank you all for coming. I know there aren't many who actually turn down a party and free food though I might know one," he met Snape's eyes with a smirk, "or two, but I still appreciate you being here. I'm really not used to celebrating my birthday so it means a lot that so many are here to help me figure that bit out."

He smiled at the laughter that came from the crowd and glanced at the watch, "Final countdown time, anyone who's wanting to remain mysterious should run now. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and off with your masks," he pulled his own off, and with it came the enchantment that had made his hair appear blond, and slipped his glasses on.

There was a rustle throughout the ballroom as all masks came off to the sound of laughter and some exclamations of surprise.

Orion kept his eyes on Pansy as he slipped off his silver colored wolf mask.

Her eyes went wide, as she'd plucked off her own mask and her mouth dropped open as the little hints she'd noticed all added up at last and she made a mortifying squeak. Orion?! It had been her puppy?! Who wasn't really all that much of a puppy anymore apparently. "W-why you little sneak!"

"Um...Surprise." He dodged her swat and caught her in a hug, lifting her toes off the ground for a moment before setting her back down. He grinned at her. "I've missed you this summer and you do realize that I couldn't let this chance slip now did you...I can't believe you didn't recognize me, it's only been two months. Tell me the truth, it's the lack of pink hair right?"

She poked him hard in the chest, "It's the added height! You're taller than me. The last time I saw you your head just reached my chin. What have you been sneaking growth potions? I should hex you for playing the silent wolf but then I'd have to hex myself for not realizing it was you. I should have known."

He rubbed his chest where she'd poked him but he continued to grin. "Nope, no growth potions, every centimeter is natural. Apparently a wolf in puberty grows fast. I've been taking wolf lessons all summer, the white and gold dressed man sniffing around you is my mentor."

"Some mentor, can't even get the nads up to ask his man to dance without a teenage girl snipping at him." She sniffed and tucked her mask into the wicker handbag she had fixed to her wrist and then proceeded to inspect him, circling around him like a predator does her prey. "Hmm."
Orion stood still as Pansy walked around him, watching him from all angles. Again he felt that electrical tingle run through him at the knowledge that her eyes was on him and him alone. Somehow that thought pleased him greatly and he wanted to win her approval, wanted her to like what she saw. "So...Do I pass the scrutiny?" He raised a dark brow as he waited for her reply.

She came to a stop in front of him, just a bit too far into personal space, meeting his eyes, searching them. Even with her at the end of the school year he'd been straining and pulling and aggressive at such an action, most everyone had needed to be careful with even affectionate touches, only the mortification of the pink hair had let him melt and cling that last day. It was different now, no barely restrained aggression hung in the air and the gentle humor was back in his eyes. She lifted her hand and pat his cheek, smiling, "Ah there he is. A little older but there you are, I know you." She stepped even closer and gave him a hug, "I missed you too."

Everything in Orion relaxed as he hugged her back, he hadn't even known how tense he'd been until his muscles slumped in relief.

Remus watched his son from where he stood next to Sirius by Harry's gift table. He was glad that Pansy Parkinson hadn't rejected his boy for his play during the evening. He wondered silently when the light would go on for those two on what they really were to each other.

Sirius smiled, skating his fingers over the base of Remus' spine, "They'll find their way in time Moony. Sooner or later they'll both be looking beyond the friendship line a lot easier than you and I did." He rolled his eyes in amusement, "I'm fairly certain they won't need a friend stuffing them in a closet together."

Remus chuckled. "Ah but it worked, James stuffing us in there made you finally find the nads to kiss me." He leaned against his mate. "I know you are right but you know me, I am finding it dreadfully difficult not to meddle."

"Don't, really Moony. That little she-wolf will skin anyone who does alive and I like your skin right where it is." Sirius watched as Harry was poked and pushed and prodded to stand on a step ladder in front of the cake so he could blow out the sixteen candles on the top tier.

Applause broke out as Harry blew out the candles and was handed a cake knife to cut the first piece.

"I really won't meddle," Remus clapped his hands with everyone else, smiling at Harry and his reddened cheeks. "Just saying it's hard not to. I might need you to offer me proper distraction." He sent his mate a look.

"Hey you know I'm always up for offering you a distraction," he kissed the side of Remus' neck. He chuckled as Harry wove through the crowd with four small plates, handing one to Hermione as he passed her with a kiss to her cheek, then stopped in front of them, holding out the plate with the biggest hunk of cake on it to Remus.

"Here you go, triple 'Death-By-Chocolate' cake."

"Ah but so tasty that it makes you feel that you are really alive. Thank you." Remus made an appreciative sound in the back of his throat as he took the plate happily, sniffing it before digging his fork in and moaning as the chocolate hit his tongue. "Oh Merlin...Molly should be sainted for this cake, she should have I shrine I could worship at."

Hermione chuckled quietly and enjoyed her piece of cake, it really was very, very tasty.
Harry laughed and passed Sirius his own, much smaller slice, "You sir, are preaching to the choir. I've been hitting my knees and singing hallelujah for her cooking since I was eleven. Merlin knows it was a godsend the summer before fourth year." He'd loathed the bunny food even more than he was certain Dudley had.

Remus swallowed the guilt that once again flared up along with his next bite of cake, knowing that Harry didn't want his guilt and knowing that it wouldn't make anything better. It was time to live in the now and look to the future. "We must make sure to praise her properly to her face then. Let her know how much she is appreciated."

"Agreed." Harry forked up a bite of cake himself.

Sirius chuckled, "She'll turn red as her hair then crush you both in a hug."

"Crushing hugs I can handle, if she can reach around me that is." Remus smiled and continued enjoying his cake.

"Aw man, no fair. You get the cake delivered by the birthday boy himself and I had to stand in a line the length of the Hogwarts Express." Orion frowned but the gigantic piece of cake on his plate was somewhat placating. "So, good party mate. Having fun?"

Harry poked Orion in the arm, "Yes and you're not pregnant, nor dating, engaged to, or married to someone who's pregnant. You can stand in line and get your own cake. Where's your little red?"

"Lady business, didn't ask but she'll be back soon. And since I am a gentleman, I've saved her a piece of cake." Orion's grin stretched across his face as he stuffed his mouth full with cake.

"Gentleman, that's new." Hermione scoffed and raised an eyebrow.

Harry's lips twitched, "You are a little low on the manners sometimes. You're getting better though."

Sirius smiled, "Much better and improving daily." Pride in his son was clear in his voice.

Orion beamed, making Hermione snort softly. The kid certainly knew how to play up his innocence that was for sure.

"He has manners when he wants to, now we only need to make him want it all the time." Remus pulled on Orion's hair.

"Here I come to spend time at the bosom of my loving family and all I get is abuse. It's truly sad." Orion shook his head forlornly but his eyes were sparkling with humor.

"And you know it means we love you. You should worry if we ever stop teasing you." Harry bumped his shoulder against Orion's.

"Oh Harrikins!" Fred called out from over by the gift table, waving cheerfully even though his other arm was around Draco's waist, "Time for you to peel away the paper and check out your haul!"

"Ah, subtle and demure as always." Orion grinned as Fred's voice carried out over the entire ballroom.

Draco had tried to keep a bit of a distance at the beginning of the evening, thinking about being in public and all but a few hours into the party he had abandoned those thoughts completely. Why
shouldn't he touch and be touched? He was not ashamed of his relationship. That was why he stood with one of Fred's arms around his waist, while leaning back, tilting his head and kissing George who stood behind him. If people wanted to talk, let them talk.

Harry grimaced and ran his hands over his scalp, "I have to do this in front of everyone?"

Sirius chuckled and gave him a nudge toward the table, "Yes Scar, you have to do this in front of everyone. Don't worry about acting delighted or whatever after opening each present. With the number there I don't think anyone in here would blame you if you just unwrapped in a daze," his voice carried just as well as Fred's had, "Right people?"

A chorus of laughter and agreement met that statement and Harry was nudged toward the table again, "Yeah, yeah I'm going I'm going."

Molly stood next to the gift table, ready to vanish the wrapping paper as Harry opened his gifts so that their wouldn't be a mountain of it that some gift could let lost it. Besides she didn't like a mess. She smiled encouragingly as Harry arrived at the table, knowing he didn't really feel comfortable opening so many presents if front of the whole room but there were only people who cared for Harry here. Everyone would understand.

Harry looked at the mound of gifts that reached higher than his head and puffed out a breath, "Where do I even start?"

Arthur smiled warmly and pat him on the shoulder, "Just start from the top and work your way down."

Ron hollered out, "Yeah otherwise you'll be buried in them when they topple over!" Another wave of laughter went through the room at that.

"You're not kidding," he reached up and plucked a long, thin box down, noting that it was from the Marauders' charms professor. Inside was a gold snake with red enameled scales. He lifted it out to study it closer, and nearly jumped out of his hessians when it slithered out of his grip, up under his sleeves, and went up to curl around his bicep.

Hermione had startled too when the snake started to move and her eyes grew worried when it slipped beneath Harry's clothes. She couldn't believe that anyone here would want to hurt Harry in any way but she couldn't be sure. She looked closely to see if Harry was okay, ready to reach into her small clutch and pull her wand out if it should be needed.

Harry was just looking at his arm and found the amused moon bright eyes of the gifter across the room, "Uh Matilda?"

The woman laughed and lifted her glass of elf-wine to him, "Just a jewelry piece with a locomotor spell on it Harry, it won't bite."

"Well that's good then," he thanked her and then reached for the next gift.

Sirius chuckled as Harry opened the presents as quickly as possible, not because he was eager to see his 'haul' as Fred had put it, but because he was trying to get it over with.

"Poor boy, it's like someone has put a speed-up charm on him." Remus watched Harry open present after present, smiling politely and adding them to the pile. "Hopefully when he gets some time to breathe he can start to actually take note of what he's being gifted. Molly is making a list of who gave him what so right now he only has to get it over with." Remus smiled and covered up a yawn, normally he was a night owl but the pregnancy had turned all that around and he was longing for
Sirius kissed Remus' temple, "He will. You know him." He watched Harry brighten at a few gifts, one especially from Hermione, his eyes lifting up to hers with the endless adoration always visible for his girl, until the only one left was a black wrapped gift the size of a potion crate, "Three guesses as to who gave him that one and the first two don't count."

"Well, considering the size of the parcel and the cheery, colorful wrapping paper it could only really be one person. One who I still don't believe came as the king of fairies. Love makes you do the strange." Remus' eyes drifted over to his long time friend.

"That it does," Sirius chuckled as Harry smirked at the black wrapped gift and shook his head before peeling the paper from it.

Harry wasn't at all surprised to find potion bottles as he picked up the card laying across the top of the crate and opened it scanning the words before his eyes went wide and his head jerked up to meet the amused, arrogant, and superior gaze of Snape. A few dozen things were said in the silent connection before he looked back down at the card with it's spidery scrawl.

'Potter those hideous things upon your face are far more detrimental to current endeavors than I am comfortable with. Fix your eyes.'

Beneath that pithy comment were neat instructions on the eyesight correction potion he'd been given. The first bottle would correct his current vision and then every month he'd have to take a supplementary potion until he turned twenty two so that his vision would remain clear even through the changes his eyes would naturally make during that time.

Sight correction potions were notoriously hard to procure as they were one of the most complicated potions in the world using almost obscenely rare ingredients and only three potion masters in the world living now could correctly brew a regimen of them. Snape was one of them but he'd never have even thought he'd make this for him, even if he'd offered to foot the entire bill as well as pay thrice the commission Snape was noted down as being worth. For the man to give it, as a gift no matter the snark in the card...Harry quite honestly didn't know how to react beyond gobsmacked shock.

Orion's sharp eyes recognized what Harry had just been given and even he was a bit shocked. It was a royal gift almost, the time and care it took to brew that potion was great and this gift said more than words ever could. He sent his Uncle a beaming smile. With the wolf training and Severus' new relationship with Narcissa Malfoy he hadn't seen much of the older man and Orion had to admit that he missed him.

Severus returned Orion's smile with a smirk of his own, amusement deepening at Draco's high-pitched choke when he recognized the potions. A movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention again and he found himself looking at Potter.

"I'll still be sending out cards but I wanted to thank you, in person, before everyone's released tonight." Harry held out his hand, "I really can't...I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to chuck my glasses into the deepest hole I can find. Thank you Professor."

Remus watched Harry shake Severus' hand in honest gratitude and felt something warm settle in his chest. He firmly blamed hormones for that but it made him happy all the same. "Look at that, the time of miracles is not over."

Hermione watched it too, smiling for Harry, knowing how much the glasses could bother him at
times. This was a perfect gift for him and she was so happy someone had been able to give it to
him.

"Miracles or the apocalypse, you be the judge," Sirius' tone was mostly amusement as he watched
Snape and Harry shake hands then chuckled at the utter shock that crossed Harry's face when
Narcissa brushed a kiss over his cheek then pushed him around and towards Hermione as the last
dance of the night was called.

Catching his hand in hers, Hermione pulled her dazed boyfriend close as they walked out on the
dancefloor again. She stepped even closer and wrapped her arms around his neck as they started to
dance to the slow playing song. "I know it's beyond midnight now, a new day but still. Happy
birthday once again Harry. I hope it's been a good one." Hermione smiled and leaned her head on
his shoulder as they danced.

Just being close to her brought him out of his daze and his arms went around her. "Yeah it has
been, surprising, busy, and maybe just a little bit uncomfortable," he gave a soft laugh and rested
his cheek on the top of her head, "but it's been a good birthday. And hey, I got what I wanted most,
no crisis and you in my arms. Makes me a very happy bloke."

Blushing a little, Hermione squeezed him tighter. "Always know the right thing to say." The thing
that really made Hermione blush and go all soft was that she knew Harry really meant it, it wasn't a
line or something he simply said. That made Hermione love him even more, she had the best
boyfriend in the whole world and she would fight to keep him. "I love you."

"I love you too Hermione. I wish I did always know the right thing to say but you know me, I
stumble over things a lot of times and dig myself a hole," one hand stroked up her back. She was so
precious to him, grounding him and keeping him from falling into a pit of overwhelming despair.
He'd take on another Basilisk utterly alone, naked, and mute for her.

"Just because everything isn't perfect all the time, the things you say are so precious. It's not really
what you say but how you say it, knowing you mean it." Hermione didn't know how to explain her
feelings. "What you are...Who you are, is perfect for me. What makes me whole." When she wasn't
lecturing or reciting something read, Hermione wasn't terribly good with words either but she
wanted Harry to know, to know that he made all the difference to her.

He shifted so that he could bend his head and lean his brow against hers in a gentle nuzzle, "You
make me whole too Hermione."

Smiling softly at him, Hermione pressed close and spent the rest of the dance in comfortable
silence. Just enjoying being in Harry's arms, having a reason to be as close as she liked.

Arthur smiled as his wife quietly shooed everyone not staying the night at Black Manor out and
away and those who were staying the night were shooed to their rooms while she let Harry and
Hermione keep dancing. He went over to a yawning Remus and amused Sirius, "The two of you
head up to bed. Molly and I will take care of the rest."

"No, we can't possibly let you do all the work and clean up. Of course we'll help." Even as Remus
said it he was smothering another yawn and rubbing at his red rimmed eyes. It was ridiculous
being this tired when it wasn't even two am. Besides, it wasn't right to leave guests doing all the
work.

"Oh I don't think so Moony," Sirius bent and lifted Remus into a bridal carry, "Molly's giving us
that scolding look and you're dead on your feet. Goodnight Arthur, don't let Molly work too hard.
The elves will handle what's missed."
Molly shook her head in amusement as Remus griped at Sirius all the way out of the ballroom and down the hall, apparently he wasn't very pleased with being picked up and carried. Clean up was something that didn't bother Molly, this wasn't worse than cleaning the Burrow and magic was a very good aid. She walked to brush a kiss over Arthur's cheek before she continued on making the ballroom spotless again.

Harry looked up when the silence somehow got his attention and blinked at the, mostly, empty ballroom. "Oh, Mione I think the party's over."

"Hm?" Picking her head up from his shoulder she noticed that there wasn't any music playing and no people either, other than Arthur and Molly. "Oh..." Hermione hadn't even noticed, how embarrassing was that? "Looks like that yes...Thank you for the dance."

Harry brought her hand to his mouth, kissing the center of her palm, "you're very welcome. Thank you for letting me monopolize you all evening." He offered her his arm, "Can I escort you to your room milady?"

Smiling, Hermione looped her arm through his. "You may milord and just so you know, you can monopolize me anytime you want." She waved goodnight to Molly and Arthur and walked with Harry out of the ballroom and up the wide stairs.

"I'll definitely keep that in mind," he walked her to her room door and paused outside of it to lean in and press his lips against hers in a slow, tender kiss, "goodnight love."

She cupped his cheek and stroked his cheekbone with her thumb before kissing him once more, just a press of lips this time. "Goodnight, sleep well and have wonderful dreams." Hermione stepped in and hugged him. Then she opened the door to her borrowed bedroom, whispered another good night and disappeared inside.

Harry nodded and slipped off to his own room, certain that if he dreamed tonight, it would be nothing but good dreams.
"Stupid bloody, where the hell did that quill go!" Harry was rummaging through his wallet, after having been convinced that he should clean it out and organize it. The extendable charm on it making that a tiny bit difficult. He groped and wiggled his arm around in it and somehow managed to knock something out of it. It rolled out and across the floor, tapping against Ron's foot as Harry stared, still shoulder deep in his wallet, at the silvery orb.

"Is that what I think it is?" Ginny's eyes were very wide and she looked at the orb as if it would roll over and attack her. "Have you been carrying it on you all this time? The thing Voldemort wants the most?"

Harry blinked, "Er...yeah. I mostly forgot it was in my wallet I mean...after everything and all the others breaking it's just," his words ran dry when Ron's hand scooped it off the floor and held it out.

"It's got your name on it mate, only question is if you want to know what's in it."

Harry reached out, aware of the very fine tremor in his fingers as he took it from Ron, "I'm not sure. Do I really want to know?"

"It's your choice Harry." Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder. "You don't have to hear it if you don't want to, will it change anything? Just remember, whatever your choice is, that no prophecy is set in stone. No matter how strong the seers are. The future can always, always be changed depending on the choices we make."

"Maybe," he rolled the orb around in his hand consideringly, "How do I-" he blinked at the open book Ron handed him, his old Divination book with the words to view a prophecy involving you printed clear as day. he looked at the orb, then into Hermione's eyes, steadying himself before making his choice. "Loqui ad me." As the last word left his lips the room filled with what sounded like static but clearly heard above it was Trelawney's voice.

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

As Trelawney's voice faded, the orb slipped from his fingers and shattered on the floor.

Hermione had her arms around him in a second, holding him tight and brushing her fingers at the hair at his neck. She just held him, offering every ounce of comfort and love she could.

The rest of the room was completely silent as both Ginny and Ron looked at Harry with wide eyes.

Harry's hands went to gently touch Hermione's arms as his mind worked away, a mile a minute. Born at the end of July, even in the wizarding world there were dozens of babes to choose from, the thrice defied him bit though, that was what would have fined it down for Voldemort and from speaking to Neville he knew that the gentle herbologist and he were two who the prophecy could have been speaking of, until that night in Godric's Hollow, that carefully engineered night. "That canny old bastard, how in the hell did he wind up in Gryffindor?"

Ron frowned, "Harry?"
He smoothed a hand down Hermione's curls, "There's two, that I know of, who could have fit the criteria before that Halloween night, born at the end of July and whose parents three times faced down and told Voldemort to stuff it. Myself," he met Ginny's eyes over Hermione's head, "and Neville. Dumbledore though, was scheming this out even then. Directing things to the end he wanted."

Ron, being born into the magical world, caught on faster than Hermione for once, "When he was young, traditionally purebloods had more magical power than muggleborns or half-bloods, the inbreeding hadn't gotten quite so bad yet that it took away from the magical core of the babies." His voice was soft.

Harry nodded, "He poked, prodded, and directed Voldemort to 'mark' the baby he believed to be weaker so that when the time came, the one marked wouldn't have enough power to survive the final encounter with Voldemort."

For once Hermione was speechless, all the rage, contempt and disgust for Dumbledore bubbling up again. Voldemort was crazy and evil but he was just as much a tool as Dumbledore had wanted Harry to be. Dumbledore was the spider in the web, pulling all the strings and make them play out the way he wanted them to. It made her sick, it really did. She wanted to scream, find Dumbledore and show him what true hurt felt like but instead she found herself trying to catch her breath, to remember how to breathe.

Ron surged up onto his feet and slammed his fist into the wall, plaster cracking and a dull red smear left behind where he'd either scraped or split open his knuckles.

Harry rocked Hermione gently and kept his voice calm, "Ron-"

His best friend spun around and jabbed a finger at him, "Don't. Don't tell me to calm down. Did you know that most magical children who are mistreated actually destroy their own magic little by little subconsciously? They separate themselves from what they know instinctively is wrong, forcing themselves to believe it's right just to keep from going mad and it kills their magic. Others just suppress it but the effect is the same, most can't use their magic. The old bastard put you with those wastes of air knowing that. He-"

"Ron please," Harry's voice remained calm and gentle and he drew Ron's attention to Hermione's shaking and Ginny's silent crying.

Ron deflated and flopped back to sit next to his sister, pulling her into a hug, trying to comfort her, "He's not human, he can't be."

Harry shook his head and pet Hermione's hair, kissing the top of her head, "Of course he can. He just lost the humanity of being his species long ago."

Harry was right, absolutely right and the the thing that scared her the most was that she felt like she was losing her humanity too whenever she thought about Dumbledore and what he had done...What he continued doing. Hermione wasn't lying when she said she wanted him to hurt. She would gladly be the one to hurt him. She wouldn't feel an ounce of regret or concern doing it. Hermione wasn't that kind of person but Dumbledore pushed her limits and turned her into someone she didn't like.

Ginny turned and buried her face in her brother's chest, not able to stop the tears.

Ron pat her on the back, "I don't get it. How can you be so...calm Harry? If I didn't know better I'd think you just don't care about the old git and his plots anymore."
"But of course you do know better," Harry rubbed his cheek on Hermione's hair, "I'm tired of getting worked up every time I learn more about how deep his deceptions go. He's just not worth making myself feel bad because he's an arsewart."

That got a choked out laugh out of Ginny. "He really is, a great big arsewart, ugly, wrinkly and an absolute pain in the bum." She wiped at her eyes. "I'm done crying, you're right Harry, instead of getting upset I'm going to burn that wart right off the bum it sits on."

Hermione was doing her best to get herself in order too, it was just taking her a little longer. She let Harry's touch ground her until she felt more like herself again.

Ron tugged on the ends of his sister's hair, "Little pyro," it was said with all the affection in the world.

Harry smiled and kept petting and touching Hermione, even after she eased away a bit, "Really the prophecy doesn't actually change anything. I was planning on removing Voldemort from our misery permanently anyway. It's just more incentive."

"I can't imagine Voldie would have liked the content of the this prophecy either, even if he had gotten his scales on it." Hermione wiggled her toes inside her shoes, trying to get them warm again. "And Harry's right, it didn't change anything, it didn't make Voldemort more dangerous and Dumbledore has been an arsewart all along. We'll move along, stand by Harry all the ways we can and take them out."

Ron nodded, eyeing his split knuckles in contemplation, "You're right, I know. Still," he trailed off. Harry smiled and nodded, understanding, "Still. You know Molly's going to have kittens when she sees what you've done to your hand and then the wall." His fingers tangled in Hermione's hair, loving the soft, springy feel of it.

"She will you know and none of us can fix either you or the wall. This will help though." Hermione reached into her ever present bag and tossed a jar of healing salve at Ron, it worked well on small cuts and bruises. "You're on your own with the wall though."

"These walls have seen worse and as long as there aren't injuries the culprit usually gets away with a stern scolding and a few extra chores." Ginny smiled and helped Ron apply the salve on his stinging knuckles.

"I don't think even Hermione's magic salve is going to hide my knuckles so Mum'll have kittens, thank Merlin school's starting next week," Ron grinned and flexed his hand, "I'm looking forward to this year's Quidditch, no toad to ruin the fun, and I've gotten better."

"You have, you've gotten lots better, which is necessary because wolf-pup has gotten better too. I will not be a part of a team that loses to Slytherin and let's face it...I'll be on the team because I am brilliant." Ginny grinned and looked over at Harry with a wink.

Hermione laughed. "Well there's nothing wrong with your confidence, that's for sure."

Harry grinned, "Well we need confidence on our team. Malfoy is a frighteningly good Chaser and we don't have the twins this year to bludger the hell out of the other team."

Ron snickered, "No one can Beat the Bludgers like the Weasley Twins."

"Why does that sound like some strange and exotic masturbation form when you say it in that tone of voice?" Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Beat the Bludger and Bump the Bum, the title of some
really bad wizarding porn and yes before you ask I have seen some. Padma is seriously...adventurous in certain aspects."

"Did you see that one Ravaging Red? With all the gingers? I thought I would pee myself laughing with all the Weasley lookalikes." Ginny snickered.

"Poor girl, all the Weasleys are very much taken." Harry grinned as he saw Ron shudder. "I suppose it's too much to hope there aren't any Potter look alikes?"

Ginny giggled even more. "Yup, very, very much to hope for. In Padma's collection alone we have Potter the Pounder, Harry the Hung and of course my favorite, The Boy Who Lived To Fuck." She laughed even more at Ron's horrified expression and Hermione burying her face in her hands.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose, "Oh lovely. Well that's fodder for nightmares."

"No kidding mate. I really didn't need to know that there's any corner of the sex market revolving around a you lookalike and random birds." Ron shuddered.

"On not just birds brother mine. Blokes too. There are plenty of movies and stories centered around the savior and his trusted best friend and the love the two heroes share." Ginny was having too much fun now. The porn existed but she didn't at all feel sorry for embellishing a little. "Somewhere between Harry Humps Hogwarts and Ronald the Ravager people seemed to realize that the two of you fit best together. She was growing red in the face from trying to keep her mirth in.

Harry's eyes were wide and his face just a shade pale and he was fairly certain Ron was a little green, "That's...ugh. The only thing worse would be Malfoy," at the look on Ginny's face he immediately plugged his ears and shut his eyes. "I don't want to hear it, I do not want to hear it. I can not hear you."

Ron took the more prudent course of action and ran from the room.

Ginny rolled off the sofa and on to the floor, clutching her stomach as she laughed in utter glee. There was nothing better than to freak Ron out, Harry was just an added bonus.

"Evil, you are so evil." Hermione's lips twitch but she still tried to scold her friend.

"Guilty and loving it." Ginny replied from her sprawled out position on the floor. "It's just too easy and someone needs to keep the flame of Gred and Forge burning now that they are moving away from home."

Harry shuddered, "I will get my revenge Ginevra Weasley. I can take the knowledge that there's porn revolved round me, even with guys but with a Malfoy look alike," he made a soft gagging noise, "Just ew."

"Don't worry too much, now that Malfoy's relationship with Fred and George are out in the open, the pornlovers will focus on them. It will be all strawberry shortcake with vanilla filling from here on out." Ginny stretched on the floor and patted Harry's foot comfortingly.

"Please Ginny, you are breaking my brain here. I'm going to need at least four or five hours buried in my books to get halfway back to normal." Hermione pulled her knees up against her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

Harry poked Ginny in the side with the toe of his shoe, "Alright you, out. My girlfriend and I need to recover from your depravity. Go torment Ron."
"Fine, I'll go see if I can find that story about him with Zabini. That should get him frothing around
the mouth. Later." Ginny rolled to her feet and walked out of the room with a teasing wave to the
couple still there.

Harry shook his head and scooted next to Hermione, wrapping his arm around her shoulders,
"So...that new rune circle configuration in this year's text, think we'll be performing it or is it just
example?"

Hermione gave him an almost pathetically grateful look as she dove into the textbook circle and
how she thought they would have to use parts of it to build their own working one.

Harry grinned widely as the scenery whizzed by outside the train window and the game of
Exploding Snap went off. He was more than happy to be on his way back to Hogwarts. A better
Hogwarts than he'd had his entire school career to date. Dumbledore was gone, they had two
brilliant new professors, and it looked like he'd be able to have a pleasant year for once. It almost
made him as hyper as Orion had been before his wolf training.

Hermione was very happy to return to school but unlike her boyfriend she was able to sit still,
Harry was jittery and his eyes went everywhere. Hermione found it adorable. She grinned as she
looked across the compartment and found two lovelorn Slytherins, Draco would hex her if she said
anything but he and Blaise were looking miserable the both of them. It could be the compartment
filled with Gryffindors and a Ravenclaw of course but she doubted it. Orion had pulled the
Slytherin triad along with him and squished them all down in the Gryffindor compartment, making
it crowded to say the least.

Pansy was filing her nails lazily, amused by the pouting of her two idiots and the way Ronald
utterly refused to look at Blaise without turning green and every time he did the little hummingbird
smiled in utterly evil glee. "Potter one would think that you're going to Hogwarts for the first
time."

Harry just grinned at her, "It feels like I am. For once I'll feel really, truly safe in the castle.
McGonagall would cheer for Slytherin to win the Quidditch Cup before she'd let anything
dangerous into the school."

"And cheer she will have to when it's time to hand out the Cup." Orion replied with a grin. "Now
that I have my little issue under control I am going to fly your polkadotted pants off Scar." He felt
brilliant. His lessons with Alek would continue via floo all year. His parents had finally gotten
hitched and they were going to be at Hogwarts. It was going to be a great year.

"Keep fooling yourself there Ri," Harry smirked at his little brother, "it will be fun when you eat
your words after the Gryffindor/Slytherin game."

Neville shook his head and, to give others a little more room, scooped Ginny into his lap, "Rabid,
you players are absolutely rabid."

"But of course, Quidditch is as important as air." Ginny turned her head and smiled at him. "Not
more important than love though." She leaned in and kissed him.

The sight of that only made Blaise pout more. "I want my own redhead to snog. Look at this," He
held his arm out. "I'm already wasting away, growing weak right before your eyes."

Ginny broke the kiss and looked at her brother at the redhead comment, smothering a cackle
against Neville's neck.

Ron made a queasy sound and buried his face in Luna's hair, "Shut up Gin or I'll tell Mum on you. I'm sure she'd love to know what her little princess hides."

Harry chuckled and murmured to Hermione, "Not a bad threat that."

Hermione nodded. "Not bad but useless when it comes to Ginny I'm afraid."

"You really think I'd leave it where Mum could find it. Please, give me some credit but go ahead and tell her. I'm sure she would like to read and see what her boys get up to." Ginny scoffed and reached for one of Neville's hands, playing with his fingers. Such gentle fingers though they were so strong. Fingers she loved.

Pansy quirked a brow, "Oh now I'm curious, what are you talking about?"

Harry looked over at Draco and Blaise, "Zabini, Malfoy, I'd suggest you run before Ginny starts talking for your own sakes." Then he raised a reversed sound shield around himself and Hermione before Ginny could start talking, keeping the conversation out. He saw Ron get up and rush out, probably claiming to get more treats from the cart.

Malfoy was the second to run out, looking paler than ever but Blaise just grinned, leaned in closer to Ginny with a curious expression.

"I am so very glad I don't know what they are saying. So very glad. Should have known Zabini would be a freak in his own right." Hermione nuzzled close to Harry, watching Orion's jaw drop and his ears turn red as he listen to the conversation going on in the compartment.

"What frightens me is that Neville doesn't look shocked or disturbed," truthfully the quiet Gryffindor looked to be amused by his girlfriend more than anything. Pansy wasn't bothering to hide her amusement and was laughing loud and long with a positively evil gleam in her eyes. "I don't want to know what that girl has planned. I really don't."

"No neither do I, especially not if she and Ginny somehow put their heads together. That partnership could only end up wrong in every way possible." Hermione shook her head, making her hair dance around her shoulders at the mere thought of it.

"I think I should pity Ron," Harry played his fingers through her bushy hair with a fond smile, "Should we warn him?"

"As amusing as it would be not to warn him I really think we should. He deserves to be aware of those two harpies team up against him." Hermione paused. "Maybe we don't have to though, Luna can probably protect him better than any of us." She looked at the blond who had a soft, serene smile on her face but her eyes were sharp as she observed the other girls.

Harry pursed his lips then nodded, "Very good point that. Still, a warning is a good idea, just in case." He caught Luna's eye and waved his communication mirror before pointing at Ginny and the sharp smiled Pansy and putting his hand over his mouth, asking if she could get them to stop so he could call Ron back in.

Luna nodded and leaned toward the other two girls and told them something, still with the same sweet, serene smile on her face. Whatever she said though it managed to stun both Ginny and Pansy into immediate silence, leaving the girls to eye her warily as she leaned back again and picked up her Quibbler.
Harry called Ron, "Hey mate, you can come back now. Luna silenced the horror, and I think scared Ginny and Parkinson too."

Ron's face melted into relief, "That's my girl. Be back in a tick with plenty of chocolate frogs to share."

Harry chuckled and brought down the sound barrier, "He's heading back with chocolate frogs, probably find Malfoy and let him know it's safe," he eyed Pansy's supremely innocent expression, "-ish."

Pansy began filing her nails again, "The little hummingbird is surprisingly forward thinking. Are you and the dhole that insecure in-"

"Hold it right there. I don't care what people get off on, I just really didn't want to know about it."

"Amen to that mate," Ron slid the door open and practically clung to Luna, a vaguely ill looking Malfoy trailing behind him. He kissed Luna just below the ear, "I love you, you know that? You're absolutely wonderful."

She reached up and petted his hair. "I love you too." Then Luna picked her paper up again. "Now, do you know a six letter word for florpflabber?"

Hermione shook her head at the Ravenclaw girl, not even trying to hide her smile.

Draco eyed his friends suspiciously before easing down on his seat in between them, sending both Blaise and Pansy warning glares as faint shudders went through him. He could have lived his whole life very happily without knowing what that ginger shrew had told him.

Harry caught the chocolate frog Ron tossed him, with a soft chuckle, "You're getting the puppy eyes Ron."

"Yeah I know, keep your shirt on Ri, yes you're getting a frog." Ron tossed the others in the compartment their frogs, rubbing his ears at Orion's thrilled whoop, and set one in Luna's lap. "Depends on what a florpflabber is. I'm still learning."

"I know." Luna put her paper down and tilted her head up to kiss him. "You listen though and that's what matters to me. Besides Papa has clearly made a mistake since there are no six letter words for florpflabber...Silly man." She shook her head and picked up the chocolate frog instead since Orion had started to eye it, having already finished his.

Pansy shook her head and dangled hers in front of Orion's nose, "You'll owe me but a girl does have to watch her figure."

Orion let his amber gaze sweep over her, from head to toes and back again even as he snatched the frog she dangled eagerly. "Nothing at all wrong with your figure from where I'm sitting but thank you all the same." He tore into the wrapping and sighed happily when he bit the head off another chocolate frog.

Harry shook his head, pulled Hermione into his lap, and proceeded to enjoy the rest of the train ride.
Ron fell, face first, onto a Gryffindor couch in the common room, "Why, in the name of Merlin, did I do the exact same thing you two did and choose to take the Advanced classes in everything I got an A or higher in? Why? Am I a glutton for punishment? Or just insane?"

Harry, for his part, almost melted into a chair, "It's exhausting I'll give you that."

"Oh come on now, it's not that bad. I think it's thrilling, it's the first year we're really allowed to push ourselves, figure out our limits." Hermione skipped to her chosen seat and sat down, a book already in her lap. "Besides, if you want any kind of chance at a decent apprenticeship, University or job once school is over then you need these classes." She looked around the common room and felt a sliver of irritation run through her, ruining her good mood. It was a silly thing to get irritated about but when it came to Harry her logical side flew out the window. "Romilda Vane is looking at you again."

"She can go kiss Fang for all I care." Harry sighed and pulled out his books to start working on his potions essay. Snape was a sadistic slave driver for the Advanced classes, even more so than he'd been before. "Hex her if you want, I doubt anyone would actually care."

Ron hummed, "Merlin knows I wouldn't. She made absolutely no friends last year," he sat up with a groan, catching the sight of McLaggan watching from over where he and another bunch of big-headed idiots congregated, "Harry's not the only one being looked at though Mione. You've got an admirer of your own."

"I've noticed." Hermione made a face. "He seems to be everywhere I turn these days. Soon he'll find himself at wandpoint if he doesn't ease off. That or I'll punch him, I haven't hit anyone since Malfoy after all." She reached in to her bag and pulled out notebook and quill. She wouldn't let any gits or bints affect her grades.

Harry looked up from his essay and met Cormac McLaggan's eyes with a narrow, glare. The rest of the school knew, vaguely, about him and the others attaining an animagus form though they'd not seen them but if McLaggan didn't stop drooling over Hermione he was going to get an up close and personal introduction to Harry's. He got a petty satisfaction when the other boy dropped his gaze and went back to chatting with his mates. "We could always set Orion on him if you like Hermione," he marked through a pointless point that wouldn't do his essay any good.

"Let's keep that idea in our back pocket if he doesn't back off." Hermione had ink stains on her fingers and one on her cheek from scratching her head as she read. "He's just a simple minded berk but even he has to get when someone really isn't interested. Why don't he and Vane comfort themselves with each other? Solve everyone's problem."

Harry had to smile at the ink smear, she always looked so cute when she was absorbed in her work, "We can only hope. If love potions weren't illegal I'd say dose them up and stick them in a room together."

Ron snickered, "That would solve the problem right enough but cause another."

"Sadly that's true." Hermione nodded and turned a page in her book, scratching something new down in her notebook and nibbling on her lip. "They are annoying but not annoying enough to dose
them with illegal potions. There's a reason love potions are illegal; they always cause more problems than solutions. Frankly neither McLaggan nor Vane are worth that kind of trouble."

"Definitely not. Though if McLaggan keeps drooling over you, Harry might scare the piss out of him by going full Scar."

Harry's lips curved, "Ah my best friend, you know me well. I hate that I'll have to be...polite and unbiased when Quidditch try outs start though. McLaggan wants to go out for Keeper. Why did Hooch assign me as the Captain again?"

"Cause you're the only one left with the experience and capability to handle the responsibility?"

"Not to mention you're a natural born leader, whether you like it or not." Hermione didn't even look up from her book but her voice was warm with fondness. "You'll make a great Captain Harry and with as much as Ron has improved he'll beat McLaggan out of the air anyway."

"You've got Hermione to talk Quidditch?" Ginny's brows were raised as she came over with her own pile of books. "How on earth did you manage that? And on study time even...I am highly impressed." She dug out her books and groaned unhappily at the amount of homework she had.

Ron grinned, "Harry's lamenting his position as our Captain, Mione's making him feel better. Poor lad so much to do."

"Sod off," Harry spoke casually and made a notation, "How was Herbology Gin?"

"Good actually, one of the few classes I understand this year. I guess having a green thumbed boyfriend is brilliant in more than one way." Ginny smiled and opened the book at the top of the pile. "Transfiguration was no walk in the park though, Sirius is not taking it easy on the students...Not even little, sweet me."

"Been there, had my arse kicked last class myself. Who knew Snuffles could be so..."

"Much of a hard-arse?" Ron grinned, "You and Hermione nailed it though, raked in the points for us."

"Still after a couple years of seeing laughing, fun Sirius it is weird." Harry chuckled.

"You know the kind of grades Sirius had in school, there's much more to him than fun and games." Hermione switched books and put her hair behind her ears, adding a new ink spot to her face. "He was an Auror too and he's a brilliant teacher. I am glad he's here."

"Woah, no one said differently, calm down little defender." Ginny threw a piece of balled up paper at Hermione.

"Sorry, Runes are kicking my bum right now." Hermione tossed the paper ball back.

"And as soon as I'm done with my potions essay they'll be kicking mine." Harry flicked his wand as Ginny tossed the paper ball again and had it folding into a pegasus and flying out the portrait entrance. "So soon as Neville appears what say we go visit Myrtle?"

"Sounds like a brilliant idea yeah." Ginny agreed and the others nodded. "Will Ri be taking over the secret lab now that double trouble are trying their wings in the real world?"

"Do nifflers chase gold?" Harry grinned, "If he's not down there already I'll be shocked."
Ron snickered, "Hogwarts is going to be a mess of colors."

"Is he still working on the whole turning the toilet water into different beverages?" Hermione looked up from her book with her brow furrowed. "I don't get that. I know he says it has meaning but who would drink from the toilet bowl?"

Ginny snickered. "Well they say there's a fine line between genius and madness. I just think Orion skipped the genius part completely."

Ron snorted, "Considering our brothers we've no room to talk there Gin."

Harry chuckled at the two fingered salute Ginny gave him and made another note for his essay. "Where is Nev anyway, do you know?"

Ginny shook her head. "I haven't seen him since lunch. I know he had a meeting with Professor Sprout today but I have no idea how long that would take. I think she wants him to help tutoring the younger students. He should be here any time now."

Harry hummed and started writing the proper rough draft of his essay, "No rush on anything really." He reached out absently and wiped away a smudge of ink from the corner of Hermione's mouth, "It'd be great for Nev to tutor the others though."

"It would be good for him I think, and help others to see how utterly brilliant and wonderful he is. If anyone gets any ideas though they'll have a hex with their name on it. All that wonderfulness is mine and mine alone." Ginny looked fierce.

"He's mad about you Gin, you have nothing to worry about." Hermione switched books again and smiled at Harry with slightly less ink stained lips.

Ginny nodded. "Yeah, besides I don't think anyone's stupid enough to risk a Bat-Boegy from you Gin-Gin."

Harry chuckled, "Not to mention Neville hasn't even seen anyone but you since our second year. One look at you and he was gone."

"Good because he is mine." She crossed her arms over her chest. "And one more Gin-Gin and you'll be answering to Ronniekins for the rest of the school year, just so you know. Eugh, why did the parents give me such a shitty name? I would do as Tonks and go by my last name alone if there weren't like a million other Weasleys out there...And honestly, Weasley isn't all that top notch either, not to be called by all the time."

"Uh excuse me? Ginevra is a good name and at least you've got an okay middle name. I got stuck with," Ron grimaced, "Bilius." He pointed at Hermione, "I heard that snicker!"

"It was a snicker of admiration...Promise. Bilius is a grand name, should be more Bilius' in the world. Jean isn't really that much better, so ordinary." Hermione grinned broadly, looking up from her books and meeting Ron's eyes.

"You can't lie worth your quills Hermione." Ron flicked an every flavor bean at her.

What is it with you Weasley children and throwing things at me?" Hermione picked up the bean and sniffed at it gingerly before popping it in her mouth. At least this one was edible. "Thank you so much for the candy Bilius, it was even a tasty flavor for which I am sincerely grateful."

Harry had to laugh when Ron razzed her before popping a bean into his own mouth and almost
choking, apparently not a pleasant flavor. He saw Neville clamber in and began gathering his materials together, "Gin, your green knight's here."

Ginny tilted her head back so she could look at Neville upside down. "Yes and what a welcome sight he is." Smiling she squirmed out of her chair to go and see if Neville was up to visiting Myrtle.

Hermione had already begun to stuff her books into her bag so that she would be ready when they left. The library in the Chamber was much more comfortable and she really liked that they could talk freely without the need for any spells.

Ron, having not unpacked his bag of anything but his every flavor beans, was able to just lever off the couch and sling his bag over his shoulder again while Hermione and Harry finished getting their things together. he smiled a bit at the way Neville's full attention was on Ginny as soon as he stepped in. It was still weird to have his friend dating his baby sister but he could more than deal with it when he looked at her like she was the center of his world.

Harry shouldered his own bag and helped Hermione heft hers, looking over at Neville and Ginny, the blond boy nodding with a gentle smile, "I do believe that's an agreement to visit Myrtle."

They scrambled out of the portrait hole and hurried to Myrtle's bathroom where they were told that yes, Orion was already down there tinkering with something in the lab. Myrtle hadn't liked it because it turned her purple and she liked her silvery, smokey appearance thank you very much.

Shaking her head Hermione talked to Myrtle a little more before sliding down the shoot. Strange being down in the Chamber again felt like coming home in a way.

Harry caught her round the waist as soon as they were in the library and tugged her down to nestle against his side on the padded bench that was at the work table. He bussed her cheek as the others found their own spots and pulled out their homework, even Ron. "Better yes?"

"So much better, thank you." Hermione leaned her head against his for a moment before diving back into her homework, finding it so much easier to relax down here. Even with the sound of cackling emerging from the lab at some intervals. Hermione really didn't want to know what Ri was up to that made him cackle like that.

Harry called down a book or two to help him finish his rough draft, picked over it, refined it, then copied down the finished essay before moving on to his Runes homework. He hummed absently as he sketched out the rune configuration, his hand falling to Hermione's thigh under the table, just resting there warmly for the contact.

Ron finished his Muggle Studies homework and, with a great heaving sigh, moved on to start his Potions homework only to jump where he sat when a loud boom came from the direction of the lab. "What in the bloody hell was that?"

"I have no idea but I hope he hasn't gone and blown himself up. His parents would be annoyed if that happened." Hermione eyed the dust from the explosion as it slowly settled again."

Suddenly an even louder cackle was heard "Wicked!".

Ginny's lips twitched madly. "He might be growing up but he's still our wolf-pup, I don't think he'll ever change."

What was surprising though was the second voice heard from the lab area. "I told you that would happen, you stirred it to long."
"Stuff it, it was brilliant. Now add the beetle legs."

"Don't order me around, I'm older than you." The posh voice was annoyed.

"Is that Malfoy?" Ginny's eyebrows went up in surprise.

Harry's head whipped around and he stared as if he could see through the walls, "Blow me down it was." He paused for a moment, "Orion and Malfoy are working together...well we're doomed."

Neville chuckled, "It's not us that has to worry I don't think. Zabini might though."

"Zabini and Ron I suspect. Malfoy doesn't forgive quick or easily and although he owned his rabbit at Harry's party he still promised Ron genital warts so I would look over my shoulder if I was you brother dear." Ginny grinned. "Orion just loves pranks so he'd be in just for the sake of it."

Ron scribbled on his parchment in a bit of developing bad temper, "Why is it that I get targeted and turned into a swamp thing, threatened with arse boils, turned twenty different colors, am subjected to hearing about porn of a fake me with a fake Zabini, and yet, when I retaliate with even just a simple teasing word, I'm jumped all over like I've committed some humongous crime? Fine I went a little far last Christmas Holidays by farting in Orion's face but other than that they're just words and not even words so bad that they deserve the punishment dealt out." He broke the nib of his quill scratching something out a little too hard and cursed, pulling out his wand to cast a reparo and to clean up the ink that splattered all over his hand and shirt.

Hermione got up from the padded bench and walked over to Ron and sat down next to him, wrapping her arms around him as she helped him clean up, knowing he was pants at cleaning charm. "You're not targeted Ron, you're really not. We don't know what Malfoy and Orion are doing in the lab. It doesn't have to have anything to do with you. The porn was brother torture and I know you can give as good as you get there."

Ron was her best friend, sometimes she got so caught up in Harry to remember that but he was her very best friend next to her boyfriend and she loved him.

"I know. I love you lot too. It's just sometimes it feels like I'm the butt of everyone's jokes, like I'm only seen as a clown to poke fun at." He gave Hermione a one armed hug.

Harry nodded in understanding and passed a chocolate bar over the table to Ron, who got the message of apology and support with a wry smile and a quiet salute.

Hermione kissed his cheek and straightened his hair before getting up and walking back to her seat next to Harry, letting Ron enjoy his chocolate in peace.

"Where's Luna then?" Ginny's voice was soft though, she did love her brother and teasing was alright but not when it actually made Ron upset. "You're never this crabby when she's around."

Ron nibbled on the chocolate, "I finally convinced her to talk to Flitwick about the people who steal her things and hide them after everything but the uniform she was wearing was taken from her trunk the day after we all got here," his jaw clenched and twitched, "So he's going round the school with her tracking down her things and the ones who've taken them this year."

"I hope they get expelled or forced to a full year of detention with Snape or Sirius." Ginny glowered. "I hate that they do that to her, what's so fun about stealing someone's things and making them go barefoot when there's frost out? It makes me so pissed. I want to hex them to go through everything they make Luna go through. Wankers!"

Hermione had to agree. She hated that Luna was still targeted, she thought it would have stopped...
now. She was glad that Ron had managed to talk her into speaking with Flitwick about what was happening to her.

Neville made a note in the margins of his textbook, "I saw them in the hall earlier, Professor Flitwick looked angry, like Ron pissed to the point of lobster red and about to blow angry. I don't think a year of detention with Snape is too far off and I think his entire house will be getting spoken to about their behavior as a whole later on tonight."

"Good, it's long overdue." Ginny still sounded grim. "Still I think we have our answer what the Slytherins are doing in the lab, Orion adores Luna and she is Malfoy's cousin. If they found out about this I would say some weird illness involving boils, pimples or hair loss will soon spread among the guilty ones."

Harry hummed, made a final Rune, then got up, kissing Hermione briefly, "Be back in a minute," then he went to the chest he'd hidden down here, opening it and fishing out a few things before walking out of the library and heading for the lab. He paused outside the door and knocked lightly before stepping in, pursing his lips seeing Malfoy with black soot on his pointy face, "Quite an explosion."

"Yes well...Someone didn't know when to stop stirring." He sent a glare at Orion who was even more covered in soot.

"Oi, you added the seeds early. It wasn't my fault. And anyway it worked didn't it?" Orion grinned brightly at Harry, teeth blindingly white against his soot covered skin. "Hi Scar, what brings you here?"

Harry leaned on the door jamb and held up one of the basilisk parts he'd gotten from the trunk, a scale, as if studying it, "Just wondering what you're up to in here, halfway that is."

Seeing the way Draco's eyes locked on the scale and just stared at it as if hypnotized made Orion chuckle, although he was no less frothing at the mouth at the sight of the basilisk part. His nose actually twitched with eagerness. "Why don't you come and look for yourself?"

"I think I'd rather not risk my eyebrows but maybe I phrased the question wrong. Why are you making...whatever just blew up?"

"Why not? Trial and error big brother, trial and error." Orion knew exactly what Harry meant but he couldn't help but tease, it was in his DNA to do so.

Draco heaved a long suffered sigh. "We're cooking up a very stubborn, painful and intense stomach bug if you have to know."

"Uh-huh, and would this be for a certain contingent of Ravenclaws?" Harry carefully tossed the scale he'd been holding to Malfoy before drawing out another bit of basilisk, this one a feather.

"Might be yes." Malfoy clutched the basilisk scale as if it was made of gold. "Might also be that the target, excuse me I mean poor infected individuals are forced to taste their worst nightmare as it runs out of both ends." The elegant blond looked slightly ill just talking about it but Orion cackled again.

"They are going to feel so, so wretched, it's absolutely brilliant. We have targeted their magical signature Scar, anyone else can ingest this and nothing happens. Malfoy here is a terrible stick in the mud but I have to admit that he knows his potions."

"Hmm," Harry twirled the feather, "I don't suppose there might be a way to use some of this," he
revealed the little basket of scales, feathers, and two containers of dried basilisk tongue, "to give them a long lasting, non-lethal, very uncomfortable rash would there? You'd both get to keep the leftovers, split fifty-fifty of course."

The two brewers eyed each other. They were both Slytherins to the core and sharing and sharing alike was not a part of their vocabulary. "The rash is definitely doable, we can add that to the puking potion, use the same targeting spell to make sure only the ones we want suffering the rash will get it."

Draco nodded. "Where do you want it oh great and savior? Face, chest, legs, intimate areas or just make it a full body rash? We can even make it into a certain pattern if that's your fancy."

"Bum and chest, crawling up the neck so that it's just barely visible. And I saw that look, fifty-fifty split with the leftovers or I won't give you the last bit." He pulled two tiny crystal vials from his pocket, both holding a yellowish liquid. "As you're both, in a manner of speaking, Snape's apprentices I don't have much in the way of misgivings letting you have a little basilisk venom so long as you promise not to take chances with anything you might use it in and show that you can be mature enough to share, Slytherin or not."

"For that right there Scar, I'll smooch Malfoy right here and proclaim my undying love and my wish for him to bear my children." Orion's eyes were almost glowing as he eyed the vials with venom.

"Right..." Draco took a few steps away from Orion. "I will not go that far, not nearly that far but I will be a good boy and share fairly." He was eyeing the vials too but he didn't have the almost crazed look his House mate sported. "You will not repeat this Potter but you know that we would have given them the rash for free don't you? This isn't business, it is a personal matter."

"I know but I'm a pesky Gryffindor and I believe people should be rewarded for effort. Not to mention I wanted to contribute something to the pot." He stepped in and held the basket and one vial out to Orion, passing the other to Malfoy, "So, multiple birds, one stone. Just one question though Ri," he looked at his little brother, "Is one of them Zacharias Smith?"

Orion's showing off teeth and absolutely menacing cackle was proof that indeed Smith was one of their victims. "We're designing it to hit him extra hard just because of what an absolute wanker he is. I'm sort of hoping he will actually wretch his spleen out."

"No death," Harry poked Orion in the shoulder, "dial it back on him," his lips curved in a positively evil smile, "as I want to speak to him personally on the matter."

Orion bowed with flourish. "As the great and mighty lion king commands. Smith will live to see another day. Besides a personal talk with you will scare and scar him more than a brush with the reaper ever could."

Even Draco's lips were twitching a little at that. If it had been anyone other than Smith, Draco might even have pitied them a little since he remembered his one on one talk with Potter after he'd hexed Granger. Zacharias Smith though, deserved anything that he got. Harry chuckled and ruffled Orion's already mussed hair further, "I'll let you get back to it. Be more careful though. I am not dealing with your Dad if you blow something off," he looked at Draco, "nor will I deal with your mother Malfoy. I don't have a death wish contrary to popular belief."

"Don't worry, I like my limbs where they are, won't risk losing them." Orion scrambled to get his hair back in a tail with little success. "And if Lady Malfoy should get upset or angry we'll just
distract her with an undressed Uncle Severus or something."

Draco turned vaguely green. "Merlin, don't say things like that! I do not beg but please, please don't say anything like that ever again."

Orion grinned.

Harry shook his head and whacked Orion's shoulder, "Agreed. I'm already scarred for life you little prat." Then he turned and headed out, barely waving over his shoulder at them before rejoining the others at the table.

"Everything alright in the lab?" Hermione kissed his cheek as he sat back down. "No body parts lost or plans for two Slytherins to take over the world as we know it? I think they could if they set their mind to it." She had her suspicions what Harry had done in the lab and since she really cared about Luna she approved whole heartedly. Hermione glanced over at Ron and saw her friend give Harry a grateful look as well.

"Everything's fine, no missing parts or plans for world domination," he set his hand on her thigh again and went back to his Runes, "just playing round with potion ideas."

Ron shook his head and smirked. Sure they were. He'd have to thank Harry later.

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Up at the Head Table Sirius studied a few Ravenclaws twitching and pale as the lit Jack o'lanterns floated round the Great Hall. A little over a month had passed since those same Ravenclaws had come down with a mysterious stomach bug that had made the results of eating the entirety of a Skiving Snackbox look like paradise and they all still had what Poppy was calling a persistent rash. Sirius called it their own private hell. Not a single person had so much as called Luna 'Loony' since. Everyone knew that someone had caused the illness and rash, and everyone knew what it was in retaliation for, especially when Zacharias Smith flinched every time Harry sent a smile his way. Harry smiled a lot.

He shook his head and looked over at his mate, who looked as if he'd explode with a single bite of pumpkin pastie. "You alright there Moony?" He knew Remus was probably getting damned sick and tired of him asking but he couldn't help it. The baby was due any day now and it made him antsy and worried he'd be teaching a class when Remus went into labor in their quarters alone.

Remus breathed deeply and turned to face his husband. "That depends on your definition of alright I suppose." A thin sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead and he could feel his hair growing damp with it. "I think I'm about to have a baby." His voice was even and calm even as another contraction hit him, making him grip the armrest of his chair.

Gray eyes went wide as Galleons and Sirius shot out of his chair, yelping, "Poppy!"

At Sirius' yelp Harry's head whipped around in concern. Halloween made him nervous and jumpy, always expecting something bad to happen. He saw Remus' pinched expression and his brows rose, his shoulders relaxing, and he murmured, "I think the pup's coming."

Most eyes were on the Head Table as Poppy got up from her seat and went over to Remus, wand raised and making diagnostic spells before nodding.

Orion shot up so fast that he tripped over his own robes and fell flat on his face before getting up and rushing toward his parents. It looked like he was about to get a little sibling and he was adamant that he would be there for it.
Remus was still calm and arguing with Sirius that he could walk to the infirmary by himself and that he didn't need to be carried.

Sirius just shook his head, "Need it or not I'm carrying you and not about to put you down unless it's on an infirmary bed so save your breath for getting the baby out."

Harry rolled his eyes and kissed Hermione's cheek, murmuring softly, "I'm going to go, help keep Orion settled. Hold the fort for me?"

"Of course, hug Remus for me if you see him." Hermione smiled as Remus was scooped up in Sirius' arms despite his continued protests and carried out of the Great Hall under the stares of all the students and professors. Poppy, Orion and Harry following behind the couple. Orion turned and locked eyes with Severus, waving him along, motioning that he should come with, he was family after all.

Harry snickered as Snape made a not precisely thrilled expression that turned to resignation when Poppy turned briefly, planted her hands on her hips, and glared at him only turning back around and moving again once he got up and was heading for them.

"Well, get moving you miscreants."

"Sorry Professor, I was just enjoying the fact that Madam Pomfrey can make even you obey her."

"Impertinent brat."

Poppy waved him along with more force as they moved up all the stairs to the Hospital wing. Remus felt sorry for Sirius for having to carry him but the pain was getting worse and it was shorter breathing time between the contractions. He was scared too. Last time he'd been so alone and so sure he would die, giving birth to Orion on his own in the woods, weak and poisoned. He knew this was a completely different situation but the fear was still there. The fear that something would go wrong and he would be forced to leave his loved ones. The fear that something would happen to the baby, a baby he already loved so much it felt like he would burst. He swallowed loudly as Sirius finally put him down on a bed in the infirmary.

Sirius, attuned to Remus' moods, pressed a kiss to his temple, "Don't worry love. We've got Poppy here and his Hedgehoginess in case something happens." He squeezed one of his husband's hands, "You know how stubborn they both are, nothing bad is going to happen."

Remus placed his hands on his belly, flinching when another stab of pain went through him. "I know that, I do but the fear doesn't seem to care about that. I love you so much and I am so afraid. It's Halloween...Bad things happen on Halloween. Our lives fell apart on this day. Harry lost everything, what if it happens again." He reached out and gripped Sirius' hand, even as Poppy waved her wand and transfigured Remus' robes into a soft shirt that reached to his knees. A spell was cast so that Poppy could hear both Remus' and the baby's heartbeat and she called on Severus to help her gather the things needed for a childbirth.

Harry nudged Orion over to Remus' other side, opposite Sirius, and took his other hand, "I'd say that it's high time that something good happens on Halloween then. Sirius is right, nothing bad's going to happen. Right Ri?"

"No, nothing bad will happen. We won't let it. This is a time for joy Dad, we'll be welcoming a new member of our family. One that's longed for and so very welcome, one that is loved already by so many people." Orion smiled soothingly at his Daddy.
Remus nodded. "You're right, you are all right." He turned to Harry. "Will you stay? You are my cub too and you should be here to welcome your little brother or sister."

"So long as you're comfortable with a bunch of people around you I'll stay," Harry squeezed his hand, "So have you two thought of names?"

Sirius nodded, "Aurora for a girl, Rigel for a boy. Plus Moony's picking the middles so it's fair."

"I named Orion all on my own so I'm just happy to have my husband to help me decide and as for having a bunch of people around me that's not really true. It's not a bunch of people, it's family." Remus tensed as he had another contraction. "It's you who have to decide if you want to stay. I can't promise not to scream, growl and howl."

"Are you comfortable Remus, as comfortable as you can be that is because this is going to take a while." Poppy's voice was brisk as she rolled up her sleeves and spelled up a sheet, covering Remus' lower body as she examined him. "Everything is looking well, you just concentrate on breathing."

Remus sighed deeply knowing it could be hours until the baby actually came.

Harry chuckled, "I think I can stick around so long as I don't have to see..." he motioned with his head toward the covered lower half of Remus, "ya know. I don't need that sort of eyeful."

Snape snorted, "No, really Potter? One would think you'd be positively fascinated by the miracle of life."

Sirius quirked a brow and stroked his free hand through Remus' hair. "Oooh he's snippy."

"Isn't he always? If he wasn't I would be afraid something was very wrong." Remus squeezed his mate's hand. "As for the miracle of life, anyone without medical training even tries to look down there I will hurt you and hurt you bad." The last words came out as a growl. A growl that made Orion give him an impressed look, it was so seldom his Dad let any trace of his wolf out that you could almost forget it was there.

Harry's lips twitched, "As I said, not interested and I'll keep a leash on Ri here."

Sirius chuckled and nuzzled Remus' cheek, "There's my Moony."

"Your Moony my arse. I'm in pain here and you're nuzzling." Remus was getting testy, the pain was unrelenting.

Orion looked a little wide eyed since his Dad never cursed, well almost never and in these circumstances it was no wonder his language got a little rough.

Harry lifted a brow. This was going to get interesting.

"Do you want me to stop?" Sirius let Remus crush his hand without a flicker of discomfort crossing his face.

"No, you might get a punch to the face if you coddle me though." Remus' body tightened like a bow and he almost lifted off the bed from the force of his latest contraction. Orion winced since he could actually heat the bones crack in Sirius' hand as his Dad squeezed it.

"Okay Remus, we are almost ready to start pushing, you have dilated all the way now." Poppy pat his knee in encouragement.
"We? What fucking we?...This is not a team effort. I am on my bloody own squeezing out a bowling ball through a hole the size of a golf ball."

Harry grimaced at the description and the way the obvious pain was making the normally even tempered, well spoken Remus degenerate into a foul mouthed irritable bear.

Severus merely raised a brow, studiously avoiding looking below Remus' waist, "And you're handling it so well too." He ducked the bedpan that was thrown at him by Sirius.

"I love you Severus, you're my brother but anymore snark from you right now and I will rip out your tongue and strangle you with it." Remus' eyes flashed a glowing amber and his fangs dropped, making him look more like Orion whose fangs were permanent. "Bloody bollocks, tell me I can push now Poppy...Please."

"Not just yet Remus, push now and you'll tear. Soon." Poppy was completely unaffected by Remus' bad mood.

Sirius used his free hand to stroke loose, sweaty, stringy hair out of Remus' face, even as his bones were ground together and popped and cracked in his other. It hurt to imagine Remus in this kind of pain fourteen years ago and having been truly alone then. He kissed his husband's temple when the contraction eased off, "Love you."

"I love you too, I really do." Remus slumped in the bed, already exhausted and he hadn't even truly started yet. It wasn't long until it felt as if a dagger stabbed him in the lower back and he tensed up again.

"This time you can push Remus, push through the contraction. Push now." Poppy peeked up from underneath the sheet before diving back in.

Sirius grimaced as Remus let loose a scream that raised the hair on the back of his neck and held his hand tighter but he didn't pull away, and noticed Harry holding in his wince as Remus wound up crushing his hand as well. He gave Harry a wry smile over the top of Remus' head and got one in return before he began murmuring encouragement to Remus in French.

Harry took a soft, cool cloth that Snape handed him and used it to wipe sweat out of Remus' eyes and off his brow even as his ears still rang from the scream.

"Good, good. You're doing good Remus. Now stop pushing. I know you want to continue but we're working with the contractions." Poppy's voice was calm and strong.

"There's that we again...Still not a team effort." Remus growled between clenched teeth, his voice hoarse from the scream. He turned to Harry and gave him a grateful look for the cool cloth.

Harry gave him a crooked smile, "I don't mind telling you Remus, seeing this is making me real happy that I'm straight. Means that some day years down the line I'll have the easy job of holding my wife's hand and making a panicky arse of myself trying to offer encouragement."

Remus huffed out a laugh even though it felt as if he was being ripped apart and turned inside out. "When the time comes you won't find that job so easy. When it's your loved one in pain."

"Here comes another contraction, get ready to push again." Poppy spoke up and soon there was another agonizing scream echoing through the infirmary. "Good Remus, you're doing so well. I see crowning now so push."

Severus looked at Orion, who was a bit pale and starting to pace in worry and caught him by his
sleeve, "Help me prepare the cleaning potion before you sprout fur in your concern."

Orion sent one more concerned look in his Dad's direction before going with his Uncle. Potions he can do and hopefully it will distract him. He'd never realized how much pain was involved in childbirth. "What do you need me to do?"

"Crush the ceanothus petals while I grate the soapwort." He nodded at the light blue petals in the jar. Most cleaning potions were premade but Orion had developed an odd mottling to his skin after using them on him as a newborn so Severus had needed to make a short shelf life non-magical cleansing potion. The mottling had disappeared and further research had pointed to the preserving agent in the pre-made potions reacting negatively to Orion's early lycanthropic immune system.

Since Remus couldn't give milk and therefore colostrum, Orion's immune system had been a bit more vulnerable than another infant's would have been. He presumed it would be the same for the new baby.

Hearing his Daddy scream again, Orion jumped into action. At least here with Severus he could do something that was actually helpful, over there by the others he only felt powerless. He wished the kid would just pop out already because this was agony and not only for his Dad.

Sirius smiled wanly at Harry when he wiped Remus' face free of sweat again and kissed his husband's temple, "Gods Remus, you're amazing and I love you so very, very much." He knew it was natural and something that many went through on a regular basis but Remus screaming and in such obvious pain twisted his heart in knots in his chest. "Poppy how much longer?"

"I don't exactly have a timeline here Sirius." Poppy sounded a bit busy. "Shoulders are next, that's the hard part. After that it's easy, well easier."

Remus grunted and got ready to push again, he was so tired, every muscle was trembling but he could do this. He'd done it on his own and now he had help so he could do this. Taking hold of both Harry and Sirius' hands he braced himself and pushed for all he was worth.

Even though his hand was definitely going to need healing after this, Harry couldn't help but be amused when Sirius started babbling after Remus screamed again.

"Is there a permanent contraceptive spell? A rune configuration? You know something we're not likely to forget that can just always be there? Two's enough right Moony? Don't need any more than that."

Harry leaned in and murmured softly, "I don't doubt that the day I become a dad I'll be a nervous wreck but I'm hoping I'll handle it a little better than himself there."

Remus snorted and looked at his husband. "Perhaps we can have this conversation when I'm not birthing your child. Otherwise I might decide that abstinence is the best protection." He panted loudly before giving another push, feeling the absolutely strange sensation of having something slide out of him.

"That's it, well done." Poppy's voice was barely heard over the angry wail starting up. "You have a baby girl."

Harry grinned and looked over his shoulder at the potion trolls, "You hear that Ri? You've got a little sister."

There was an answering whoot of happiness from Orion, a baby sister, that was wicked.
Sirius craned his neck, not letting go of Remus' hand but trying to catch a glimpse of the baby, who had apparently inherited his lungs.

"Come on down here Papa and cut the cord of your daughter. Everything is covered up, promise." Poppy's tone was amused.

"Sorry about your hands." Remus released his death grip on Harry and Sirius and slumped back against the pillows, pale and tired, oh so tired. He was filled with happiness though. He and Sirius had a little girl, their baby was here and everything had gone well.

Sirius shuffled down, barely noticing Poppy heal his hand, pass him the medical scissors, and directing him where to cut the little bit of ropy flesh still connecting his daughter to where she'd spent the last nine months. His hand shook like a leaf but he managed not to fumble it and just looked for a bit at the little girl he'd made with Remus.

She was wet and streaked in birthing fluids, red in a squashed, almost wrinkly face, and squawling loudly. He swallowed around the lump in his throat, not particularly caring if Snape saw how damp his eyes had become, "I don't think she's too happy to be out in the cold, messy world."

Harry chuckled, "You wouldn't be either after nine months snuggled all safe and warm then suddenly being squished and squeezed and pushed out of that into a very chilly room."

Snape snorted, "Especially when she's covering in slowly drying birthing fluid. Give her over Poppy, Orion and I will clean her up while you assist Lupin in expelling the afterbirth."

Sirius' head whipped around, "You mean it's not over yet?!"

"No, not quite yet." Poppy shook her head at Sirius' startled eyes. "Don't worry though, it's not nearly as bad as pushing a baby out."

It might not be that bad but Remus was still close to sobbing at having to work more, his muscles felt like jelly and he honestly didn't know if he had it in him.

Orion peered at his sister as he helped Severus clean her up. She was still crying, deep shuddering little wails. "She looks like a little old man." Orion's voice was soft and filled with fondness though. "Can you tell how much wolf she has in her?" He lowered his voice as he asked his Uncle that. Orion was in balance now but he didn't wish the conflict he'd gone through on his little sister.

Severus gently cleaned her hair, which appeared to be the light sandy brown of her 'mother' then dried her off, dressed and swaddled her and tugged one of Molly's tiny knitted hats on her head. He handed her to Orion, showing him how to cradle his baby sister. "I can find out some at least by testing the bathwater."

He dipped a measure of the water out and dripped it onto a special testing parchment designed for testing the strength of creature blood. He lifted a brow and nodded at the amount of the paper that turned red, "A few shades more than you," understanding Orion's concern Severus laid his hand over his head, "The good thing is that she is a beta. She won't be quite as impossible as you thanks to that. Also she'll have you and that will indeed make a difference. You'll want to make sure you not touch her after handling silver though, she's got the allergy." He angled his head at Orion's parents and Harry, "Go on, take her over."

Nodding Orion started to walk over to his parents, cradling his sister as if she was the most precious and fragile thing in the world. He would protect her and help her in every way he could. Standing by the bed he gently handed her to his Daddy who was much paler that Orion liked but he
understood that he was exhausted.

Remus held her close and brushed his lips over her small, knitted cap clad head. She was so tiny and so perfect. "Our daughter, Aurora Hannah Black." He looked up and caught Harry's eye as he revealed her second name. "She should be named after her oldest brother."

Sirius chuckled as he saw green eyes go wide and Harry turn a dull embarrassed red, his mouth opening and closing like a fish with nothing coming out, "It also makes you her godfather automatically should," he exchanged a look with Remus, "well if anything happens. Not that it will." He shifted to wiggle in behind Remus and wrapped his arms around his husband and daughter, "Not if I have anything to say about it."

"I..." Harry ran his fingers through his longer hair, it brushed his shoulders in the back now and still looked like a wild man's but soon enough he'd be able to pull it back, "You're both mental," he smiled and let Poppy fuss a bit over his hand, healing it, "but thanks."

Remus smiled tiredly, leaning back against his husband. "It's not mental in the least. We love you, trust you and know you Harry. This is what we want." Aurora had finally quieted down in Remus' arms, looking a little like a baby bird where she lay.

Orion beamed at his big brother, fully agreeing with his parents decision when it came to her name and godfather. "We'll look out for her, won't we Scar?"

"Of course we will. That's our job, I vote we never leave her alone with Ginny though, she'll get bad ideas." He shuddered in exaggeration.

"Merlin no!" Orion shook his head quickly. "No alone time with Ginevra, I still don't know how Nev can be that calm with her...interests."

Remus was sure he didn't want to know what his cubs were talking about. Now when the adrenaline started to fade away he could feel how tired he really was tired and aching.

Harry caught that easily, especially as Poppy and Severus were setting up a bassinet with a bottle and diapers on a shelf beneath it and then creeping away, and he ruffled Orion's hair, "We'll go tell everyone else the news and let you rest. Come on Ri, let's go spread the word."

"Absolutely, everyone needs to know that a princess has been born." Orion smiled at his parents and ran a finger over Aurora's soft cheek before bounding over to Harry, following him out of the infirmary.

"We have wonderful children don't we?" Remus looked where his boys had disappeared. "I love you."

Sirius leaned down to brush his lips over Remus' cheek, "I love you too, so very very much and yes, our kids are amazing. Just as amazing as you are, and that's pretty high in the ranks."

"Flatterer." Remus smiled and let out a yawn. "You are the amazing one." He looked down at his daughter, having Sirius to lean against. He was married, he had Sirius back and now he had another child with the man he loved. Even with the threat of Dumbledore still out there, Remus had never been happier. His heart was so full it felt like bursting.

"Take a nap love. I'll be right here, looking after you and our little angel." Sirius shifted so his hands were cradling Aurora along with Remus' arms.

"Mmm, don't mind if I do." In Sirius' arms he knew that he was safe and so was their little girl.
Remus already felt his eyes drooping and he nuzzled back against Sirius as he drifted off.
Chapter 59

Chapter by trulywicked

Harry had to chuckle at Sirius, standing in front of the class, Aurora in the baby sling across his chest, as he wrote out the latest spells on the board. Remus and Sirius switched care for her between classes, depending on the dangers. If Remus was teaching a class on say, werewolves or anything that was mostly theory or a class where nothing was loose and no hexes were taught or things thrown, then Remus had her, if he was teaching a class where creatures were free and out or there were things being thrown or hexes tossed, then he gave her to Sirius. Of course this usually resulted in Sirius having to go back over the lesson once Remus took Aurora back since many of the girls and a few boys in the class tended to coo and get distracted by the baby. Even Hermione occasionally got unfocused. It was funny.

Hermione tore her eyes from the baby to look at her chuckling boyfriend. Aurora was so cute and it hadn't taken long until she'd become the whole castle's princess. Hermione had a huge soft spot for the baby. "What's so amusing?" She reached up and tucked a strand of his hair behind his ear, resisting the urge to play with it.

He leaned into the touch, making a note on his parchment, "Mostly you and the others and the way Professor Black is already resigned to having to teach this class over again." He nodded at Sirius' knowing look in his direction, followed by a piece of chalk flying toward him that he caught without any problem whatsoever.

"Unlike others I can do more than one thing at once." Hermione pushed her parchment over in Harry's sight and showed perfectly taken notes of everything Sirius had gone over during the lesson. "I can admire, coo and learn all at the same time." She gave him a teasing smile and pulled her parchment back in front of her.

He grinned, "I know you can. It's the rest of them. You I just find adorable the way you go all soft and even prettier than usual around Aurora."

That made her flush slightly. "I can't help but go soft around around Aurora, she's beyond adorable. Such a cutie and sweet too, she almost never cries when she's in class."

"I know and I love seeing it."

Ron rolled his eyes from Harry's other side, "Can we please pay attention? That way when he goes back over it we can zone out, already being smug and knowing it."

"Didn't I just make of point of saying that I am paying attention?" Hermione looked at her other best friend. "I'm multi tasking." She did fall quiet though and turned her eyes back to the front of the classroom where they once again locked on Aurora and her adorableness.

Harry just chuckled again and went back to his notes. There were still thirty minutes left for class when Aurora began fussing and whimpering. Harry's head immediately jolted up out of instinct and he saw Sirius trying to balance Aurora and the chalk while digging out a bottle. He shook his head and got up, taking his goddaughter from his godfather, grabbing a bottle, and meeting embarrassed gray eyes, "I'm here to help you know." he chuckled as Sirius stuck his tongue out at him and walked back to his seat with the baby, bottle, and a burping cloth. He settled into his seat and gave Aurora the bottle, aware that he was now the one being stared at and that with her so close Ron lost the ability to concentrate and was watching the baby hungrily devour her meal.
Hermione was definitely looking, holding in her soft coos by force. Harry was wonderful with his
goddaughter, absolutely wonderful and it made her love him even more if it was possible. She
smiled as Aurora devoured her bottle as if she’d never seen food before, her little rosebud mouth
sucking greedily, her eyes firmly locked on Harry, their baby blue shade having turned into her
Papa's gray color.

Across the classroom Romilda Vane watched with barely concealed envy as Granger leaned close
and Harry not only let her but leaned his head into hers with loving whispers. That should be her
not some bushy haired know it all who was only passably pretty. She didn't know what Harry saw
in Granger but she didn't care. It should be her cuddling up to him and getting to coo over that
adorable baby up close.

Harry was so good with her too, one day he'd make such a good husband and father and Romilda
wanted to be the one who was the other half of that equation. She tightened her hand around her
quill and reminded herself that it wouldn't be long until she was the one Harry smiled at like he was
smiling at Granger now and Granger was instead cuddled up to McLaggan. She just had to finish
the potion she had brewing in secret and then Granger would break up with Harry, leaving a space
for her to slip in and offer comfort.

Hermione knew she would need the next lesson when Professor Black went over this again
because with Harry and Aurora right next to her she lost focus completely. She loved to watch her
boyfriend with Aurora, how gentle, loving and great he was with her. Between him and Orion this
little girl was certainly cared for and very much loved as much as by her parents.

When the bell chimed, letting them know that the class was over, Remus came rushing in, looking
around rather wildly but smiling as he saw his daughter with Harry.

Sirius blinked at Remus and walked over, "Should I be insulted that you seemed to have thought I'd
lost our daughter?"

Harry's lips twitches as Aurora finished her lunch and he shifted her so that she was draped against
his burp cloth covered shoulder and began patting and rubbing her back, aware that the majority of
the class's female population had remained to watch while the boys aside from himself and Ron
had all torn out of there going down to the Great Hall like their trousers had been on fire.

"I didn't think you'd lost her." Remus gave his husband a quick kiss. "I just missed her, could
hardly concentrate all through the lesson, almost let Ginny's hex hit me." He heard his daughter
burp loudly and then lean her head against her godfather's shoulder contently. "Look at her, now I
almost feel bad for coming to take her."

Ron shook his head, gathering his things up, "You could just let Harry hold her through lunch, he
only needs one hand to eat really."

Sirius chuckled, "It would be a shame to disturb her."

"You know I don't mind so long as Remus doesn't have the Mummy-jones going on," Harry gave
them a grin.

"I always have the 'Mummy-jones' but I'll try to control myself." Remus' voice was dry but his eyes
were warm. "If you don't mind having her a little longer Harry, it really would be a shame to
disturb her now that she's about to fall asleep." It would give Remus a chance to actually have a
meal together with Sirius too, that didn't happen too often these days.

"I don't mind in the least," Harry used a charm to pack his materials away, shrinking his bag to put
in his pocket before standing, to the sighing flutters of the girls still in the room. He looked at Hermione as Ron had to flee to give voice to his braying amusement down the hallway so as not to disturb Aurora, "Well, lunch then?"

Hermione's lips were twitching as well but she managed to hold her amusement in better than Ron. "Yes, lunch." She reached over and tuck ed that stubborn strand of hair back behind his ear again. "Nothing like a baby if you want to land the girls." She whispered it so that only Harry would hear. "Too bad for them though, you're already taken." She smiled at him lovingly.

He leaned in and kissed her cheek, "Eh let them flail in jealousy, you get to sit back and smile smugly, same as I get to do when the lads nearly foam at the mouth looking at you." He walked with her down to the Great Hall and sandwiched in at the Gryffindor table, Ginny already pulling Neville over to do her own share of soft cooing at the baby.

Neville laughed softly and did Harry the favor of dishing up the lunch onto his plate so he could eat while holding the baby.

"Thanks Nev."

"Not a problem. You've got the whole Hall's attention you know."

"Hey I'm just glad it's cause I'm holding something cute and not the usual reason," Harry speared a carrot and began eating, neither noticing nor caring that Romilda Vane was nowhere around.

"Aww, seeing her I think becoming a mother some time in the future wouldn't be such a bad thing." Ginny gushed over the sleeping baby. "Then I remember that I could just as well get a boy that could grow up to be like my brothers and I get apprehensive again." She stuck her tongue out at Ron.

Hermione chuckled and poured Harry a goblet of pumpkin juice to wash down his food with.

Ron just rolled his eyes at his sister, hearing Harry thanking Hermione, and dug in to his food with relish. He was not going to rise to his sister's bait and wind up with some sort of mentally scarring vengeance wreaked upon his head. He did notice that Vane wasn't anywhere to be seen but didn't think anything of it beyond wondering where the little pest had gone to sulk.

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She was in her dorm, adding the final touches to the potion. She'd followed the instructions with military precision and now it was time to add the crushed silphium seeds, the unicorn horn shavings, and McLaggan's hair. Once more she followed the recipe with perfect precision, her potion skills weren't the best but this was high stakes so she'd paid more attention than ever before. She was just lucky she'd found the silphium seeds at such a reasonable price. They were so rare they normally cost more than a brand new Firebolt.

She added the crushed seeds, stirred correctly, sprinkled in the horn shavings and let it sit for the prescribed three minutes before stirring counter clockwise once and clockwise thrice. The potion took on the mother of pearl sheen and the pretty spiraling smoke distinctive to it, and she smiled in relief as she poured a little into a vial and added Cormac's hair. Tonight at dinner she'd dose Granger's goblet and the know it all would fall for Cormac.

She didn't bother to notice that, though it was a mother of pearl sheen, underneath that sheen it had an odd blue tint.

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They were back in the Great Hall for dinner, the day having passed quickly. The adorable Aurora hadn't been in anymore classes so all the students had managed to concentrate. Hermione was in the middle of a conversation with Harry and Neville when she started to feel strange. She couldn't seem to catch her breath, it felt as if she didn't get enough air into her lungs. Her heart rate sped up and thundered in her ears. She felt hot and cold at the same time, still struggling to breathe. Darkness crept into her vision and she began to panic.

"Hermione?" Harry noticed that she looked pale just before she suddenly slumped, falling back off the bench and only his Seeker reflexes managed to catch her before her head cracked onto the stone floor. "Hermione!" Her skin was clammy and her temperature was dropping and her breath was coming in short, gasping wheezes and his heart jumped up into his throat and in less than an instant he was nearly screaming for Madam Pomfrey.

Sirius was on his feet and rushing toward Harry alongside Poppy, the abject fear in his godson's voice making his stomach clench in terror, especially when he saw the pale face of the girl who was just as much family as Harry and Orion were.

Poppy hurried over and crouched over the pale girl, not liking what she saw at all. The girl was barely breathing and she was turning cold. "Severus, come quickly." Poppy had a feeling that what was wrong with Granger was more his area of expertise. "I want Severus to look at her and then we need to get her to the Hospital wing."

Ginny was ghostly pale as she looked at her friend on the floor and the potent fear in Harry's eyes. Snape was there between one breath and the next, carefully examining Hermione's breathing, temperature, pulling up her eyelids to see her pupils dilated, and looking at her nail beds before grimly announcing, "Poison. Black get Granger's food and drink and keep them set aside. Once we get her in the infirmary and stable I'll test it and see if I can discover the poison to make an antidote." He barked for a house-elf and in a pop he, Hermione, and Poppy were gone from the Great Hall.

Ron was just as pale as his sister and he pushed Harry's shoulder, "Go mate, I know you need to. Go, we'll handle things here." The absolute agony and terror in Harry's eyes as he turned his head and nodded before running off to wait out of Poppy and Severus' way in the infirmary nearly ripped Ron's own heart out.

The Great Hall was full of whispers and gasps at the word poison. The students looking at each other warily before pushing their food and drinks away, afraid to finish them. Remus made his way to Sirius, pale and drawn. "Who would poison Hermione? It must be someone inside the school, the wards have been strengthened so that no one can breach them without Minerva being aware of it."

Sirius' face was grim as he set a stasis charm on Hermione's food and drink and began to gather it for Snape, "I don't know but we will find out."

Over at the Slytherin table Pansy ran her hand over Orion's hair and rubbed his back to calm him, the growl rumbling in his throat tickling her fingers as it made his chest vibrate. She was not sentimental, not much anyway, but that look on Potter's face...she hoped Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey could save Granger because if not the world would have a Savior with a death wish and a grudge on their hands.

Right now Pansy's touch was the only thing grounding Orion, the only thing that kept him from losing control. He loved Hermione as a sister and he wanted to find the guilty one and make them pay. That look on Harry's face, it was a horrible look and it made Orion's wolf howl in need for
vengeance.

Remus rocked Aurora in his arms since she'd started crying from all the tension and talking in the Great Hall. "Gods I hope Poppy and Severus are making her better as we speak."

Neville slipped his arm around Ginny's shoulders, "They will. There's no one better in this world at the job they do."

Minerva stood up at the head table and clapped her hands, "Attention, staff I would like for you to divide equally four ways and then cast detection spells on the food and drink in the hall. We must learn if this was a mass attack or targeted."

Sirius nodded sharply, passing the tray with the known tainted food to Ron, "Take that to Snape's office. That's where he'll do the work on it." Then he got into a position to cast over a section of the table.

Ron took the tray and rushed to get it into Snape's office, praying in the back of his head that Hermione would be alright.

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Harry sat on a cot, out of the way, eyes intent on Snape and Madam Pomfrey working in tandem over Hermione. Snape had already forced a bezoar into her and now they were working to stabilize her vitals and put them on the magical equivalent of life support.

"If you help me cast it, I think a strong stasis charm is the only thing we can do until we have a proper antidote." Poppy lowered her voice after a look in Harry's direction. "She's fading Severus, with all we're doing here she's getting worse and quickly too." The girl was barely breathing now, lips getting a bluish tint to them. Poppy was no expert in poisons but she'd never seen one like this before, where not even a bezoar helped much.

Severus nodded, "Agreed. Whatever this is it's nasty and quick." He gripped his wand tighter, "Ready?" The medi-witch gave him a signal and together they wound the strongest stasis charm they knew around Hermione, freezing everything about her where and how it was. Poppy was correct about it being the only thing they could do right now but it wouldn't last forever.

Poppy was very much aware that Hermione Granger was living on borrowed time. If they couldn't figure out an antidote to the poison she wouldn't have a chance. For the moment though, they had done all they could. "Thank you for your assistance Severus." The medi-witch looked very tired. "I need to speak to the Headmistress too and Miss. Granger's parents need to be informed." She looked toward where Harry was sitting, her heart going out to him.

Severus nodded, "Minerva will likely handle the latter Poppy. She's always felt Miss Granger to be her responsibility." His gaze cut over to Potter, recognizing the shattered expression as one that, for years he himself had woken up with and seen in the mirror. "Go." As she clipped out he pulled a chair over to Hermione's bedside and gestured Potter over. "Sit Potter. I know it will be utterly impossible for you to leave."

Harry settled in the chair, stretching his hand out toward Hermione's, pausing to look up at Snape in question.

He nodded, "You won't disrupt the stasis charm." He watched the son of his first love take the girl's hand and bring it close, kissing the cold, blue-tinged fingers and even his hard heart twisted and gave enough that he pat Harry on the shoulder before he had the house-elf that had remained
Harry rubbed his cheek against Hermione's fingers. He couldn't say anything, his voice seemed to have disappeared the moment Snape had announced the cause behind Hermione's collapse. Right now his entire world was drawn down to the focal point of just himself and the girl he loved fighting for her life. He leaned his head over her hand, holding it like it was all that connected him to sanity and in truth it likely was.

Pansy watched as Orion paced the common room. They'd all been ordered to their common rooms and dorms for the night. Only Granger's food had been tainted but it hadn't changed the fact that no one had any appetite any longer and it had made most of their little group feral in anger, Orion most of all. Even Draco and Blaise were grim and angry and the shit she could hear being spouted from the corner did not help matters.

Goyle held his, very small, audience captive with his ranting about such a fuss being made over a know-it-all mudblood. "Really who cares if she dies. One less mudblood in the world and good riddance I say. She deserves it, I hope she does-"

All Pansy caught was a blur and now she was seeing Orion, pinning Gregory against the wall, off his feet, with one hand.

"On more word out of your bloody gob and I swear to you that it will be your death we'll be celebrating." Orion's voice was more growl than human and he'd sprouted claws that were pricking into the soft, fleshy skin of Goyle's neck as he held him over his head, against the wall with a single hand.

The bully writhed and struggled, squeaking as he gripped Orion's arm and tried to get free, "Y-you're mad! I'll have you-"

"What," Pansy came up behind Orion, ignoring the odd little thrill the display of strength he was putting on gave her, and slid her hand over his shoulders and along his arm, knocking Goyle's hand away and resting it just below Orion's wrist, "You'll have him what Greg?"

Her cheek rested against Orion's as she pinned Goyle to the wall just as effectively with her gaze as Orion was with his hand, "You so much as try anything, your family so much as tries anything, and you'll be contending with me in a very, very foul mood." She curled her fingers, surprised to notice that they didn't quite go all the way around Orion's wrist, "And if you continue spouting off I won't just stand beside Orion here, I'll help him turn you into food for Hagrid's next dangerous lesson. Clear?"

His eyes went wide but he made a shaky nod.

It satisfied her, barely, and she murmured to Orion, "Let him go, he's not worth it."

He didn't want to let go, he wanted to feel Goyle's blood run down his hand but Orion still pulled his hand back and watched the bully crumple to the floor, coughing and holding his bruised neck. "Make no mistakes about it, you owe Pansy your life. I would just as happily have killed you." His voice still came out as a growl.

Draco and Blaise exchanged a look, suddenly very thankful to be on Orion's good side.

Pansy moved her arm to drape around Orion's shoulder, hand brushing over his chest, her other arm going round his waist and she nuzzled his other shoulder as she watched Goyle run away, his
metaphoric tail tucked between his legs. "Come down darling," she gently pulled him to step back with her toward a couch, "Your brother is going to need you the next few days."

Sitting down he pulled Pansy down with him, needing her closeness as he tried to pull himself back under control. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, reaching inside him as Alek had taught him to get his wolf back under control. Not repressing the wolf as his Dad did but calm it.

She pulled his head to her shoulder and ran her fingers through his hair, softly petting him, "I'm proud of you." She kept her voice soft and calm for him.

Orion wrapped his arms around her and relaxed under her touch. "Don't be, I would have killed him, I really would have, that's not something to be proud of." Orion was scared, he was scared for Hermione and he was scared for his brother and the broken expression he'd worn.

"But you didn't, last year you'd have drawn blood as soon as you touched him," she rubbed her cheek against his head, "You kept control now darling, as upset as afraid as you are, as angry as he made you, you still kept your control and stayed close enough that you heard me. You gave him a warning and put him in his place but you didn't draw blood."

He let out a shuddering breath and kept his arms around Pansy, her presence more comforting than anything else. Her scent soothing him and made tightly coiled muscles slowly grow soft and pliant again.

Pansy settled closer, leaving the rest of their house to Draco and Blaise should heads need to be knocked together. Right now Orion needed her more than she needed to keep the order.

-----------------------------------------------

Romilda paused outside the infirmary doors, her hand clenched around a vial of her potion. It was an hour before breakfast, a time most students would be primping and showering and getting ready for the day, a time she'd normally have been doing the same but today was anything but normal.

She'd been up all night, tossing and turning and trying to figure out what could have possibly gone wrong. She knew she'd brewed it exactly according to the directions, followed every step with perfection so she couldn't understand why her Amortentia had become a poison.

She'd tried to talk to McGonagall last night but had been brushed off before being made to return to her common room immediately after dinner while the incident was investigated.

As soon as the morning had come and she could leave the dorms without getting into trouble, she'd tossed on her clothes from yesterday, scooped up some of the potion still sitting innocently in her cauldron into a vial, and hurried down to Professor Snape's office only to learn from the portrait outside it that he was in the infirmary. Harry was in there, she knew because Ron and Neville and Ginny had all been talking quietly in the common room, worried about Harry and Hermione and wondering who could have done this.

So Harry was in there and it scared her more than the possibility of expulsion. Still she summoned her Gryffindor courage and pushed open the door, stepping in as she heard Pomfrey and Snape discussing the mystifying properties in the traces of poison he'd found in Granger's pumpkin juice. She saw Ron, Luna, Neville and Ginny clustered around Harry, who looked like he'd slept just about as well as she had at Hermione's bedside. She jerked her eyes away from the sight of the girl who was always busy, always doing something so still and pale in the hospital bed.

"Professor Snape may I have a word?"
Hard black eyes cut to her filled with irritation and hostility, "Miss Vane perhaps it has escaped your notice but we are a tad busy with Miss Granger's situation. If you need a potion for cramps it will have to wait."

Her cheeks burned red. That was the reason she normally bothered him, as her mother refused to send her the money to buy the menstrual relief potions herself, but did he have to blurt it out in front of everyone? She shifted, took a deep breath as he started to ponder out loud about how the potion could have gotten into Hermione's pumpkin juice, and said as quickly as she could, "It's my fault."

And everything stopped.

She could feel all the eyes in the infirmary on her, especially one pair of vibrant green, and her stomach roiled.

Severus gave her his full attention, "Precisely how is Miss Granger's condition your fault?" From the corner of his eye he saw Potter stand up from the chair he'd been slumped in since Hermione had been put under the stasis charm and push off the concerned hands of his friends.

Romilda swallowed nervously, "I...I've been brewing Amortentia for the last couple of months in a cauldron under my bed. I followed all the instructions to a T and it looked and smelled right so I added some hair I swiped from McLaggan l-like you're supposed to, and slipped it into H-Hermione's goblet. S-she was supposed to fall in love with Cormac not...I don't know what went wrong. This wasn't supposed to happen. She was just supposed to leave H-Harry and then I w-was going to...to offer comfort a-and friendship and g-get him to s-see me as the b-better choice!"

"You did what?" Harry, almost as pale as his girlfriend, stepped in front of Romilda. "You slipped my girlfriend a buggered up love potion because you couldn't have me?! She could die!"

"Sorry? You're sorry?!" His hand flew up and started to swing down to the utter shock of those in the room before it paused, hanging in the air, trembling with the force of control it took not to bring it down and slap the hell out of her. "Sorry isn't going to wake her up or get rid of the poison!" His hand came down and gripped her arm, not quite hard enough to bruise and he yanked her around to face Hermione's unconscious form.

"Look at her," he ground his teeth when Romilda averted her eyes, "I said look at her!" His other hand grabbed her chin and directed her gaze at Hermione. "You did this. Out of selfishness and jealousy you've put Hermione's life in danger."

Romilda sniffled and whimpered, the loathing and contained fury in Harry's voice making her cringe as he released her. She flicked furtive glances at him, his eyes nearly burning with the force of his anger.

"Vane you had best pray to every fucking god you can think of that Snape can figure out what you did wrong and save Hermione because if she dies I will see to it you wind up in Azkaban," her terrified gasp did nothing to to make him feel the slightest bit sympathetic to her, "If Hermione dies I will make it my mission in life to see you tossed into a cell on that godforsaken island with a dementor posted outside your cell door twenty four seven. Understand?"

She nodded, shaking like a leaf, as Ron managed to pull Harry away, back over to Hermione's side. She believed him.
Ginny was utterly shocked at Harry's reaction and that Romilda Vane had done this. They had been joking about her crush on Harry, never in a million years could she have believed that Vane would go this far. Ginny was angry and resentful that this had been done to Hermione but she couldn't help but pity Vane at the same time, even when Hermione got better, and Ginny had to believe that she would get better, Vane would never be trusted again. Not by anyone.

Luna held on to Ron with one hand and reached out to Harry with the other, stroking his back soothingly.

Ron took comfort and strength from Luna's touch, and used that to keep Harry from doing something he ought not. One royally buggered love potion and Hermione was left fighting for her life. Never again would he decry Snape's hawking about over everyone during potions class or his perfectionist streak. This made it all too clear that a badly brewed potion had worse consequences than a melted or exploded cauldron.

Neville wrapped his arms around Ginny, staring at Vane in disgust and in his quiet way just said, "Harry should have gone ahead and slapped you."

Snape cocked a brow and grabbed Vane's arm, sneering in disgust at her jittery jump, "You and I Miss Vane, will be discussing this further in my office," he saw Minerva and Remus in the entryway, both looking furious, ill, and a bit disturbed so he would imagine they'd heard the entirety of the discourse, "I presume you have saved some of your botched potion?"

She nodded jerkily, holding up the vial with her shaking hand, flinching when more than one growl echoed through the room, "I k-knew you'd n-need a sample."

Right now Remus regretted he was a Professor because he would have loved to tell that slip of a girl just what he thought about her and her selfishness. Biting down on his tongue to keep from blurting it out he walked over to his oldest cub instead and handed Aurora over to him, knowing that Harry wouldn't do anything stupid as long as he had the baby in his arms. Remus found it hard to look at Hermione, seeing her all still was completely wrong.

Harry looked down at his goddaughter, who was looking up at him with somber eyes, and leaning down he brought her close, eyes squeezing shut to keep the tears that wanted to fall. It was only a week away from the winter holidays and because of one stupid stupid girl he could lose the one person he needed more than anything when things should be happy.

Minerva looked down her nose at Romilda as Severus marched her past, "Once you are quite finished with Miss Vane Severus, escort her to my office. I will be contacting her parents and the board."

"Of course."

Remus left Aurora with Harry and walked over to Severus. "If there's anything I can do to help you only have to name it. Or if not me then Sirius or Orion, they would help too without hesitation."

Remus saw the lines in his friend's face and knew that Severus had been up all night as well, trying to figure something out. "Minerva has been fighting with the board, since Hermione is seventeen they want her to go to St. Mungos, they don't think she should be a school responsibility."

Severus kept his voice low so that only the werewolf would hear him, "Moving her would require removing the stasis charm and as soon as that happens without any antidote administered she'll die. She's already on the edge Remus, one fraction of a mis-step and she'll go over the wrong way."

Amber eyes flashed with temper and frustration. "Maybe Sirius can get through to them, it's funny
what a restored lordship and a fortune can do. No matter what she won't be going anywhere, no one
could do more for her than you do anyway. Just make sure to take care of yourself as well." He
looked over at Harry, feeling wretched that there wasn't anything he could do to help. "I managed
to convince Molly and Arthur to stay at the Burrow for now, Molly is livid."

Severus noticed that Vane turned sheet white at that, "Yes I would imagine she is. I make no
promises about myself Remus. Granger has a week before the stasis charm begins unraveling. That
said I have to get this," he jerked his head at Vane, "and her idiocy to my lab so I can try and craft
an antidote before that happens." He marched the little idiot out and to his office. Having the
poison in it's undegraded form would help to isolate what made it toxic but that was no guarantee
that he could create an antidote in time.

Nodding in understanding, Remus stepped aside letting Severus move so he could walk to the
dungeons and his lab. Remus hoped that Harry wouldn't hear about the board and their moronics,
Harry had enough to deal with as it was. Slowly he walked back to Harry and his daughter.

Severus growled as another analysis of Vane's potion showed that nothing she'd added to the
potion proper should have made a poison. It wouldn't have made a love potion either. The idiot girl
had fallen for a streetside vendor passing entada gigas seeds off as silphium. As silphium seeds
were rare it was possibly a forgivable mistake except for the fact that even in the pensieve the
blasted girl would have correctly brewed Amortentia had she had actual silphium seeds. As it was
it should have become a health draught and not a poison. His eyes cut up at a knock on his door
and he lifted a brow as Cormac McLaggan came in. "What?"

"Um...I've come to apologize. I would never have been a willing part in a plan like this." For once
McLaggan sounded sincere and humble. "I had no idea she'd gotten hold of my hair and used it in
the potion. If I fancy someone I'll win them over by myself, don't need artificial help." Cormac did
feel bad. He really did find Hermione very attractive and he was not happy that she was this sick. In
the middle of his apology Cormac scrunched his nose up and looked around. "Really Professor,
what is that smell? It's rancid, it smells just as bad as those doxy eggs tasted." He shuddered at the
memory.

Snape's head snapped up, "What? Doxy eggs?" He did recall having heard of McLaggan taking a
dare last year to swallow doxy eggs but hadn't believed anyone could be that stupid. He cut his
gaze to the potion then back to McLaggan, "Mr. McLaggan did you cut your hair at anytime after
the egg incident?"

Cormac looked baffled and a little but startled. "Yeah, two months after the dare, just as soon as I'd
stopped being sick. It was a Hogsmeade weekend so I cut it there."

Snape's hand shot out and plucked a hair from the boy's head, ignoring the yelp, as he stirred it into
another sample then tested it. The test sample turned a bubbling, virulent red indicating the
transformation from health draught to poison. "Mr. McLaggan you may have just assisted me in
saving Miss Granger's life."

He moved into a flurry of motion, getting down his rare gold cauldron and several ingredients to
create an antidote, "What you consume, especially those of toxic variety, shows up in the hair days
to months after consumption in trace amounts. Take a message to Poppy, tell her I may have an
antidote soon."

Rubbing his stinging scalp, Cormac looked at Snape with wide eyes. He'd actually been helpful?
Huh, he couldn't recall that happening before. "I'll run and tell her straight away. Bye Sir." Cormac
turned on his heel and rushed out of the dungeon lap, practically flying up the stairs to the infirmary.

Harry was still sitting at Hermione's side when he heard McLaggan's voice speaking to Poppy, the medi-witch asking intent questions for details and he swallowed when he heard that Snape was close to finding an antidote. He leaned his head close to Hermione's, murmuring to her, "You hear that love. You'll be back with us soon, just keep hanging on."

Poppy felt as if she had a little more spring in her step after the Gryffindor boy had delivered the message from Snape. Oh how she hoped that it was the truth because as the days passed, so did the chances that Hermione Granger would wake up at all. She hadn't been able to get Harry to move from her side, it was a struggle even getting the boy to eat. Soon she would have to start worrying about his health as well.

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Down in his lab Snape opened his most secretive stores and took out the vial that held a vital ingredient only to grit his teeth and snarl as he saw it was empty. He'd forgotten to get it refilled last year before the old bastard had disappeared. He cast a stasis charm on the cauldron and stalked out, heading for the infirmary, careful not to make a loud noise as it was nearly midnight and he didn't wish to wake Potter. Especially not if Poppy's stores had none of the necessary ingredient. He crept into her store room and opened the magical lock then stared at the empty vial. "Damn." It was a whisper with heavy weight in it.

"What's wrong Severus?" Poppy's voice was just a whisper as she leaned against the doorway, nightgown and heavy dressing gown on. She'd heard Severus even though he was light on his feet. Poppy had a feeling she would be on edge for as long as Miss. Granger was under Stasis in her infirmary. She could see from the potions master body language that there would be no good news.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, "You and I are both out of phoenix tears and I can not complete the antidote without them." Getting tears from a phoenix was difficult as they were only ever shed willingly and couldn't be wrung from the birds like you could sneak up and pluck a feather. To date only one phoenix had produced tears that could be purchased and that phoenix was hiding with it's master.

"Oh." Poppy sounded forlorn. "I suppose we got a bit spoiled with Dumbledore and Fawkes in the building. I didn't even know I was out of tears." She pulled her dressing gown tighter around her body, as if she was very, very cold.

"I'll be flooing my associates, someone is bound to have enough somewhere." The question was what it would take to get them to part with the tears. In four days time the stasis charm would unravel and it would be too late so he'd need to begin calling them now. "Go back to bed Poppy. Potter will need you in top form if he continues driving himself into the ground as he is now."

"No, I don't think I can go back to bed now." She shook her head sadly. "I will owl some of my medic friends, see if they have phoenix tears in stock, Perhaps by some miracle one of them does." She reached out and petted Severus' arm before going back to her room to start her letters.

Severus nodded and made his way back out of the infirmary, pausing to look briefly at Potter, sleeping with his hand around Granger's and his head on her bedside, then he was on his way. He had no time to waste.

Harry lifted his head once the footsteps faded and looked at Hermione's pale, drawn face and swallowed. He got up and pressed a kiss to her brow, whispering, "You keep fighting love. I'll be
back soon."

He then got up and ran on silent feet to the Chamber library, giving Myrtle a wave. The ghost had come by to check up on him several times while he'd sat with Hermione and he appreciated it. He drew his wand and called out to summon every book the library had with knowledge on phoenixes.

He could write Dumbledore he supposed. He wasn't sure how, probably the child of one of his few remaining supporters, but he'd been finding notes from the old bastard in his freshly laundered clothes all year. He could write Dumbledore, ask him to send Fawkes or some of Fawkes' tears but he didn't trust him.

He didn't trust Dumbledore not to try and trick him by sending false tears nor did he trust him not to do something to the real tears that would kill Hermione faster. He'd consider it as a last resort but for now he'd try and find a way to approach a phoenix on his own and beg it for tears for the potion.
Chapter 60

Chapter by trulywicked

Two days later found him finishing the last rune on the highest flat point of the castle and stepping into the ritual circle. He'd learned more about phoenixes the last couple of days than he thought anyone even knew but out of all of it only one thing could possibly get him the tears for Hermione in time and it was this ritual.

It would summon a phoenix to him and then he'd be judged on his worthiness to perpetrate such an audacity. If he was judged unworthy he'd die, immolated in flame for it. If he was judged worthy he'd be granted a single request from the phoenix that came to the summons.

He lit the silver laurel powder in the silver goblet he'd found in the room of lost things and took up the silver athame. As the sun began to crest the horizon he slashed his palm open right across the spell mark scars from his fifteenth birthday and put his magic into the incantation as his blood dripped into the white flames of the burning powder, "Ad me o avis lucis. Pellentesque ut rogaret coram me vobis."

There was a flash of fire as bright and blinding as a lightning bolt and when it subsided there was a large Phoenix, its plumage bright blue and silver looking at Harry with a cocked head, electric blue eyes unblinking. "Who are you human and what makes you think you're worthy enough to summon me?"

"The girl I love is dying," his jaw flexed and he swallowed thickly, "she was poisoned and though my potions Professor can make an antidote he's missing an ingredient. Phoenix tears. I called you to ask you, to beg you, for those tears. Please, Hermione means more to me than anything else in this world, please may I have some of your tears for her?"

"Are you sure that is truly what you want? You have one wish and I could give you anything. Your little brother for example, I could remove the bond tied to his life, he'd be reborn by the Phoenix, free from any curse or bond." The Phoenix cocked its head in the other direction, all attention still on Harry.

"The girl I love is dying," his jaw flexed and he swallowed thickly, "she was poisoned and though my potions Professor can make an antidote he's missing an ingredient. Phoenix tears. I called you to ask you, to beg you, for those tears. Please, Hermione means more to me than anything else in this world, please may I have some of your tears for her?"

Harry's heart made a hiccup and twisted for an instant as he imagined Orion free from Dumbledore and the lycanthropy but then again he'd be reborn. All the effort to control his wolf, everything that made him who he was now, would be gone. He'd be a blank slate, not the Orion they knew. Some things would be the same Harry knew but he'd be an infant and Pansy would be stuck waiting another eternity for him. He shook his head, a tear of his own escaping, "I'd love for Orion to be free but he'd be a baby, have to grow up all over again and Hermione would die. Orion would kill me if I didn't kill myself. Please, just the tears that's all I ask."

"I have seen into your heart little human, it is strong and worthy." The trilling voice softened as the Phoenix came nearer, seeking perch on Harry's shoulder. "Your wish is granted, my tears are yours."
Harry shivered with relief as the oddly light weight of the phoenix settled on his shoulder. He reached into his pocket, "Thank you. I brought a vial, in case you agreed," he pulled the pure crystal vial out, hand shaking in relief. Hermione would be saved now. He was pretty sure she'd be a bit miffed at him hearing what he'd risked but he could take her being angry as long as she was alive.

"Hold still, the tears will not do any good on the floor, I do not cry on command often so you better take use of this little human." The Phoenix sounded more amused than anything as it settled better on Harry's shoulder and tilted its head over the vial, letting fat, crystalline tears drop into it. Once it was done, the Phoenix seemed to come to a decision and instead of moving off Harry's shoulder it leaned in and nipped at Harry's soft neck, drawing a tiny drop of blood.

Harry's other shoulder jerked, though he was careful not to unsettle the phoenix's perch or drop the vial. "Um, what was that for if I may ask?"

"I am young for my species but compared to you little human I am very, very old. In all my years I have never met a human worth bonding with. A Phoenix's power is only truly completed through a bond. I've chosen you as my human."

Harry's jaw dropped and he carefully stoppered the vial, slipping it securely into his pocket, as shock rolled through him. "I...don't know what to say aside from, I'm honored and thank you. I'll do my best to treat you with the respect you deserve, if I ever falter on that, feel free to smack me with a wing or something. Hedwig does it all the time...oooh boy she is not gonna be a happy owl." He swallowed and began dismantling the ritual circle, "What name do you prefer to be called? Saying 'hey you' is hardly respectful."

"Call me 'hey you' even once and you'll face worse than a wing to the face." The Phoenix fluffed its feathers. "I am Neptune and why would your owl be upset? I am not stealing you away."

Harry smiled a bit, feeling hopeful for the first time since Hermione had collapsed, "She's a little possessive, especially when it comes to other creatures of a feathered variety. Though she might be more accepting of you Neptune." He vanished the final rune and stood up, bandaging his hand, "The others have been post owls and one veela," he almost shuddered remembering Fleur's introduction to Hedwig. It had not gone well.

"Most other birds shun veelas, they are not considered all bird with one foot in each world." If a bird could shrug than that was what Neptune was doing. "To me though, it simply sounds as if you have a very spoilt owl. I have no wish to inch in on whatever your relationship is."

Harry nodded, "Maybe she is spoiled but she was my first real friend that I could talk to about anything and has been there when I've needed her, through my worst times," he carefully climbed back into the castle and began walking briskly to Snape's office, "and she put up with the bloody cage with minimal distress so I figure she's deserved a little spoiling."

He reached the dungeons and knocked on the potion master's office door. He hoped Snape wouldn't have a heart attack seeing him outside his door with a phoenix on his shoulder, and a blue one at that. He knew everyone had been looking for him since he'd slipped out of the infirmary, and he had been avoiding them wonderfully.

The door was jerked back, revealing the disheveled and royally pissed off Snape, "Who the hell is-Potter! Do you have any idea how-" his voice ground to a halt and black eyes stared at the phoenix on Harry's shoulder the color temper had brought to his face draining slowly.

Before Snape could get another word out, Harry pressed the vial of phoenix tears into his hand,
"I'll explain later, after Hermione's okay, but very short story: this is Neptune, those are his tears."

Severus snapped out of his shocked stupor and looked down at the vial before jerking his head in a sharp nod, "Two hours Potter. Go inform Poppy and, as I believe Lupin is looking over Miss Granger, face the music." He slammed the door in Harry's face.

Neptune's trill sounded very much like an amused chuckle as Harry stared at the closed door before moving up the stairs to the infirmary.

Poppy looked like a shadow of herself, she looked twenty years older than she was. She hadn't got a single positive response to all the letters she'd sent out and on top of everything Harry had gone missing as well. Poppy was a woman of action and she loathed the fact that there wasn't something she could do for Miss Granger.

Remus sat by Hermione's bed, speaking softly to the still girl about all that had happened during the week. He doubted that she could hear him but it made him feel better.

Harry slipped in quietly and looked at the medi-witch and Remus, neither of whom had noticed him yet. He walked, as quietly as he could over to where Madam Pomfrey was fixing the sheets on an empty cot and gently touched her arm.

Turning around, Poppy's eyes widened at the sight of Harry and then even more at the sight of the bird on his shoulder. "Harry! Where have you been? The castle has been turned upside down in looking for you."

Remus looked up, locking amber eyes on Harry but he didn't say anything.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck, pretty certain he looked at least as bad as Snape had, since he'd not actually slept in all the time he'd been chasing phoenix tears, "I heard you and Professor Snape, in your potion storage space, and well," he gestured quietly to Neptune, "You know me. I had to do something."

Poppy sighed deeply. "I do know you Mr. Potter, I know you well enough to know that most of the time you have to do something it ends up here with you in one of the beds."

She eyed him with sharp yes. "You look well on your way there this time too. I know Professor Snape and I know that even with his brilliance, it will take him a couple of hours to ready the antidote. You Mr. Potter are to get in bed right this instant and sleep until we are ready to wake Miss Granger up. I do not want to hear even a single protest. What will Miss Granger say if she wakes up only to have you pass out on her?"

"Oh round about the same thing she's going to do in any case I imagine." He tugged on his hair, "Can I push a cot over next to her?"

Stern eyes softened a little. "Yes, you can push a cot close." Poppy did watch him closely though until he was in a cot right next to Granger's. The strange blue phoenix perching on the frame of the cot, trilling softly.

Harry turned on his side, his hand reaching out to cover Hermione's, and he met Remus' eyes over her, hearing Madam Pomfrey's footsteps retreating and giving them privacy. "I'm sorry for worrying you. I just heard and sprung into action and didn't stop moving until-," he closed his eyes and brought Hermione's hand to his cheek, "I couldn't be still, and I couldn't face anyone. If I did I'd break down and there wasn't time for me to break down."

"I understand Harry, believe me I do. You might want to prepare yourself for facing Orion and
Sirius though. My boys don't handle worry all that well." Remus shifted in his chair, staying to watch over both Hermione and Harry.

"I know. Well Ri'll be wild but I'm not too sure about Sirius," Harry opened his eyes again, "I think he'll understand too, he almost lost you and Aurora last winter so he'll understand. I'm more worried about McGonagall, she's going to skin me alive and Hermione's going to salt the remains," he kissed his girlfriend's hand. "Before I nod off I'll introduce you to my new friend. Remus this is Neptune, Neptune this is Remus, basically my second father."

Neptune inclined his head to Remus and trilled a little song.

"Only you Harry, only you go missing and come back not only with the thing needed to heal Hermione but with a Phoenix familiar as well." Remus couldn't help but smile. "Sleep now, before Poppy comes over and boxes both of our ears."

"Kay. You'll wake me when Snape gets here with the antidote?" Harry scooted closer to Hermione automatically.

'I'll wake you, promise." Remus assured him and crossed his feet at his ankles as he settled down to wait.

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Sirius entered the infirmary, pausing at the sight that greeted him. There, on a cot next to Hermione, was the little bastard they'd been spending the past two days looking for, a rare blue phoenix watching over him. He strode over and handed Aurora to his husband, "Alright, when did the little shit show up?"

"About an hour ago." Remus replied and nuzzled Aurora's plump cheek before looking up at his husband. "Look at the featherduster sleeping on top of Harry's bed. Then you can see what Harry's been doing."

"You're going to refuse to let me be petty and pissed aren't you?" He leaned down to kiss Remus. "I get it, he's still a little shit for worrying us though."

"Mmmhmm, you can tell him all about his little shitiness once Hermione is out of danger and Harry doesn't look like a living dead anymore." Remus tilted his head back and pressed his lips against Sirius' again.

He hummed and smiled against Remus' mouth, "Don't think I won't Moony."

"I have no idea, apparently Neptune, the phoenix, has bonded himself to Harry though, as his familiar." Remus watched Aurora give a gurgling chuckle as he tickled her belly. "I have a feeling I will get a whole lot more gray hairs when I find out what he did."

Sirius shook his head, "I suppose I'd best sent a Patronus round to the troops so he only has to tell it once do you think?"

Remus nodded. "Yeah, a Patronus or mirror call, either would work. Try to hold the gang back a little until Severus has been here with the antidote. Harry needs every minute of sleep he can get before then." He looked at the couple in the cots. "I wonder if he realizes that Hermione will be stuck in here at least another week. Her body took quite some damage before she was put under stasis and the stasis spell itself will leave her stiff and aching for days."
Sirius took out his wand, "I'm sure he does and considering how he looks right now Poppy'll probably strap him to his cot for the duration as well." He cast his patronus, the first since getting out of Azkaban, and promptly fell off the chair arm when he saw, instead of a stallion, a familiar wolf.

Remus blinked, looked at the silvery wolf bounding away and then at his husband, sprawled on the floor, a slow beaming smile spreading across his face. "Have I told you today how very much I love you?"

"It might have been mentioned," He didn't bother to get up and instead leaned his head on Remus' knee, "Have I told you how much I love you back?"

"I might have heard something like that yes, if I recall correctly." He held their daughter with one arm and placed his free hand in Sirius' hair, stroking gently. Unfortunately the soft touches turned into sharp tugs as Aurora's tiny, spit sticky hand found its way to Sirius' hair as well, tugging at the silky strands with all her might.

Sirius winced but chuckled, "Easy there sweetheart, Papa's hair is attached to him," from the enthusiastic yank he'd guess that she didn't really care as it was repeated.

That was how the 'pride' and Minerva found them, Harry passed out next to Hermione, a phoenix watching over them, and Remus trying to coax his husband's hair out of their daughter's grip. Minerva cocked a brow and turned a pair of cots into several chairs, going to sit down in one before speaking quietly, "I have a feeling that this will be a long story once Miss Granger awakes."

"Probably though it can be said pretty short and to the point." Luna sat sideways on Ron's lap, leaning her head on his shoulder. "Harry obviously found the old ritual about calling forth a Phoenix. Also obviously since he is here and not burned to a crisp, he was found worthy and got his wish. I am not sure how the phoenix ended up bonded with him but since it's Harry, nothing is impossible." She smiled serenely at her Headmistress.

Several people choked at that and Sirius ran his hand over his face, "Ritual? Burnt to a crisp? Calling forth a phoenix? If I didn't understand so bloody well the whys I'd wake him up just to kick his bum across Hogwarts."

Ron shook his head and held Luna tighter, "Forget it Snuffles. Hermione's going to do all the kicking needed."

Minerva shook her head, "I do believe that we should just take this as a matter of course. Mr. Potter would give his life for Miss Granger, as she would for him. The rest is to be worked out between them."

"I believe it will be worked out too, rather loudly if Hermione'll get in form." Ginny would be sending her own hexes Harry's way for scaring her but she knew why he'd done it. She would have done exactly the same had it been Neville.

Pansy found a perch and crossed her legs, "Professor Snape will get her back to nattering away on elf rights soon enough Flicker," she eyed a crack in her nail polish, "of course you know I mean that in the kindest way possible for a Slytherin."

Sirius snorted, "That was almost gushing."

"I'm almost a teeny bit teary eyed here." Blaise wiped at his eyes. "Really Darling, you're going soft." He blew Pansy an air kiss.
Orion rolled his eyes, Pansy had feelings but she was anything but soft. "The only marshmallow here is you Blaise and you know it."

Sirius breathed a sigh of relief when Remus finally managed to get their daughter's hands out of his hair and moved to sit back up on the arm of his chair, tying his hair back before he leaned down to kiss him on the cheek, "Thanks love." They all settled into wait, listening to the Slytherins bickering back and forth until Snape came striding in, robes flapping, a vial of shimmering golden potion in one hand and his hair sticking up worse than Harry's did. Sirius murmured lowly to his husband, "He is never getting rid of the name 'Sir Hedgehog' now, ever."

Remus had to smile at that because Sirius was right, Severus would be stuck with that nickname now for the rest of his life. He watched Poppy rush over to Severus' side so he handed Aurora to Sirius and walked to wake Harry up. He had promised after all.

Harry was awake the instant Remus touched his shoulder, green eyes snapping open as he sat up with a jerk. His eyes immediately found Snape and caught on the potion in his hand, "It worked?"

Severus looked at him, raising a supercilious eyebrow, "Yes Mr. Potter, now move out of our way."

Before anyone could scold Snape for his tone, Harry was off his cot and pushing it back to its original position and scrambling out of the way, a blue phoenix perched on his shoulder as he went to stand next to Malfoy, figuring him to be the safest bet right now. He looked over at Remus and Sirius and gave their questioning looks a crooked smile, "I'd join you three but my hands are covered in silver dust."

Remus would have asked just why Harry's hands were silver covered but right now that wasn't really an important question. He appreciated that Harry kept his distance from Aurora though, since she was still so small.

Poppy walked over to Hermione's cot, pulling the still girl up against her so that her head was up and so Severus could pour the antidote in her the second the two of them cancelled the stasis charm. Everything now had to happen quickly because once the spell was gone they had seconds to make it work.

Severus nodded and they began unraveling the stasis charm. As soon as it was gone and Hermione began turning bluer again, he was tipping the antidote into her mouth and rubbing her throat to make her swallow.

Harry's hands fisted hard enough to leave bloody crescents in his palms when Hermione's skin grew almost translucently pale, he could see the veins stark against her skin, and her breathing stuttered then stilled for several agonizing seconds before she sucked in a sharp breath, like a free-diver coming up for air and her skin began getting color back.

Sucking air until she choked on it and started to cough desperately instead, Hermione looked around the infirmary with startled eyes. She couldn't remember anything after the Great Hall. There were plenty of eyes looking at her but only one pair mattered and she sought out their vivid green color instantly.

Harry took a halting step forward, pausing only to see if it was alright and once he received a nod from Snape he was running to her side, cupping her face in his hands, "I'm here, you're okay love." He pressed a kiss to her brow, gripping control tight, not wanting to break down in front of everyone, "You're okay."
Ron made a soft sound between relief and a choked sob and leaned his head down against Luna's. He'd been so terrified he was going to lose one of his best friends and his favorite sparring partner. "Thank Merlin."

Sirius wrapped his arms around both Remus and their daughter, "Thank Merlin indeed."

Poppy let out a breath she hadn't been aware she was holding as Miss Granger colored up nicely. She sent Severus a grateful look before jumping in and running diagnostics and taking stock of Granger's strained and twitching muscles. This was work she could do and she was so happy.

Ginny was crying from the release of days of stress. Hermione would be fine, she would be fine. "What happened?" Hermione's voice was scratchy and rough and she had to cough several times to get the words out.

Harry took the cup Snape handed him with a straw in it and brought it to Hermione's lips so she could drink, "Vane," the name was spat out, "tried to brew Amortentia and bollocksed it up." He stroked her cheek with his fingers, needing to touch her, to reassure himself that she was warming up, "She dosed you trying to get you to fall for McLaggan and leave me."

Behind him Ron and Orion's joint opinion was eloquent and comprised of very bad language.

Hermione sucked up cool water greedily, feeling so thirsty. She couldn't believe what she was hearing, who would do that? Who would do something like that just to get the boy they liked? From the looks of the people around the bed and from the ache she felt, Vane had to have more than bollocksed up. "Ew, it would take more than a potion to get me to fall for McLaggan." Hermione shuddered and winced when the shudder brought pain.

Harry ignored Madam Pomfrey's look and was up on the cot behind her, supporting her body with his own in a flash, Neptune flapping to the railing once more, "Easy. Your body's been through a lot this past week."

"Indeed it has," Minerva stood up and walked over, brushing her hand over Hermione's brow before making a decision, "I believe that you and Mr. Potter have earned a little privacy," she looked at the others in the room, "explanations, discussions, and longer well wishes will have to wait until this evening at the earliest."

Seeing Headmistress McGonagall's stern expression, no one was in a particular mood to object. Remus had to chuckle when Minerva practically took Severus by the ear and ordered him to bed and stay there until he was fully rested.

Many hugs, well wishes and see you later's later, Hermione and Harry were alone, Poppy was in her quarters, taking a small nap until it was time to check on Hermione again.

"What really happened, how long have I been here and by Merlin's painted toenails. How and when did you get a phoenix?" Hermione was leaning against him, soaking up his warmth since she couldn't seem to stop freezing.

"That is basically what happened, from what I could gather Vane mistook another heart shaped seed for silphium and when she added McLaggan's hair it created a fast acting poison instead of a love potion. I'm not sure of the details, I mostly overheard stuff as I was here."

He pulled a blanket up around her. "You've been here for five days. Neptune," he paused and his arms tightened, "Snape didn't have any phoenix tears, no one did, and it was a necessary ingredient for to antidote. Without them no antidote and the stasis spell keeping the poison from...well it only..."
lasted a week. The last two days I've been researching phoenixes and I found a ritual that would summon one so I could beg tears from him. It worked and Neptune chose to enter a familiar bond with me."

It was a very strange feeling, being told that you almost died. It was something she couldn't really focus on, it was too large to be real and she didn't want to look too closely there and fall apart. "Harry...No ritual that calls forth a magical creature gives you something for nothing. What did you risk?" She turned her head so she could peer up at her boyfriend and the beautiful bird on the railing.

"It doesn't matter." He felt her tense to begin arguing, "No Hermione, it doesn't matter. You were dying," he forced the word out of a constricting throat, his arms tightening around her, eyes squeezing shut and his head bending to bury his face in her shoulder, "and I could feel my soul dying with you. The cost didn't matter because if you die, I'm as good as dead anyway."

"I want to argue with that, I want to scream and rage and quite frankly hit you but I can't." She rubbed her cheek against his temple. "I would do the exact same thing for you. I would tear the world apart if it meant I could save you when you needed it." Hermione let out a choked sob. "Don't do it again though, I need you to live and be the amazing man you are no matter what happens."

His arms tightened and silent tears finally began falling, soaking into her hospital nightgown. "I can't promise that, not if your life is on the line. I can promise that I'll never go that far for anyone else but for you Hermione...nothing matters if you're not there."

"Oh Harry." Not caring about the ache in her body, Hermione twisted fully so that she could hug him fully, wrap her arms around him as she was crying too. "I'm here though Harry, I am still here, you saved me. I'm here and I love you and I'll never, ever leave as long as it's my choice. I love you."

"I was so scared," his words hitched as a sob built and was swallowed, "you were so pale and could barely breathe and it felt like someone had a grip on my heart and was squeezing and twisting. I love you so much, I'm nothing if you're not okay. I could take anything else in the world, you leaving me for McLaggan, going to America, whatever just so it meant you were here, in this world, safe and happy."

"I feel the same thing, I can handle anything, as long as I know you're safe and where you want to be. But Harry...This is where I am happy, right here with you. You are the one who makes me happy, makes my life worthwhile." She hugged him tighter, pressing kisses to his hair and temples. "I am yours Harry, all of me...And please, no more mentionings of me and McLaggan, I loathe the berk. I have the best, why would I want anything else?"

He gave a choked laugh and lifted his head to catch her mouth with his in a brief, soft, sweet kiss. "I was coming up with worst case scenario for who." He rested his forehead against hers, eyes closed, and kept his arms around her.

"Definitely worst case scenario and nothing that will ever happen." She let out a deep breath, her lungs still stinging but that was okay as long as she could breathe. Hermione leaned close and simply let herself bask in Harry's closeness.

He held her, relaxing after five days of tension and worry and gut-wrenching fear, the feel of her petite frame against his soothing him until he fell asleep, his arms still locked around her, his face slipping down to bury in the crook of her neck.
A few hours later after lunch he was still asleep when Ron snuck in, bringing a couple sandwiches and chocolate frogs. He looked at Harry wrapped around her and shook his head, "Hey Mione."

"Hi Ron." Hermione smiled at her best friend, keeping still so Harry could keep sleeping. "How are you?" She noticed the shadows under Ron's eyes as well and she felt horrible for being the one who'd put them there.

"Alright. Now that himself there has come out and saved the day," he gave her a smile and settled into the chair by her cot after setting the tray on the bedside table. "It wasn't quite so bad when he was here, sitting beside you. Then it was, 'yeah Hermione's in trouble but it can't be too bad since Harry's staying there with her' but when he disappeared...well that sent us all into panic since if he disappeared we knew it had gone from bad to fucking awful."

He rolled his shoulders, "And it was really bad. He almost hit Vane. Seriously, his hand was up and about to smack her cross her face when she told what she'd done."

Hermione blinked at that because Harry was the gentlest person she knew, for him to lose his temper enough almost to slap someone, it had to be bad. "Poor Harry." She pet his hair gently, as much as she could since he was lying on one of her arms.

"Vane isn't safe yet though. She made Harry hurt, she made my friends hurt and she wanted to have me panting after bloody McLaggan, I'm in a good mood to do much more than slap the bint." To Hermione that was what mattered, her loved ones. Of course she didn't want to die and of course she was upset by the pain she was in now but it was the hurt placed on her loved ones that angered her the most.

"She might be getting expelled, even if it had been Amortentia she'd still be up for expulsion as it's illegal. The Board and McGonagall's decision I think hinges on you two." He looked at Harry's slack features, relaxed in a way that he only ever was with Hermione, "He needs you."

Hermione was quiet for a while, continuing to pet his hair. "I'm starting to realize that Ron. I've always been certain that I'm not good enough for him. That one day he would find the perfect girl that up there in his league and I would have to let him go. Things are different now. It's a little bit scary, having that kind of power over Harry but I will never ever abuse it. I need him too. Always will. I love him in a way that indescribable and there's nothing I wouldn't do to keep him happy."

"I know that. I just wanted to make sure you knew how important you are to him. You're always so smart that sometimes you let your brain over think what your heart knows. I'm just glad it's you who's got him in the palm of your hand. No one else would be able to keep from abusing that power but you, you'll claw the face off anyone who tries to manipulate him." Ron grinned at her and got up to kiss her cheek, "Mum's going to try and convince Pomfrey to let you go to the Burrow with us. I think she'll manage it so long as you keep to the bed rest bit."

"Oh I hope Molly brings out the stubborn, I don't want to be here on my own over Christmas." Hermione knew she should just be happy to be alive and all that rot but she really did dislike hospitals and infirmaries. Spending months as petrified when she was twelve hadn't helped at all with her dislike. Of course it had been Harry who saved her that time too.

He snorted, "Even if Mum can't manage it do you really think himself will let you stay here alone? You know better." He gave her a smile, "So if you have to stay, expect the redheaded horde to descend upon Hogwarts since Mum wouldn't let you two get out of the Weasley Christmas if you wanted to."
"You're sweet and you're right but I wouldn't let him stay here. I might not have a choice when I'm poisoned and under stasis but I would never let Harry spend a Christmas here now that he no longer needs to." She smiled at Ron. "Believe me, I can be very, very stubborn."

"And that would be my cue to go tell Mum to work harder on Madam Pomfrey because that's one battle I definitely don't want to get caught in the middle of. Get some rest, actual sleep type rest, because the more you rest, the better you'll be and the more likely Pomfrey will let you go."

"Yes Daddy." Hermione smiled again and snuggled closer to Harry, her hand going from his hair to cup his neck as she burrowed against him. "Thank you for coming to visit Ron."

"Hey you're my friend, course I came to visit and bring lunch. Now I'll get back to the pride and let them know you're resting so they can just wait on visiting themselves til later." He set the chair back where it belonged and gave her a wave before walking out looking forward to some cuddle time with Luna.
Chapter 61

Chapter by trulywicked

Harry literally growled at Bill when he tried to take Hermione from him, "My girl, I get to carry her." He smiled at Fleur when she laughed and pulled her fiance away scolding him for even trying, and continued to carry Hermione to the room she'd share with Ginny over the Hols. He set her gently down on the bed and sat on the edge of it, "I know it's driving you round the twist being fussed over and carried everywhere but I don't dare risk Madam Pomfrey's wrath and I certainly don't dare risk Molly's."

"I know," She cupped his cheek. "I'm just going spare here, I can walk on my own and I feel completely fine. Nothing worse than the aches after a hard workout. Thank you for helping to tip the scales and allowing me to come here though." Hermione smiled and swallowed down her irritation had having to stay still all the time.

He turned his head and brushed his lips over the inside of her wrist, "You're welcome," he chuckled when he heard Ginny screech at Charlie over the smell he'd just tracked into the house, "I don't think I want to know what Charlie's covered in right now."

"No, neither do I. Since Blaise is coming I think he won't be smelly for long though, Blaise won't let him since he's very fond of the snuggles." She laughed when she heard Molly's voice add to the scolding Charlie suffered through, ordering her son to the bathroom and then to scrub the floor after himself.

Harry snickered when Charlie passed by Ginny's room on his way to the loo, the language he was using more foul than the smell he was sporting at the moment, "I don't think that's physically possible Charlie!"

"Bugger off brat!"

The bathroom door slammed on Harry's laughter, "I think he's just as crabby as Blaise has been."

"Mmm, yes. I think I want to be in the other end of the house when they do meet up again though. I don't need to be a firsthand witness to that." Hermione leaned back against the pillows, very much irritated that she was still so weak and tired.

Harry scooted a little further down the bed and situated her feet in his lap before he began massaging one leg and foot, "No definitely do not need to hear or see what they'll get up to, matter of fact we should remind Charlie to use silencing wards upon pain of pranked."

"Oh yes, that sounds like a splendid reminder to me." Hermione nodded. "Blaise though, the little git would probably think it was a lark to make the rest of the house uncomfortable." She wiggled her toes and hummed him pure pleasure at what Harry was doing with her sore muscles.

"No doubt, which is why I'll be threatening Charlie and not his cuddle bunny." He heard Ginny yelling again, this time at Bill and Fleur to get a room, and shook his head. "Neville withdrawal."

"Poor Gin, though the withdrawal started early, they kissed each other goodbye yesterday." Hermione let her body relax as Harry continued massage her foot and leg. "She gets mean when she's in longing though, I do hope she goes and have herself a mirror meeting soon."

"Agreed, very much agreed," he looked up when Ron came in, a red handprint on his cheek,
"Ouch. Should I ask?"

Ron rubbed his cheek, "I really didn't do anything, not a single crack. I just asked her if she wanted help with the carrots so she could finish and give Nev a mirror call sooner and then she smacked me. Mum's reading her a riot act right now for it."

"That was going too far, she deserves one of Molly's lectures for that." Hermione, picked up her wand and sent a healing spell at Ron's cheek, making the swelling go down. "Are we sure there's no part wolf in her as well? She's behaving like Orion did last year."

Ron sighed, "Thanks Mione. Like Ri did last year or like Parkinson did last Christmas. Either way she's in a nasty mood and I'm staying out of it. I think she's worried Nev's Gran is going to try and force a betrothal contract between him and the granddaughter of some Irish friend of hers."

"She can't do that, Lady Longbottom can't do that to them." Hermione could feel herself getting worked up. "She knows that Neville and Ginny are together. She can't do something that will tear them apart."

Ron shook his head, "She might. She's definitely a member of the old guard that believes matches should be socially advantageous so she might try. Thing is, Neville would have to sign off on it since she's his Grandmother and both his parents are still alive. So long as they're alive she can't have a betrothal contract go through without Neville signing off on it. There's a bunch of old pureblood laws and mess behind it but that's the basic gist."

"Nothing to worry about then." Harry pressed the heel of his hand into the side of Hermione's calf, making the muscle relax. "Neville'd throw himself off the Astronomy Tower before signing any betrothal contract that doesn't have Ginny as the girl."

Hermione nodded and once again relaxed in bliss under Harry's hands. "Neville would never agree, still it's unfair of Lady Longbottom to even start betrothal procedures when she knows that Neville's feelings are somewhere else."

Ron lifted a shoulder. The pureblood world was often unfair, "Anyway it's got Gin worked up and that combined with missing him and whatever else makes for explosions to be had. I don't blame her really. I'd go mental if I was in her shoes."

"I would to, one good about being muggle born, I can choose for myself and I chose the best. It's not right playing with lives that way. Poor, poor Ginny, this shouldn't happen, not now not ever but not now at the Holidays."

Harry nodded. "No it shouldn't. Ginny should be able to just have a good time being home with her family and not scared her boyfriend's grandmother is going to bully him into accepting a betrothal contract with another girl. I-" he broke off when the door opened and Ginny stepped in.

Ron opened his mouth, "Hey Gin-Gin Mum wasn't too h-oof!" between one second and the next he went from where he was to flattened against the wall, his little sister hugging him in a death grip and sniffling apologies into his favorite Cannons jersey. He ran his hand down her hair. "Hey don't cry Gin. You can hit me all you want you know, if it'll make you feel better."

"It doesn't." Ginny shook her head violently, her face still buried in his chest. "It only makes me feel worse after the fact. I really am sorry, you didn't deserve to get slapped, you hadn't done anything and I'm so, so sorry." A new storm of tears were unleashed and she gripped her brother tightly.
Hermione felt so bad for Ginny, she could only imagine how distraught she would be if anything like this happened to her.

Ron rocked his sister back and forth. "Hey, it's okay I understand you know. You should remember that Neville loves you, just as much as I love Luna. He'd never sign some stupid contract that would make him lose you." He rubbed her back comfortingly.

Harry spoke up quietly, "That's right. Nev's not the timid kid he used to be, desperate for his Gran's approval. He's taken on the people who drove his parents mad and he knows he's got a solid place of worth with us. He's part of the 'pride' and as much as he loves his Gran, she's not the most important person to him anymore. You are Ginny."

"He's the most important person to me too." Ginny wiped her eyes on Ron's shirt. "Neville doesn't get his Majority until summer though and even though he can resist I don't want him to have to even have the discussion, to have to disagree with the family that he has left. He has us but Lady Longbottom raised him. I don't want him to feel bad."

"We know Gin but he wouldn't want you to feel bad either." Harry began massaging Hermione's other leg. "And truth be told I don't think Augusta Longbottom has been much of a guardian for him."

She shook her head. "She hasn't. Mostly she's tried to mold Neville into becoming his father and when it hasn't worked she's shown her disappointment in him very pointedly. Neville thought it had gotten better last summer for a while. But now it's worse again." Ginny and Neville spoke a lot about everything, including his family situation.

Ron gave her a squeeze. "Thing to remember then Gin, is that it won't be you making Neville choose. His Grandmother will be. She can accept his choice or not but if she doesn't, he'll tell her to go stuff it. There's only so many times you can poke a sleeping bear before it takes a swipe at you after all."

"I know." She hugged Ron one more time before going over to her bed and sinking down on it. "I just get so bloody scared, scared that I'll be forced to lose Neville just when I have realized how incredibly wonderful and amazing he is."

Hermione stretched out a hand across the beds and took Ginny's hand in her own, squeezing it gently. "It'll be alright Gin, Neville is totally devoted to you. At least Neville's grandmother isn't trying to get you panting after McLaggan."

Harry wrinkled his nose. "And let's hope she never does, the idiot swallowed doxy eggs on a dare for Merlin's sake. What kind of moron does that?" His hand stroked Hermione's leg gently. "I'm still trying to figure out why I let you talk me into requesting permanent detention for Vane instead of letting the Board give her the boot by the way Hermione."

"What Vane did will never go away, it's on her permanent record and people don't forget. My part in the whole thing will be forgotten but her brewing a forbidden potion in an attempt to snatch the Boy Who Lived for herself, that will stick in the memories of everyone. She's going to have an awful life. Unless she moves abroad her life will be horrible from here on out. She is going to need a proper education and a degree that she has graduated. I couldn't bring myself to take that away from her when she has lost almost everything else. Even her family has turned their back on her...I can't forgive her but I can pity her all the same." Hermione reached out with her free hand and placed on top of Harry's on her leg.

He turned his to link their fingers. "You're a better person than me Hermione. She could have
burned for all I cared."

"I'm really not a better person than you, by keeping her at Hogwarts I have probably just prolonged her suffering and teasing. I doubt very much that she's thanking me for it." Hermione looked down at the buttons on her pyjama top. "I just don't want anything more to do with her."

He leaned over her feet and brought her hand to his lips, "Fair enough."

Ron chuckled and poked his sister in the shoulder, "Why don't you get a cool cloth from Mum and press it to your eyes then give Neville a call when it doesn't look like you've been crying anymore? It'll make you feel better."

"You're right. The sad thing with being a redhead though is that I can have the bloody cloth to my face for hours and my eyes will still be all red and weepy. I'll do it anyway though because I really want to speak to Neville." Ginny got up from her bed again and ruffled Ron's hair on her way out.

Ron stuck his tongue out at her before sitting on the corner of her bed, "So who's up for a game of exploding snap?"

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Neville looked at the half crazy stack that was the Burrow and hitched the bag he'd brought with him a bit higher on his shoulder before walking down the lane to the back door. It was five days since the Hols had begun and the morning before Christmas Eve and if he was right Molly should be up and in the kitchen. He went round to the Dutch door at the back and knocked tentatively, hoping he wouldn't have to spend an hour in Arthur's shed if no one was awake yet.

Molly was in the middle of kneading the dough that would make up the breakfast bread when she heard the knock on the door. She opened the upper part and her eyebrows went up when she saw who was on the other side. "My word Neville, what are you doing out and about this early, the sun isn't even up yet."

She opened the rest of the door. "Come in dear lad, come in and have some tea, tell me what this is about." She hurried over to the kettle and poured a nice big cup of tea in a brightly colored cup.

He let her usher him in and coax him to sit down at the table with the tea. "I'm sorry to intrude and I know it's asking a lot but, could I stay through the holidays?" He fiddled with the spoon in his tea.

"I just can't," he closed his eyes and sighed, "Gran wants me to sign that stupid betrothal contract she had drawn up with Tess MacCumhail, wants it so bad she had Tess's Gran bring her for the holidays and keeps pushing us together whenever she can, trying to make Tess catch me alone, and just...anything she can do to force it."

"Oh sweet boy...Of course you can stay here. We've never turned anyone away yet and I'm not about to start with family." Molly walked over and pressed a kiss to Neville's hair. "It's not right for Augusta to put that kind of pressure on you and that's precisely what I'm going to tell her if she comes asking questions. If she's so hot to mingle family lines with the MacCumhail's she can marry the grandfather herself, he's been a widower for the last ten years. Fleur is staying in Percy's room but you can stay with Harry and Ron." She smiled at him. "Are you hungry dearie? I have a batch of fresh rolls in the oven."

"More than you know," he smiled sheepishly, "I just can't keep an appetite when Tess is at the table. She's nice enough I guess but she's so...giggly and blond and covered in pink and glitter
and...it's like someone took Lavender Brown, put her on an extreme diet, rolled her in glitter, and hit her with a dozen cheering charms. Toss in the blatant hints my Gran and hers keep tossing round and it's like having dinner with a niffler someone's trying to get you to kiss and all I could think about is how much I miss Ginny."

Molly made a tutting sound, she would be sure to send Augusta Longbottom a very stern letter later in the day, for upsetting such a sweet child to the point where he even lost his appetite. "Well Ginevra is right upstairs sleeping so you'll see her soon enough. For the record Neville, we already consider you family and we'd be proud to have you as a son in law when the time comes. You are just wee ones yet, you're in no hurry at all."

Molly brought out butter, cheese, ham and half a bacon and broccoli pie that had been left over from yesterday's dinner. Opening the oven, she grabbed three fresh, piping hot rolls from the plate and loaded them up next to Neville. "Eat up love."

"Thank you," he gave her one of his shy smiles, "I don't mind telling you that I want to ask her one day, when we're both ready for that step, and I don't think there'd be a better Mum in law than you." He ducked his blushing face to butter a roll.

"Oh aren't you just a sweetheart?" Molly flushed and pressed more kisses to his hair even as she loaded his plate up with more food, no one was going to feel hungry under her roof. "I'll be finishing the rest of the rolls now so the brood has something to scarf down but just call out if you need anything. The others should be down shortly. At least Charlie and Harry, those two never sleep very late."

He nodded, "Thank you again." He ate at a measured pace then at the sound of footsteps looked up and saw Harry blinking at him in surprise, "Morning Harry."

Harry tilted his head and looked at the food then at the bag at Neville's feet, then at his friend and smiled, "Bunking with me and Ron then?"

"Yeah."

He pat Neville on the back, "Welcome to the insanity. I'll take your bag up and get Charlie to transfigure a trundle for you." He grinned, "How bad by the way?"

Neville rolled his eyes, "The exact opposite of Ginny in just about every way."

Harry laughed, "Alright then." He picked up the bag and started up to his and Ron's room.

In the landing the door to Ginny's room opened and Ginny, still clad in her sleeping shorts and tank top with her red hair all over the place, scuffled out still yawning. Her good morning to Harry ended in a squeak as she looked up and caught sight of her boyfriend. "Neville!" She ran the few steps that separated them and threw herself into his arms. "I can't believe you're here, missed you so much!"

He lifted her up and held her tight, "I missed you too, more than I can say." He kissed the end of her nose, "I had to get out of there. Gran was intolerable and Tess was just ugh." He buried his nose in her hair, breathing in the fresh sweet pea scent of her shampoo, so much better than the cloying rose perfume that clung to Tess like a cloud of toxic fumes.

"She was there, this Tess? She was at Longbottom Hall?" Ginny's eyes narrowed. "Now that you're here I am not going to let you go. You Neville Longbottom, are mine!" She wrapped long, toned legs around his waist and clung to him, arms wrapped tightly around his neck as well.
"All yours my ruby." He sat back down, happy just to be holding her. "I've already asked your Mum if I could stay, I'm bunking with Harry and Ron, and yes she was there. Gran's desperate and thought I'd take a shine to her or be able to be forced into too close quarters. Neither was happening."

Ginny made a soft growl and buried her face in his neck, still wrapped around him like a Koala bear. "The only one you'll be forced into too close quarters with better be me." Okay so she was possessive, who wouldn't be when they had such a fantastic boyfriend as Neville. "I'm glad you're staying here though, best Christmas present ever and even a day early."

He smiled, "I wouldn't need to be forced, not for you."

A throat cleared from the entryway revealing Charlie leaning on the wall with an amused smirk, "Gin don't you think your big brothers might get the wrong idea seeing you over your boyfriend's lap and decide to defend their little sister's honor?"

"I'd tell my brothers to piss off and go mind their own business. If you keep up with this strain of speech, I will get back to you this afternoon when a certain incubus arrives." She looked up from Neville's broad shoulder to glare at her brother. "I am precisely where I am supposed to be, perhaps a little underdressed but I'm not going to move just to put clothes on."

"Ah but I don't have any honor to defend so I can keep poking at you then abscond with Blaise free of retribution." He jumped when a sharp finger poked him in his back.

Harry prodded him again, "You're blocking the way to the food Charlie, and trust me Ginny would find a way to ruin your time with Blaise if you don't stop being a berk. She's in her pajamas not naked, and cuddling with Nev, whose hands aren't anywhere near her curvier parts," he nodded at Neville's hands splayed on Ginny's back, "so drop it and move."

"Hey it's my brotherly duty."

"And if you don't move I'll be considering it my duty to get the twins, Malfoy, Orion, and Parkinson in on punishing you." Harry smirked when Charlie blanched and shifted out of the way so he could head back to the kitchen and help Molly get breakfast finished.

Ginny was content to sit nuzzled against Neville for a long while before looking up and catching his eyes. "Hey...Why aren't your hands anywhere near my curvier parts anyway?"

She smiled and leaned in to kiss him softly before unwinding her long legs from around his waist. "I gave you the perfect opportunity to cop a feel there, got to take advantage." Winking at him she disappeared inside her room again to get some proper clothes on.

"Tease." Hermione said in a low tone from where she was propped up against the pillows reading.

"Oh I'm not teasing," Ginny twisted her hair into a high ponytail and shimmied into a worn pair of jeans. "I'm just making sure that his mind is filled with thoughts of me and not bloody Tess." Ginny wrinkled her nose at the sound of her rival's name.

"He always thinks of you." Hermione turned the page.

"Still, it doesn't hurt to remind him of what he has, I actually wouldn't mind some hand action near my curvier places...Have you seen Neville's hands? They make me shivery just thinking about it."

Charlie's voice called out, "We can hear you Gin and I for one don't want to know!"
Poor Neville was bright red as he finished the meal Molly had dished up for him and proceeded to flee to the kitchen before Charlie could take the piss out of him.

Harry gave him a sympathetic look, "Stay here. Molly will protect us from Charlie taking the Mickey."

"That I will dearies, and Charlie has lived in this house long enough to know that you don't listen in to conversations that are none of your business." Molly gave her second oldest son a piercing look. "Nobody said anything about what you and Blaise did behind the tree last year so you should do well to keep your mouth shut. Here, take this out to the chickens." She handed Charlie a bucket full of bread and corn.

His own cheeks went lobster red and he took the bucket, "Yes Mum." He left to go feed the chickens.

Neville smiled at Molly again and started washing the pot and pans she'd finished with, without being asked, "Thank you." His eyes went to the door as Ron staggered in looking like he'd been trampled by hippogriffs.

Harry grinned, "Yeah Nev, he's pretty much the same as he is in the dorms."

"Huh?" Ron blinked blearily at Neville, "What're you doing here? Not that it's not good to see you."

Neville chuckled, "I escaped Gran and her matchmaking."

Ron's eyes nearly bugged out, "She brought the girl there?"

"Yeah."

"No offense Nev but your Gran's got to be mental going that far. Even my Aunt Muriel canned it when I told her I was in love with Luna and nothing she said or did was going to change that."

"Aunt Muriel can piss off." Surprisingly that was Molly speaking. "She's as batty as they come the old hag and she should know by now that my children are going to marry for love and love alone." She walked over to hand Ron a cup of tea and ruffle his sleep mussed hair.

He gave her a smile, "Thanks Mum," he went to stand beside Harry and Neville, "Mum and Aunt Muriel don't like each other. Mum because Aunt Muriel's an old stick in the mud who's always trying to tell her how to keep her home. Aunt Muriel because Mum does the smart thing and doesn't listen to the old bat." He lifted his tea cup in a toast to his mother.

Harry leaned close and whispered just below Molly's hearing range, "Suuuuuck uuuuuup."

"Oh but Harry, it pays to suck up to this Mum." Molly leaned in close, a wicked smile on her lips showing that she was indeed the mother of six Weasley boys. "Something you'd do well to remember."

He turned and hugged her, "But I don't have to suck up. I love you and can take my lumps when I've earned them, with minimal complaint, and I know you love me so why would I suck up?" He tilted his head and smiled, "No need to."

Ron snickered and sipped at his tea, "Oh he's good."

"Too good, it looks as if I'm going to have to up my game." Ginny narrowed her eyes at her newest
brother before walking over to kiss Neville and dry the plates as he washed them.

Molly just shook her head and hugged Harry back before loading a tray up with breakfast food. "Will you take this up to Hermione, Harry?"

"Of course I will." He picked up the tray and made his way back up the stairs as Neville kissed Ginny back and Ron just rolled his eyes, greeting his sister when she stopped snogging her boyfriend. Harry made a detour to his and Ron's room to get the phoenix food mix Charlie had helped him fix then knocked lightly on the girls' door and stepped in, smiling at Hermione and at Neptune who was perched above her, the both of them looking at each other as if fascinated. "Hungry love?"

"I think the answer is yes...For the both of us." Hermione smiled as Neptune flapped his wings enthusiastically at the mentioning of food. "Thank you." She reached up and kissed Harry's cheek as he placed the tray on her lap. "Has Hedwig forgiven you enough to come when you call now?" As predicted the snowy owl had not been happy at all with Harry's new feathered familiar.

"Not yet but I've a plan for that," Harry clipped the tray of phoenix food on the bedpost for Neptune, running his fingers over the vibrant blue feathers. "Do you want me to go grab my own breakfast and come back up here to eat with you?" He turned his head at the thrilled shriek that echoed downstairs followed by a bang. "Five quid says the twins are here."

"I am not betting against you there." Especially since there was another boom from downstairs followed by Ron cursing. "And yes, I would love it if you ate with me but you don't have to. Spend time with the twins instead. I'm not going anywhere."

"You make it sound like you think I consider it a hardship to eat breakfast with you," he kissed her brow, "I don't but I will see what the terrors are up to and be back later to keep you company while Ginny pulls Neville out to Merlin knows where."

She smiled and watched him leave the room. Only when she knew he was half way downstairs she let the smile slip as she picked at the toast on the tray. Hermione was so over being confined to bed now and she was so tired of keeping the lingering pain from showing on her face. "Just you and I now Nep." She stroked the blue feathers. "Thank you for binding yourself to him, please, please take care of my Harry when I can't."

The phoenix gave a soothing trill and continued eating.

As soon as he stepped back into the kitchen Harry found himself sandwiched between two redheads.

"Harrikins we heard the most amazing thing." Fred grinned at his adopted little brother.

"Now you need to tell us if it is true." George slung an arm over Harry's shoulders and stuck a smiling face right in Harry's space. "Come on, tell us, tell us now."

"What are you going on about? A lot of things happen around me you know," his lips twitched, eyes bright with humor.

"Oh that's just cruel. Gred our little lion's being a tease." Fred slung his arm around Harry's neck and squeezed lightly. "Come on Harry don't leave us in suspense."

Green eyes rolled, "Yes I have a phoenix familiar, no I am not asking him to give anything to you two for your work. You want something from Neptune you can ask him yourself but you'll take no for an answer if he refuses, got it?"
"Oh but Harry, Forge and I can be very, very persuasive when we want to be. Just ask our dragon."
George leaned his chin on Harry's shoulder, wagging his eyebrows as he grinned. "We can't believe you didn't owl us, this is the stuff you need to tell your brothers instantly.

Harry elbowed him. "I was a bit preoccupied with my girlfriend's near death experience and Madam Pomfrey insisting I sleep in the infirmary until the Hols."

Fred's teasing grin faded just a bit, "Hermione's okay though, right?"

"Yeah, she's fine now but it was close and...terrifying," Harry spoke quietly so as not to disturb the rest of the Weasleys as they settled at the table and started dishing up their food.

A freckled hand ruffled his hair. "Yeah I understand."

"Me too." George turned his head on Harry's shoulder and placed a smacking kiss on Harry's neck, just trying to lighten the mood. If something like that had happened to Fred or Draco...George could feel himself trembling just at the thought of something that horrible.

"Eugh! Keep your lips to yourself, or Fred, or Malfoy when he gets here," Harry wiped at his neck and stuck his tongue out at George, giving him a smile and a nod of thanks for breaking the low mood.

Fred grinned and gave George a peck on the lips, chuckling when none of his family so much as raised a hair, "Nothing like the real deal no."

"Perverts," Harry shook his head fondly and went to get his breakfast before everything was picked over by the hyenas.

Fleur smiled and looked up as the skies started to cooperate and flakes of snow began drifting down. It was going to be a white Christmas. She spun round in an elegant pirouette. She loved warm weather but there was something more magical about snow than all that they could do with their wands.

Bill stood in the doorway, watching his fiancee with a warm weight in his stomach. Merlin he loved that girl and he couldn't wait to marry her, to spend the rest of his life at her side, doing everything in his power to keep her happy. She looked like a winter fairy, twirling in the garden, pale blonde hair flowing around her as the snow slowly fell to the ground around her. Fleur was fire and ice and oh so wonderful. Bill couldn't believe that he'd been lucky enough that she'd ever even given him a second glance.

Ron came up behind his brother and gave him a light shove in the shoulder, "Go dance with her, idiot. before the snow gets too heavy and Mum calls you both in."

"What's the world coming to? Taking girl advice from my baby brother?" Bill grinned at Ron but did as his little brother said and walked out in the garden. He caught Fleur around the waist with a large hand and slowly began to dance with her underneath the twirling snowflakes.

Fleur's smile went wider and brighter and she beamed up at Bill, going to her tiptoes to kiss him before continuing to dance. No matter how disastrous the Tri-Wizard Tournament had turned out to
be she would always be grateful for it because it had brought her to Bill. She loved him so much, her heart was held in those big, elegant hands and she wasn't afraid of that. Her Bill could be a bit insensitive at times but she knew he'd never deliberately hurt her or think of her as just 'the veela girl' like so many others did.

"My beautiful winter queen +. More magical and beautiful than Yule itself." Bill kissed her again before picking her up by her narrow waist and twirled her around before lowering her again and kissing away the snowflakes sticking to her lashes.

She laughed happily and looped her arms around his neck, thrilling to the spin.

In the kitchen Arthur was holding his wife from behind and watching the two dancing in the snow with a smile. "Look at our boy there Mollywobbles."

"Makes me think we did something right." Molly leaned back against Arthur, her voice filled with pride and love. "I hope the two of them will still dance in the snow when they've been together as long as we have love."

He kissed the top of her head, "I think they will, we've done a good job with Bill and Fleur is rather nice, when she's not uncomfortable." He chuckled remembering the first few days of friction between the ladies in the house.

"She is yes, and don't give me that chuckle. I had more than reason to make sure she was worthy of our Billy-boy." Molly reached back and pinched Arthur's side. "She is by the way, she's exactly what Bill wants and that makes her perfect."

"I for one am mostly relieved that we won't be going through the testing again with the rest, at least I don't think we will." He noticed the snow starting to come down in harder flurries as Bill and Fleur swayed together, oblivious. "I think you'd best call them in now love."

"Mmm, yes. It wouldn't do to have them catch the sniffles at Christmas." Molly turned her head and kissed Arthur's cheek before moving out of his arms and opened the kitchen door, calling her son and soon to be daughter in law inside.

Fleur blinked, the spell broken, and gave a tinkling laugh as she pulled Bill back inside by the hand, her cheeks pink with the chill of the snow, features alight with joy, "Merci belle mere. I lost track of ze snow."

"Love makes even the coldest day feel like spring." Molly smiled and took their damp cloaks to hang them by the fireplace to dry. "It's still cold though and I don't want either of you falling ill."

Fleur gave Molly a pair of air kisses then looked back at Bill, "Shall we cuddle by ze fire mon cher?"

"Sounds brilliant winter fairy." Bill kissed Fleur and hugged his mother. "Go ahead and sit down, I'll go make us some hot chocolate, made from Honeydukes’ finest."

She kissed his cheek and murmured something sweet in his ear before doing as asked, passing Harry on his way upstairs as she did.

Harry had to smile at the roses in Fleur's cheeks. Christmas was shaping up to be happy and bright. He stepped into Ginny's room and lifted a brow at Fred and George pleading with Neptune under the amused eye of Hermione, "I thought I told you two that if Neptune's answer was no to leave it?"
"Well, technically he hasn't said no, just turned his feathered bum in our faces." George sent Harry a look over his shoulder. "I think he's only playing hard to get...Somehow all gorgeous, magical creatures, loves to be flattered and coaxed. Just look at our dragon."

Hermione rolled her eyes. One thing though, was that it was never boring when the Weasley twins was in the room.

Harry folded his arms and frowned at George, "Out, and quit pestering Neptune. The feathered bum in your faces is a no. Accept it gracefully."

Fred pouted, "Well you're no fun. Come Georgie, let us go make plans to welcome our dragon tomorrow and leave the party pooper to his bird."

"Right you are Freddie, only question here is which bird our Harry's going to play with first." George sent Harry a cheeky grin and blew Hermione a kiss before dragging his brother out of the room.

"Why do I like them again?" Harry looked at Hermione before sitting next to her on the bed and pulling out a brand new hardcover Patterson novel for her, "Surprise."

"Oooh thank you." Hermione beamed happily. "But it's not Christmas yet." She pulled Harry down by his shirt collar so that she could give him a proper kiss.

He settled his mouth over hers, smiling into the kiss before kissing her neck, "I know. it's not a Christmas present, it's just because."

"Mmm, well thank you very, very much for this just because gift. I do love a good, thick Patterson." She tilted her head to the side to give Harry more room to her neck, Harry's lips there sent shivers down her spine.

He kissed up and down her neck and along her jaw, one of his hands resting warmly on her waist, his thumb rubbing up and down along one rib.

It should tickle, since she was very ticklish, especially along her ribs but instead it just felt good. Very good in fact. Placing the book on the bed next to her, Hermione wrapped her arms around his shoulders and did some kissing of her own, wherever she could reach.

He went from just the stroking thumb to sliding his entire hand up and down her side, curving over her hip then slipping back up to gently cup her breast, hoping in the back of his mind it wasn't too far and she wouldn't smack him as he squeezed softly.

Smiling softly, Hermione inhaled deeply at the feel of Harry's hands on her and in Ginny's words she did get all shivery. She moved one hand off his shoulder and stroked it down his back to tease her fingers at the hem of his shirt, just barely dipping inside and caressing the soft skin of his lower back.

He smiled against her neck and kissed his way up to her ear to nibble softly on the lobe as his hands grew just a touch more assured. He measured the softness of her breasts in his palms, coming to the conclusion that just like the rest of her they were perfect, and squeezed and massaged them, occasionally slipping back down to tease at her waist before returning to her chest.

Goose bumps prickled her skin and a soft moan escaped her lips. Hermione could never have imagined that her breasts would be so sensitive, it felt nothing like her own touch when Harry touched her. She pulled his mouth up to her own as she raked her hand up and down his spine.
He teased his tongue into her mouth, sliding it against her own as they touched and explored as innocently as two teenagers in love could. That was fully clothed and no hands below the waist, yet. Just when he was contemplating slipping his hands beneath her shirt, Neptune stirred. A loud warning trill was all they got before the door opened and in barreled Orion, apparently arriving early.

"Oh crap! Ooooh sorry, so, so sorry." Orion's hand went up to cover his eyes as he tried to back out of the room only to trip on his own feet and fall down in a heap of gangly limbs. "Just pretend I'm not here...But please, please don't continue with what you were doing....Please let me know when I can take my hand off my eyes."

Hermione couldn't help it, she burst out laughing against the skin of Harry's neck.

Harry's own face went to Hermione's shoulder and he groaned before laughing too. He lifted his head and kissed Hermione on the lips briefly, before moving to a much more PG rated position with Hermione. "Alright whelp, you can look now."

Orion peered out between his fingers before he deemed it safe to remove the hand completely. "Happy Christmas. I am so sorry for interrupting but really...Haven't you heard of locks? Look there's one right on this door, shiny and working and everything." He grinned at them as he waggled the lock back and forward. "It's great to see you though. Dad, Sirius and Aury are downstairs...Um sorry by the way Hermione, Aury caught Crooks by his tail, he might never recover."

"I haven't you heard of knocking? And I dare you to try locking Ginny out of her own room, just try it and see how fast your own tail is never the same. Happy Christmas though."

"Please don't turn me blue. It wasn't the bathroom and Hermione wasn't naked and I didn't see any wandering hands, no Sir...No gropage at all." Amber eyes turned pleading. "Please don't make me have a Blue, blue, blue, blue Christmas." He sang the last words out in a deep voice.

"We'll see." Harry lifted a brow, "Go on downstairs and tell them we'll be down in a tick, and put in a request for hot chocolate."

"Dad's here, along with me. Do you really think there's any chocolate left?" Orion got his cheek back as he saluted Harry playfully and bounded down the stairs before he pushed his brother over the edge.

Harry snorted and murmured, "Ron lives here, there's still chocolate." He gave Hermione a sheepish look, "Piggy back ride downstairs tigress?"

"Yes please my lion king." Hermione crawled close and wrapped arms and legs around Harry's back. "I am more than capable of walking on my own, I swear it."

He stood up, "I know you are but let's get Molly's okay before you do to avoid trouble." He carried her down stairs on his back, smiling when he saw Remus and Sirius watching as Aurora was passed around and cooed over by all the Weasleys.

Remus smiled when he saw Harry and his burden coming down stairs. "Hi, I know it hasn't been very long but it is so good to see you. You are both looking much better." His eyes found Aurora in Fred's hands. "Watch it, too young for pranks still."

"Aww but she's already such a pro, just look at poor Crooks in the corner there," Fred nuzzled the
Harry deposited Hermione on a chair and looked over at Fred, "And yet you turned Ron's teddy bear into a spider when he was how old?"

"Well that was different, Ron was well...Ron and to our defense he had just gone number two on our favorite blanket." George was quick to jump to his brother's defense.

"You are all freaks." Ginny rolled her eyes and slipped into Neville's lap. "No wonder Ron is as damaged as he is."

Harry chuckled, "Well they never did mess like that with Ginny so I suppose our little briar rose is safe...though it wouldn't surprise me if they made a sweet that turned people into glowing rainbows in her honor."

"Ooooh that's a good idea Harry! Don't you think so little princess?" Fred cooed some more to Aurora who burbled at him and waved her arms with a happy squeal.

Relaxing again, Remus smiled at his daughters happy noises, she already loved being the center of attention. "You should make them flicker like the northern lights she's named after instead."

Molly shook her head with a smile, seeing how the wheels were already turning in her boys sharp minds. She had a strong suspicion that such candy would soon be in stock at their shop.

Arthur chuckled and passed a pair of mugs over to Harry and Hermione, "Here, hot chocolate fresh from the pot."

Harry took his with a grin, "Thanks," he looked over at where Sirius and Orion were sitting, heads together, and murmured to Hermione, "Should we be worried do you think?"

"With those two, whispering like that? Yeah, I think we should definitely worry." Hermione whispered back with a smile. She didn't think Sirius and Orion would really come up with something worrisome but she did wonder what they were up to. She noticed that Remus hadn't caught onto what his men were doing yet.

"You never know, they might be planning something...nice." Harry shrugged, "Anyway I don't think they'd ruin tomorrow or the day after, the Eve and Christmas Day are sacred and even those two wouldn't mess with that...well not in the Burrow with Remus more than capable of spanking them both for it after Molly's done with them."

Hermione chuckled. "Oh I don't know...Sirius might like getting spanked by Remus. You are right though, they would never jeopardize Christmas or do something that would strain Arthur and Molly's hospitality." Suddenly Hermione's face just softened when she found herself with a baby in her arms, Remus smiling at her as he placed his daughter there. Hermione cooed softly and leaned down to breathe in Aurora's sweet baby scent. "Hi sweetheart, I've missed you."

Harry leaned his jaw on her shoulder to watched as Aurora squealed some more and reached grasping hands up to pat at the bushy brown curls of Hermione's hair. He ran his hand over baby
soft hair, "You've just got us all wrapped right around that sweet little finger don't you? You know it too." He chuckled as the baby made a raspberry and then proceeded to gum on her own hand with soft coos. A drooly, cooing mess she was and adorable with it.

Smiling Hermione continued to admire the sweet little girl in her arms. Harry was right, they were all wrapped around those tiny, spit covered little fingers and they all loved every second of it. She had a feeling that a certain princess would have a mountain of gifts come Christmas Day. Hermione was a little upset that she'd had to spend so much time in bed, she hadn't been able to shop for gifts they way she'd wanted to, having to rely on owl order gifts instead of picking them out for herself.

Sirius glanced up at Hermione holding his little girl and Harry looking over her shoulder and was struck for a moment over just how good parents they'd make when the time came. He shook his head at himself in amusement then resumed planning with his son. If things went well then they'd have a wonderful surprise for everyone after dinner tomorrow.
Harry helped Molly clear the table, grinning as she hovered just a bit over Hermione as his girlfriend did the same. Molly had given the okay for Hermione to walk round on her own two feet and use light effort but she still worried and asked a few dozen times an hour if Hermione was certain she didn't need to rest or 'dear are you sure you can carry that' or other gentle fusses.

Hermione assured Molly once again that she was absolutely fine and that she wouldn't collapse from carrying a few glasses and plates from the table to the sink. She was so happy to be up and walking that she couldn't even get annoyed with the hovering. Hermione knew that Molly did it because she cared.

"Okay love but be sure to take it easy, no wearing yourself out now because then it will be straight back to bed for you." Molly's blue eyes still shone with concern, Hermione's parents had trusted her with their daughter's well being over Christmas break and she wasn't about to break that trust.

Once the table was cleared and Molly had the washing charms going, Harry caught Hermione round the waist and lifted her in a short spin, grin still wide on his face, "I love you."

Laughing at the thrill of being spun, Hermione wrapped her arms around Harry's neck and kissed him soundly. "I love you too." She loved Harry's smile and she would do everything in her power to give him reasons to keep on smiling.

He began swaying with her in an impromptu dance, prompting smiles from Fleur, Arthur, Bill and Molly who were the only ones left in the kitchen with them. Everyone else was in the living area, snuggled up with their significant others, except for Sirius and Orion, and Merlin only knew where they'd gone. It was Christmas Eve and the snow was still falling though only in soft, gentle flakes that just made it look pretty outside. The Slytherins were all here as well, Narcissa having convinced Severus to join them, Pansy bunking with Hermione and Ginny, a bit frightening that, and Luna had come by with her father so it was shaping up to be a perfect evening.

He tilted his head and frowned, "Do you hear that?"

If Harry hadn't said anything, Hermione might have believed it was only in her head she heard the gentle sound of sleigh bells. She would have thought it just the magic of the season and the magic of being in Harry's arms. "I do, it's almost so that I wouldn't be surprised if Father Christmas himself decided to come for a visit." She was curious though, where the sleigh bells came from and she could see that she wasn't the only one from the way Molly and Fleur looked out the window, trying to see the source of the bells.

Harry looped his arm around her waist and went to the other window, blinking as he saw several large horse drawn sleighs appear out of the softly falling snow, stopping in the Weasley's yard, "What in the..." he started laughing when he saw Sirius and Orion clamber out of one of the sleighs, "I think we know what they were up to now."

Hermione nodded with wide eyes. The horses and sleighs outside looked like something straight out of a Christmas fantasy and she couldn't help but ache to get outside and experience it for herself. "A good surprise and nothing worrisome then. Sometimes the Black boys are just a little bit fantastic."
The expression on Remus' face when he saw what his men had been up to was priceless and the kiss he gave his husband in the doorway was hot enough to make the snow melt around them.

Orion went through the house like a whirlwind, telling everyone to get dressed and come outside.

Sirius, still flushed and a bit dazed by the steaming kiss, grinned widely, "We've got lap furs and muff and," he pulled a fur-lined carrier out of seemingly nowhere, "since we don't want anyone to be left behind, a special everwarm papoose for Aury."

Harry laughed and pulled Hermione upstairs, "Come on, let's get bundled up then. No way do I want to miss this!"

Laughter and excitement filled the house as everyone got dressed for a sleigh ride, Arthur and Molly practically being ordered to come along as well, and before long the house was being warded and locked and they were all piling into the sleighs, some people deciding to sit on their lover's lap. Harry and Hermione were in a sleigh with Ron, Luna, Neville and Ginny. Sirius pulled Arthur and Molly into a sleigh with him, Remus, Narcissa, Severus, and Xenophilius, Aury in her papoose cradled by Remus.

Pansy laughed as Orion very nearly ordered her idiots and their Weasleys into the sleigh he commandeered and waved at Bill, Fleur, Percy, and Oliver as the four got into the last one. She poked Orion in the shoulder, "How long did you and your father plan this?"

"Oh, since we knew we would celebrate Christmas here." Orion smiled at her and made sure she was bundled up in fur. "We were panicking slightly though when it seemed like it was going to be a green Christmas, thankfully the weather gods decided to take pity on us." He looked at the large, fat snowflakes, slowly making their way toward the ground. He chuckled at the way the twins sandwiched Draco and how Blaise had jumped on the opportunity to crawl into Charlie's lap.

She smiled and ran her gloved hand along the black fur of the lap blanket he'd draped over her, "You sneaky thing." She leaned over and kissed his cheek, "Thank you. It's been forever since I've been on a sleigh ride."

Charlie's arms went around his mate under the lap blanket, running the fingers of one hand along his thigh, enjoying holding him. "When was the last time?"

"Oh I was ten. The charming prat in your lap somehow managed to sneak me and Draco out with him and into the stables, bullying one of the elves into harnessing a small children's sleigh to one of the big Abraxans in the Malfoy stables." Her lips twitched.

Fred paused in his playing with Draco's hair, "Oh what happened dragon?"

"Well, everything went fine until the Abraxan decided to use his wings. Needless to say we got the sleigh ride over our lives." Draco chuckled at the memory. "I thought Mother would have a brainmelt when she happened to look out a window at the Manor and caught sight of us. We were very much yelled at and Blaise were banned from the Manor for months afterwards because he was a bad influence."

Blaise shrugged. "For some reason that has been a running theme in my life, for the life of me I cannot understand why." He snuggled closer to Charlie.

Pansy lifted a brow, "Darling I adore you but you are a bad influence, in the best of ways."

Charlie chuckled and murmured into Blaise's ear, "Even if you are, you're my bad influence. You'll have to influence me some more later."
"Mmm, I'll be happy to show you just how bad I can be." Blaise whispered back and gave a discreet wiggle on top of Charlie's lap, grinding down lightly.

Draco rolled his eyes, knowing exactly what his friend was up to. He couldn't say much though since his hands rested on two different, toned thighs underneath the furs.

Fred was more than happy with the state of affairs at the moment, his ankle was hooked with George's, he was being allowed to play with and nuzzle their dragon's hair, and Draco's hand was warm and enticing on his thigh. Oh my yes this was a good thing.

Fleur nestled her head on Bill's shoulder, gloved fingers linked, and smiled at Percy, "Ow 'as my fazzer been treating you Pearcy," she wrinkled her nose at her mispronunciation of his name and murmured an apology for it.

Percy just brushed it off, not at all offended. He had grown used to his name being pronounced all kind of ways since his move to France. "You're father is treating me very well. I work hard and loving every minute of it. With your father it feels like I am actually making a difference." He smiled at her and held Oliver's hand tightly.

Oliver grinned, "Course when I'm round I make trips to beg your father work Percy a little less so we can spend some time with each other."

Fleur laughed, "I do not zink you 'ave to beg very 'ard. Papa 'as a romantic 'art."

Percy flushed a little. "It doesn't hurt that Gabrielle has taken to Ollie like a brother. You know that your sister has your father wrapped around her fingers so I always find myself with days off when Oliver has the chance to come around, either with his team or by himself."

Bill laughed and wrapped his arm around Fleur's shoulders, pulling her close to his side. "No need to look so embarrassed little brother, having time together with your loved one is a good thing."

Fleur nodded, "Oui and you deezerve ze time."

Oliver ran his hand over Percy's hair, "I know I'm happy for it, no matter what we're doing even if it's eating take-out on the floor of the flat and talking about broomstick regulation."

Percy flushed a darker red at that. "Well broomstick regulations are important, it affects you directly as a professional Quidditch player...Also somehow we never end up talking for very long, it has a tendency to move on to other things." His eyes glittered as he looked at his lover.

Bill chuckled. He was so happy that Percy had Oliver, the Quidditch player had made Percy loosen up and allow himself to have some fun.

Oliver kissed the tip of Percy's freckled nose, "I'm not arguing that it's important love. Just saying that whether it's take out and broomsticks on the floor or roses and fancy restaurants by the seine, it's all perfect when I'm with you."

Percy smiled at Oliver, leaning in to kiss him, forgetting that they weren't alone in the sleigh. "I feel the same way, it's always perfect as long as we're together. I love you Ollie."

Smiling at his brother, Bill kissed Fleur's temple. France had done Percy good and if it hadn't been for Fleur, Percy might still be stuck at the British Ministry, unheard, unloved and miserable. "You are a miracle my blossom, a true miracle and I thank the fates for you every day."

She blushed and murmured softly to him, "I am just as grateful zat I met you and decided not to let
you get away. And mon cher, add a leetle gratitude to 'Arry, 'e was ze one to get Percy to show 'is brilliance at ze Yule Ball and zat ez what got my fazzer's attention."

"Of course I am grateful for Harry, if I hadn't come to visit him that day I wouldn't have met you." He bent his head and kissed her again. "For that alone I owe him more than I can ever repay." Bill looked into her eyes, feeling his stomach flutter with love for his little veela girl.

She just smiled, the flush still one her cheeks, and brought his head down for a soft, adoring kiss.

Neville laughed as Ron managed to lean out and scoop up a little bit of snow to stick down Harry's collar and narrow green eyes promised retribution at a later date. He gave the redhead boy a warning look of his own and pulled Ginny closer against his chest.

Ron held up his hands in surrender and dusted them off, "Alright mate. Harry, snowball fight when we get back, you and me?" He sat back, looping an arm around Luna's shoulders.

"So long as you're prepared for defeat," he kissed Hermione's cheek and thanked her for spelling the snow out of his clothes. It definitely paid to have a girlfriend who was already seventeen.

Hermione smiled back and cuddled deeper underneath the furs. It annoyed her greatly that she got so tired and achy just from sitting still in a sleigh. She wanted to be fully fine already. She chuckled though as she listened to Luna point out where all sorts of incredible and invisible critters dwelled in the wintery landscape.

Ron just grinned like an idiot, beaming at his girlfriend. He couldn't see what she did, and truthfully he often thought that the creatures she saw weren't actually in their world but another underneath theirs. She really did have some sort of second sight and he loved that she never let anyone tell her what she should or should not believe in. No one was like his Luna and he loved her to pieces.

Ron in love was a great thing, Ginny smiled at her brother. Luna was good for him and Ron was strangely enough perfect for her too and he adored her.

Luna turned pale blue eyes on Ron and leaned up to kiss his nose. He never made fun of her even though he didn't see what she saw. She would never have believed she could fall so completely but she had, Ron was her shining knight and she really did love him with her whole being.

Harry grinned as he watched Ron canoodle with Luna, snuggling close and nuzzling at her temple, murmuring sweet nothings into her ear. "I think I'm going to see if I can convince Molly to let me make breakfast tomorrow. Orion has definitely earned chocolate chip pancakes and Sirius an entire platter of bacon."

Hermione chuckled. "I think you'll have to save that thought, no way Molly is going to let you make breakfast on Christmas Day."

"Hermione is right, you've seen Mum's Holiday breakfasts, she prides herself on them." Ginny smiled.

"Okay I'll beg her to let me cook on Boxing Day then," he scooped Hermione up into his lap and grinned wider when he heard Sirius' barking laugh followed by Remus' as well.

Sirius chuckled and reached over, "Here let me help you with that Xeno," he carefully coaxed long blond hair out of tiny little fists, "Sorry, she likes blonds I think, goes for Draco's hair whenever she can."
"Oh it's fine, strong grip, that's good." Xenophilius chuckled and twisted his hair into a bun on top of his head.

The sight of that made Remus hide his smile, Xeno really looked like a woman when he did that, an ugly woman but a woman nonetheless.

Narcissa laughed a bit, "Well it is a good thing that Draco keeps his hair short then. Makes it easier to get out of sweet, sticky little fingers." Her own hair was kept back from her face in a coiled braid so she leaned in over Aurora, "Having a good time sweetheart? Of course you are, just like the clever little Black you are." She tickled the baby under the chin, getting a pleased squeal out of her.

"Of course she's having fun." Remus smiled. "She already loves being the center of attention and here she is, having everyone coo over and admire her. She's right in her element." It was already very, very clear that none of his children had inherited Remus' reserved personality. Remus was happy for that, happy that his cubs would be a part of life, grab it in full. He hoped that none of them would ever have to hide or be ashamed of who they were. Remus' parents had loved him, Remus had never had to doubt that but even they had done their best to hide him away after Greyback's attack.

Severus watched Narcissa continue to talk to the baby and met Remus' eyes, "You realize of course, that your daughter will be taught to take full advantage of her adoring fans by Narcissa."

"I do intend to teach her everything I know," Narcissa didn't even look up from the baby.

"That's good, at least I know very little about adoring fans so it is a good thing Aury will learn from an expert." Remus smiled at his best friend and his lady. He was so happy that Severus had someone now, someone who cared and someone who'd managed to make him quit the spy game. For that Remus could sink to his knees and kiss Narcissa's feet. He wanted his friend to be as safe as he could be. "It wouldn't surprise me at all if we have another little Slytherin in making."

Arthur chuckled, "Perhaps but it's a little early to be sorting her already." He nuzzled Molly's hair.

Sirius grinned, "Yeah, besides I'm sneaky and I'm a Gryffindor. Nothing saying that she can't be one too, or a 'Puff, or a 'Claw."

"She can be anything she wants to be." Remus said, looking at his daughter adoringly. "Wherever she ends up she will be loved."

"Oh I do not doubt that." Molly leaned against Arthur happily, she hadn't been on a sleigh ride since her school days and she was really enjoying this.

"And that's just how it should be," Arthur's eyes crinkled up at the corners.

Sirius's grin turned wicked, "Ever think about having a little girl of your own Cissy?" He laughed as he dodged a kick from Snape and a smack from a blushing Narcissa but happily accepted Remus' thumping him on the nose. "I know I'm a pig." He leaned in to kiss Remus just under the ear, "But I'm a lucky one. Best Christmas ever isn't it?"

Remus nodded and turned his head so he could kiss his husband properly. "Absolutely the best ever. And you're not a pig, a dog perhaps but certainly not a pig...If you were I would have to eat you, or at least huff and puff and blow your house down."

"Moony you know you can huff and puff over me whenever you like," he wiggled his eyebrows and laughed when Snape made a snarky comment about his perversion. He was so glad Orion had come up with this idea and brought him in on it. Brilliant Christmas indeed.
While Harry's family and friends were having a perfect Christmas, Bellatrix Lestrange most certainly wasn't. She was in her cell in Azkaban, her face scarred and scabbed from her nails tearing into her skin, her hair torn out in patches, her voice nearly gone from the wild, insane screams and keens she voiced constantly. She bit and scratched herself wherever she could, in the most painful ways she knew, using her knowledge of torture on herself as punishment. She had failed her Master and worse in that failing she had lost all worth to him and she knew it. She punished herself because his hands and magic should not approach one so vile as she now was. She could only hope he was safe and surrounded by faithful and true followers who would do his will and give their lives for his cause.

It really was depressing how easy it was to break in. Voldemort stepped over the two guards bodies calmly. Really, how could wizards fear ending up here? It was his second time here now in quite a short time and if anything the security had gotten even worse. No challenge at all. He breathed in deeply as he walked the corridor down toward his targeted cell. The scent of agony and terror hung heavily in the air and Voldemort liked it. The cell door slid open with barely a creek and Voldemort tilted his head as he looked at the pitiful creature inside the cell. "Bella, Bella, Bella...What have you done?"

She sucked in a breath but scrambled back from the voice of her Master, "My Lord, My Master I...I do not deserve to be in your presence. One such as me does not deserve to have your gaze touch upon me. I am filthy and vile, worthless," her eyes spilled over with tears, "I deserve nothing."

"You were my star Bella, my most favored and faithful one and look at you now." Voldemort's voice was low and gentle. "I'm here to help you Bellatrix, one last favor for my favored one. What would you prefer? Wand or hand?"

Her shocked gasp was louder than a scream through the cell and she whimpered, "Such a gift I do not deserve and your mercy is worth more than my soul. I beg of you Master, your wand so that I may feel the brush of magic one last time."

"Very well Bella. Goodnight my star." A sharp green light lit up the cell and that was that. Voldemort didn't even look at what he left behind in the cell, it was useless. He did have mercy though, for those who'd served him well and Bella had served him very well. That's why he'd brought her one last gift. Voldemort left Azkaban the same way he entered it, through the front door.

In the morning the change in guard shifts would find Bellatrix Lestrange dead in her cell, with a relieved and almost angelic smile upon her wrecked face.

Harry read the Prophet the day after Boxing Day, the announcement of Bellatrix Lestrange's death, and he looked out the window thinking. Somehow he wasn't surprised to learn that Voldemort had so easily broken into Azkaban. The new Minister, Scrimgeour, wasn't making any bones about it having been a grievous lapse in security and was assuring the people that it would be addressed. Nor was he surprised to learn that Bellatrix had been killed. If anything he'd almost been expecting it.

Hermione had read her own copy of the Prophet before she walked down the stairs and now she kissed Harry's cheek before going to fix herself a cup of tea. "I hope Lady Malfoy and Draco are alright. I know they didn't have any contact with Bellatrix but she was still family I suppose." She brought her cup and sat down. "Do you really think that Voldemort did it out of kindness?"
"Maybe," Harry sipped at his own tea, "He's evil and sadistic but he also prizes loyalty and none were more loyal to him than Bellatrix. I think it just may have been his way of giving her mercy. He knew living like a squib was a worse hell for her than anything else. He couldn't give her magic, but he could give her peace."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Hermione stirred her tea and then set the spoon down on her saucer. "My personal belief is that the world is a better place without Bellatrix Lestrange in it, squib or not." She took a calm sip of tea. "Voldemort doesn't have that many loyal ones left in his ranks. I wonder where he will turn for new recruits."

"No telling," he reached over and took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers, "I suppose we'll simply have to be ready for anything yeah?"

"Yeah." She agreed and squeezed his hand, leaving their fingers entangled. "We'll be ready even as we keep on living our lives. I'm not going to stop on account of some twat with a superiority complex."

"Certainly not. Speaking of living our lives, how do you feel about a date in Hogsmeade when we get back? A real date not our group going. It's been a while since we've had a nice actual date."

That got a beaming smile in reply. "I'd like that, I'd like it a lot." It really had been a while since they had done something just the two of them. Hermione loved the pride, loved everyone in it but she was still a girl and she liked the thought of a date.

"It's a date then."
Chapter 63
Chapter by trulywicked

Bill stepped into the construction zone that was the remodeling of Zonkos into Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes in Hogsmeade. His brothers had effectively driven Zonkos out of business and as much as their mother still felt the jokes were silly, she was proud enough to pop. "Fred? George? You here?"

George popped out from the storage rooms, sawdust in his red hair. "Bill? What brings our illustrious eldest brother our way? Want to help with the remodeling? We could always use someone who'll lift all the heavy stuff."

Fred looked down from the landing they were building, "Oh hullo Billy boy, yes what indeed does bring you here? Sorry we can't offer tea just yet."

"No that's okay, no tea needed." Bill pulled something out of his pocket. "I need your brilliance actually." He showed them the slender gold locket on a chain. "Can you make this play a certain song when you open the locket?"

Fred tsked and came down from the landing, "I can't believe you asked if we can. The question you should ask is will we." He grinned, "What song?"

"It's a French lullaby, Fleur's mother used to sing it to her when she was little." Bill looked slightly embarrassed. "It's called Dodo l'enfant. I know Fleur is happy here but I also know she misses her family a lot. I thought this might help a little." He pulled at the end of his ponytail.

Fred exchanged a look with George and smiled with a nod, "Do you want it to be just the melody or would you like it to sing in her mother's voice? If it's just the melody we can do it in oh, four minutes give or take right Georgie?"

"Hmm yeah, we better stretch it out to four minutes since it's so cluttered around here. Otherwise I bet we could do it in two." George smiled a slow smile and walked over to throw a long arm around Fred.

"Enough bragging, your heads are already big enough." Bill huffed out a laugh. "Just the melody thank you, I really do appreciate it."

Fred took the locket and cleared a spot on the floor before he started marking down a rune circle. "Well you're our brother, even if you are a pretty boy. Georgie the melodies are in the second blue box from the west wall I believe." He caught Bill's curious look and answered the unspoken question, "We're starting a line of tiny plush keychains that sing. Customizable melodies will be offered of course but I'm pretty sure we have that one in the box already. It's apparently a rather popular lullaby for anyone who's got French roots."

Bill only shook his head with a smile. "Of course you would have thought of it already and I'm not a pretty boy. I am dashingly handsome, there's a great difference."

George snorted as he came back with the melody required. "Oh yes, a great vast difference."

Fred hummed and set the open locket in the center of the circle after chalking a rune inside that would anchor the song but wouldn't be visible once it was done. "And we first made a simple little bound journal, for Draco. He likes to write to music."
Bill watched with interest. Not that he ever would really say it but he was greatly impressed with the ease his little brothers did this kind of work. It was rather amazing to see and Bill truly was proud of them. "It all comes back to your little dragon doesn't it? Your Muse."

Fred grinned as George set the melody crystal on the locked and set it to playing. "He is that, and so much more. Ready Gred?" He touched one charging rune with his wand.

"Born ready Forge." George grinned and took out his own wand, touching one of the other runes, sending his magic into the rune circle along with his brothers.

It didn't take long, as Fred had predicted no more than four minutes, and then the crystal was blank and the open locket was playing the song. Fred picked it up, closed it, and handed it back to Bill. "One reminder of your lady's home, free of charge."

He grinned and hooked an arm with George as they both straightened from their crouch, "Of course we wouldn't say no if you wanted to treat us to lunch as a token of your gratitude."

"Lunch is more than fair and the least I can do." Bill took the locket happily and pocketed it, already looking forward to see Fleur's expression when he gifted it to her. "I'll even splurge for the fancy stuff if that's what you're in the mood for." He grinned at this twin brothers, too happy with the way his life was going right now to even feel the slightest bit annoyed with anything they could get up to.

Fred shook his head, "Nah, we'll stick to Three Broomsticks. Bigger portions and better taste than the fancy." He flicked his wand, cleaning up the rune circle, and grabbed his and George's cloaks. "It's a Hogsmeade weekend so we might even get to run into our adorable little brothers, even if we don't dare annoy Harry today."

"No, we'll turn out worse than blue if that happens." George grinned teasingly at Bill. "It's the big date weekend. Hermione can be scary too and I don't particularly feel like getting on her bad side."

Bill chuckled. "We'll leave the dating couple alone, concentrate on the food."

"Works for me." Fred waved Bill out and locked the shop before hooking his arm with George's. "So Billy boy, only seven months until you're hitched. Getting nervous yet?"

"Nah, this might sound way too soppy but I don't feel nervous at all, only excited. Fleur is it for me and I know that. I will never want someone other than her." Bill stuck his hands in his pockets and ducked his head to hide his red cheeks. "She's everything and if she didn't have her heart set on a large summer wedding I would happily marry her tomorrow."

"Nah it’s not too soppy," Fred flicked some snow off George's shoulder, "I know how you feel. Soon as we can, Georgie and I-"

"-are going to make an honest man out of our dragon. Well as honest as he can get but you get the point." George smiled again and thanked his brother for removing the snow from his shoulder. If they hadn't fallen and fallen hard for Draco, they might have thought Bill to be much more soppy.

Fred grinned. "Won't be easy but oh it will be worth it. Even if Hercules had easier tas-" several loud cracks interrupted him and the next thing Fred knew he was pulling George out of the way of a red hex as the main street suddenly swarmed with masked Death Eaters.

“What the bloody hell?!" He already had his wand out and sent a hex at one masked man, paling when it bounced off and he was looking into red eyes. "Oh shite. George, vampire," he tossed his communication mirror to his brother and hit the vampire with a deadly pure sunlight hex, "warn
Harry and the others! There might be more and other creatures beside!"

Cursing and blocking a curse of his own, George managed to call Harry's mirror, sad that he would have to break up the date but this was a little more important. After Harry he called his sister and youngest brother as well. All of a sudden feeling his stomach twist since he didn't know where Draco was.

Once the vampires knew that they used sunlight hexes they stayed behind the other creatures, attacking only when guarded. There were some insane sounding howls too, proving that if Greyback himself wasn't there than at least some of his children were. Fucking hell.

Bill turned and took down another masked wizard.

Pansy covered Orion's back as he spoke to Harry on the mirror, Draco and Blaise at her own back and Charlie Weasley covering them as well. She hissed and pulled out her silver hair pins, transfiguring them into daggers. One of which she sent sinking into the chest of a howling bastard who tried to attack Charlie from behind. Giving soft mental thanks that Orion was immune to silver she passed him another as the werewolf who'd tried to attack Blaise's mate fell down stone cold dead. No one, absolutely no one attacked her family and lived to repeat the mistake.

Harry's voice on the mirror was loud even through the sounds of battle around them, "Hermione, Ron, Luna and I are covering the carriage stables. Get as many of the other students here safely as you can. And Orion? Don't get hurt, your parents would go mental."

"Take that advice yourself." Orion said as he ducked and ran his borrowed silver dagger over the back of another werewolf's knees. He didn't care if he killed them or not as long as they weren't a threat anymore. He kept an eye out for other students, for once glad that the first and second years weren't allowed to go to Hogsmeade as he kept on fighting.

Most of the curses Draco used was right on par with the ones the Death Eaters tossed around but Draco didn't even feel remotely guilty about their screams.

Pansy growled, drawing a pair of surprised looks from a couple of werewolves who were cornering two third years just before she sent a bonebreaker hex at the bastards necks and grabbed the kids, pulling them into their circle, "Keep your wands out and use shield charms unless you know deadly curses that work against vampires, werewolves, and damn it all is that a harpy?"

She ducked as the spectre swooped down at them before she used a cutting curse Snape had taught them on the vile thing's wings. "Just stick to shield charms. You know Blaisey boy, if ever there was a time to break out your targeted soul sucking trick, it would be now. Not very appetizing I know but we're in a tight spot luv."

"If I get sick from this I want you to make sure Charlie is there to nurse be back to health." Blaise complained and straightened the cuffs on his perfect shirt even as he shot the vilest curses he knew at the creatures trying to take them down. He usually never called on his creature side other than the unavoidable part to keep him alive and with Charlie.

"You know the downside of me doing that Pans. Make sure no one jumps me and I'll get to work." He had to release his incubus side in full to be able to target souls and that in turn...Well it turned the heat up, made him all but irresistible.

"Darling you know Dray and I will keep the horny twats well off your back and I'll make sure your Big Red is there for you." She hexed the legs out from under a vampire then sent a metal sign flying down like a guillotine blade, cutting off his head. A few more younger students joined them.
and raised shields of their own.

Charlie caught Blaise in a brief kiss. "I'll be there, nothing and no one would keep me away." He let him go and incinerated a human Death Eater along with a pair of vampires.

Blaise sent him a heated smile and got to work, letting his creature out and targeting souls and energy, pulling them into himself.

Draco snorted at hearing a few mindless groans and watched a few idiots actually dropping their wands in an attempt to get close to Blaise, it was pathetic. Draco had no qualms about killing wandless wizards and witches and he made quick work of them before moving on to the next ones.

He hated to admit it but this really had been quite a brilliant move of Voldemort. If you wanted to scare a society into obeying, show what you can do and go after its children. At Hogwarts the students were warded but here they were all but defenseless, well at least most of them were. If Drasny had anything to say about it though Voldie would meet another loss instead of a victory.

Pansy flicked one concerned glance at Orion and found herself blushing at the efficiency that he took point and cleared a path for them. She wrenched her attention back to the fight, reassured that her little wolf was taking care of himself, and hexed the bollocks off one death eater to the extreme winces of her boys.

Fred caught sight of people just dropping from the corner of his eye and barked out a laugh when he spotted the group heading their way, "Now that's what I call a plan!"

George chuckled and let out a relieved breath when when he saw the head of pale blond hair coming closer. He knew Draco could handle himself but that didn't stop him worrying. Their dragon was quite heart stopping though, wielding the sword they had made him like he was made to do so, dealing both curses and death with the silver blade.

Bill cursed loudly when he saw a small girl fall down as she ran from two cloaked beings and hurried to go to her aid.

Fenrir Greyback licked his lips at the sweetmeat that was running and his eyes gleamed with feral hunger as she tripped. He'd not been able to taste as much blood and meat as he liked, not since he'd been forced to consider rejoining Voldemort's forces just to get a pack. That disgusting school that had been created and was being run by that upstart Aleksander. That bastard had the nerve to challenge him and keep him out, keep him away from the children he'd turned to create his pack.

He saw some pretty redheaded bastard step in and fight off his beta, giving the girl a chance to get away, and snarled. He was not losing a chance for blood, not after so long without it. He barreled forward out of the alley he'd been stalking in, catching the man off guard, breaking his wand wrist, and he wasted no time in throwing aside his mask and tearing into him with every ounce of savagery in his soul, biting and clawing and gouging.

Bill fought as best as he could but without his wand there wasn't much he could put up against that large and absolutely insane werewolf. He could feel his skin rip and tear where the wolf clawed into him.

A low growl tore its way out of Orion's throat when he saw Bill on the ground and the snow colored red around him. His eyes already glowed amber and his nails were sharp claws. He sent a strong stunner to get the feral wolf away from Bill and then jumped between them, shouting at the twins to get Bill out of there.
Fred moved quickly to do so, falling to his knees to cast blood stopping spells on the worst of the wounds, he had to swallow the sick that wanted to come up when he looked at the savaged and bloody side of Bill's face.

"Bill, oh Merlin." His hand shook as he helped George create a stretcher for their brother. "You damned well better hang on big brother. I'm not going to have gone to the effort of charming that locket only for you not to give it to your girl you hear me!"

Greyback bared his teeth at the boy who stood before him, his nose catching scent and he growled deeply when he saw the claws and amber of his eyes. "Whelp you'll pay for interfering."

He paced in a circle around the boy, sniffing. A vicious snarl came from his throat, "You're Remus' whelp." He ran his tongue over his lips and his snarl turned into an insane grin of sort. "What a perfect opportunity to make that little bitch suffer for denying me."

"He should get a bloody medal for denying you." Orion let out a growl of his own. "You're rotten Greyback, damaged...You're not a leader of a pack, you're its shame. Any healthy pack would have taken you out ages ago."

Greyback was large and strong but Orion wasn't about to back down. He was fast and he was a wizard along with a wolf. Both Remus' and Sirius' son and he would take this poisonous boil out. He carefully tracked every move Greyback move while he stood his ground. "You are so scorned and so impotent you have to do the dirty work of a halfblood crazed wizard. I'm not afraid of you."

Pansy had to swallow a scream as Greyback lunged at Orion, knocking him off his feet. Her hand tightened around her wand, wanting to cast and get that vile monster away from her bloody puppy. She caught her breath when she saw Orion roll with the impact, knee Greyback in the ribs, and land in a crouch. She blasted a pair of werewolves who tried to come up behind Orion's back and watched as Greyback lunged again, so much bigger than Orion it made her heart twist in fear and worry. Her heart stayed in her throat as she continued to work with the others to keep Death Eaters, vampires, hags, werewolves and the occasional harpy off Orion's back while the fight played out.

Greyback growled as the whelp ducked and rolled him over his back, using his weight and power against him, and he snarled when claws raked across his face. He spun and managed to catch the pup in the ribs with a rake of his own claws, the only problem being that they had to go through layers of winter clothing first, not leaving as much damage as he'd like.

He would be black and blue after this and his parents would kill him but there was no fucking way he was giving up now. Not when he had the bastard on his back. Orion pulled out the silver dagger, Pansy had handed him earlier and ran it across the back of a knee, severing a tendon before moving to an arm. Using both claws and dagger with one hand and his wand with the other he finally placed the blade against Greyback's neck, pressing the pure silver into his skin. Orion licked his own blood off his cheek as he looked straight into Greyback's eyes. "I should slit your throat right here, the whelp of the bitch that defied you."

"Orion look out!" Pansy's scream came too late as a werewolf suddenly appeared, a wand in hand and used a reducto to blow the boy off Greyback. She ran forward to where he landed, panic gripping her chest as she saw Greyback coil to attack Orion while he was down. She didn't think, she just reacted, shifting to her animagus form, and lunging, colliding with Greyback in midair, her jaws clamping around the wrist of his already damaged arm and wrenching it, breaking the bone.
and tossing her head, throwing him away from Orion. She took up a guard position, even as she
heard a furious roar of a lion that attacked the one who'd hit Orion with the blasting hex, and stared
hard, eyes wide, teeth bared in a savage snarl, hackles raised as she faced down Greyback in case
he got any ideas.

More cracks of apparition sounded but this time it was the cavalry, the professors of Hogwarts
appearing alongside Aurors and the tide began to turn, Death Eaters and creatures fled before they
could be captured, one Death Eater gripping Greyback's shoulder and apparating away.

Orion struggled to his feet, pissed off that Greyback had gotten away this time too, filled with
amazement and pride for Pansy, admiring her guts and worried about Bill. Bill had lost a lot of
blood already when Orion had gotten there and he knew that wasn't all you had to worry about with
a werewolf attack. Greyback wasn't wolfed out but who knew what sort of virus the bastard carried
all of the time?

Everything seemed to slow down as the last of the Death Eaters and their following creatures took
the hint and got out of there as quickly as they could.

Pansy transformed back and was at Orion's side in a second, arm sliding around his waist and
coaxing him to lean on her, not caring that the shallow gashes in his side were almost certainly
staining her light blue sweater beyond hope. "You idiot. I don't know whether to be proud of you or
angry that you faced that sick bastard down like that."

"Why not a little bit of both then." Orion smiled at her and winced when a cut on his cheek
stretched and re-opened. "I had to do it Pansy, at first just to get Bill out of there and then because
someone had to take Greyback on and quite frankly the arsehole pisses me off."
Orion wasn't hurt badly, his left eye was swelling closed, he had a ton of bruises and a few cuts
along with the shallow claw marks. His parents would still blow the top and Orion feared their
wrath more than facing down Greyback.

"Idiot," she sighed and held up her wand, whispering the basic healing spell to make the swelling
of his eye and most of the light scratches and bruises fade to almost nothing. "You scared me. He's
so much bigger and more experienced and to see you facing off against all that...I am going to
make your life hell for weeks for scaring me, even if you did make mincemeat out of that rancid
cyote masquerading as a wolf."

Despite everything and despite his gut wrenching worry for Bill, Orion couldn't help but laugh at
that. "Oh Pansy...Seeing as we're still here after facing werewolves and vampires and Death Eaters
and more, you can make my life hell all you want...It's still here to make a hell of and that's enough
for me." He raised her chin by putting his fingers underneath it before leaning down to brush his
lips over hers. "Sweet, brave lady wolf." Releasing her, Orion saw his father in the crowd and
ducked out of sight before Sirius could see the state of him and his clothes.

Pansy's eyes were wider than Galleons and she swore her lips were on fire. Orion had kissed her.
**Orion** had kissed her! What in the name of Salazar's knickers was he thinking kissing her?! And
what on earth was with her that she'd...liked it?

Harry had transformed back into human as well and shook his head in amusement at Pansy's
gobsmacked expression before he caught up with Orion and grabbed the back of his shirt. "Uh-uh,
you had the bollocks to face down Greyback and did him some serious damage Orion. No slinking
away to keep from facing the music. You're growing into the alpha you're supposed to be, that
means you take responsibility for your actions."

"I'm fine with taking responsibility Scar, taking responsibility is one thing, ending up as a furry rug
or locked up by over worrying parents are quite another." Orion slumped in Harry's hold and stopped his escape attempt. "Do you have any idea how Bill is doing?"

"No, they just apparated him away to Madam Pomfrey. I just know that he'll live, nothing beyond that. You're not going to wind up as a rug, or locked up. Maybe a little grounded for a month or two. If I were you though I'd be more worried about what Parkinson is going to do to you." He let Orion go, ruffling his hair.

"I only did that because I had the perfect getaway before you ruined it." Orion flattened his hair in annoyance, pulling the tie out and retying it. "Great, now he's spotted me." Orion met his father's eyes.

George was sitting in a doorway, looking at his hands who were covered in his brother's blood. He should get up, make his way to Hogwarts and the infirmary but for some reason he didn't seem able to move. Two hours ago they had teased Bill about being a pretty boy and now...Now everything was different. Bill would live but would he be okay?

Fred appeared next to him, his own hands stained red, and leaned his head on George's shoulder. He was worried about Bill, worried how he'd take being scarred, worried that he'd contract the lycanthropy, and he hated to even think it but he was worried that Fleur might leave Bill because he wasn't the handsome face she'd fallen for. If that happened Bill would be devastated.

Charlie stood, arms tight around Blaise and looked at the twins before looking over at his mate's male best friend who was talking with a still thunderstruck Pansy, "Draco," when the gray eyes turned to him he angled his head at Fred and George, "please."

Nodding, Draco leaned in and whispered something in Pansy's ear before he walked over to where his lovers were. He crouched down in front of them, laying down the sword still in his hand next to him and wrapping his arms around both Fred and George, pulling their heads to his own shoulders as he stroked their backs. With these two he was allowed to be himself like with no others. They were his strength and he would struggle his best to be theirs as well.

Fred leaned close and nuzzled his face into the side of Draco's neck, breathing him in, "I'd hug you but you're still pristine and my hands are..."

"It's okay, Fuck being pristine but if you want to I'll do the hugging for now." Draco ran his fingers through the hair at Fred's nape and turned to press a kiss against George's temple.

A rush of air, not quite a laugh, not exactly a sob, escaped him, "By Merlin I love you Draco," Fred pressed his lips to Draco's skin in a gentle, chaste kiss.

Draco's breath hitched, especially when George echoed that sentiment with a slightly broken voice. They hadn't ever said those words before and Draco felt a little overwhelmed. "I love you too, the both of you." He had never thought he would, not this completely and with abandon but he did. These two strong men were precisely what he needed, wanted and he would never willingly let them go.

Sirius found Harry, the longer mop of dark messy hair, with his eyes knowing that if he found Harry, he'd find Orion and he certainly did. His eyes narrowed and he stalked forward to pat Harry on the head then yank Orion into a crushing hug. "What the bloody hell did you do to yourself?"

"I didn't do anything to myself thank you very much...Besides maybe having signed on for assisted suicide by Pansy Parkinson." Orion hugged back, he didn't want his father worried. "I'm fine, promise."
"Blood, cuts, and bruises is not 'fine' Orion. How did you get so bunged up?" He ran his hand down his son's hair gently, checking for any head injuries secretly.

Orion squirmed under his father's gaze, he knew he couldn't lie, the truth would come out anyway and if he lied about it, things would only be worse for him later on. "Bill was down, I couldn't leave him there like that. I didn't know it was Greyback at first not until he spoke." He gnawed on his bottom lip. "He insulted Dad and I couldn't stop thinking about Marauders and all the kids he's turned. I wanted to put him down."

Harry spoke up, "He'd have managed it had one of the Death Eaters not blasted him off Greyback."

Sirius went silent for a few moments then sighed. "You are so grounded for the next month Orion and your Dad is going to tan your hide, teenage alpha or not." He looked over at Harry, "Get your pride together cub, time to head home."

Harry nodded, pulling out his mirror to call for everyone to meet him at the carriages, "I already contacted Molly, she's probably already at the castle with Bill." His jaw tensed then relaxed, "If not she's definitely on her way."

Hermione nodded, slipping her hand into Harry's as they waited for everyone to arrive. She hadn't seen Bill but she'd seen the red snow and the twins reactions and it made a lump form in her stomach. "Did Molly say she would tell Fleur?" She imagined that Arthur would find out at the Ministry if he was at work. Tonks would let him know if nothing else.

"No but she wouldn't keep this from Fleur, not knowing how much Fleur loves Bill." He brought her in close to him and kissed her temple, "It'll be alright. Whatever happens, it will be alright in time." He had to believe that. If he didn't he'd wind up doing something stupid. He looked at the outline of Hogwarts in the distance and thought of Bill in the hospital wing. He would live but how much would his life be affected by this? And how would Fleur deal with it?

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Fleur didn't bother waiting for Molly to apperate to Hogwarts, the second she heard Bill's name along with 'injured' and 'Hogwarts infirmary' she was gone in a crack and running through Hogwarts gates to get to her fiance. She was aware of the gape-mouthed boys and scandalized girls of the student body staring at her as she ran but didn't care. All that mattered was Bill and making sure he was alive. Her hands impacted on the infirmary doors, flinging them open.

Poppy startled when the doors slammed into the wall and looked out from behind Bill Weasley's screened off bed. She'd been busy putting a healing paste on Bill's wounds. She couldn't do much about the scarring, nothing that would work on werewolf scratches but she did what she could and at least prohibit infection. One of the deep gauges ran straight over Bill's eye and she worked to make sure he would keep his sight on it. "Miss Delacour, what brings you here in such dramatic manner?"

She began to babble in French before catching herself though her pronounciations certainly suffered from her distress, "Beel, ez 'e... ow ez 'e?" Her usually smooth features were strained, her brow creased with worry.

Looking from the distraught woman to the man in the hospital bed a light of understanding dawned on her. "Mr. Weasley was attacked by a werewolf. Luckily his brothers were on site and they managed to stop a lot of the blood loss quickly. He is unconscious right now and I have given him a sleeping draught to help him manage the pain but his life is not in danger." Poppy kept her grave expression since though he would survive it would be a long way back for Bill Weasley and he
would never be the man he was before the attack.

Fleur blew out a breath, "Oh merci dieux. May I..." she gestured with her hand, the ring Bill had given her glinting softly in the bright infirmary lights, "May I zee 'im s'il vous plait?"

Poppy nodded and motioned for the girl to step behind the screen. "You can, be prepared that he is hurt though Miss Delacour. It... It's not pretty looking so if you are sensitive you might want to wait." The left side of Bill Weasley's face had been ripped apart, Poppy had seen that several of the gashes went straight down to the bone. His neck was almost as ravaged and his arm and torso on the left side also bore angry claw marks.

Fleur shook her head and moved forward, stepping behind the screen. Her sharp gasp was louder than a scream in the near silent infirmary and she rushed forward to his side, her hand stopped before she could touch an injury and she moved to his uninjured arm, taking his hand, needing to touch him but refusing to cause him more pain. She looked back at the medi-witch, "Ze eye, will ze sight remain? 'e so loves 'is job but ze goblins will not like a curse breaker wiz impaired sight."

"His eyelid has been split open but the eye itself has not been damaged. I have treated that wound and I'm hopeful that he will regain full sight." Poppy was relieved that the young woman was as calm as she was and that she hadn't caused a scene when she saw the state of her fiance.

The doors slammed open again and Poppy sighed, preparing herself for explaining everything one more time. She could hear Molly Weasley's upset voice. "I was covering his wounds with this paste to keep them from getting infected and to help them heal faster. Do you think you could do the last ones while I speak to Mr and Mrs Weasley?" She held out the bowl with the light blue paste in it toward Miss Delacour. In Poppy's experience it often felt better for the family if they had something to do, some way to be helpful.

"Oui, of course," Fleur cast a sanitizing charm on her hands then took the bowl, dipping her fingers in to get enough of the paste to cover a gash that ran along the edge of Bill's cheekbone.

"Thank you." Poppy gave Miss Delacour a small smile before stepping out from behind the screen once more to take care of the Weasleys and tell them what she knew so far.

Arthur stood, arm around his wife, and listened to Poppy carefully, holding Molly in place as the injuries were detailed. "What about the possibility of lycanthropic infection?" It was an important question and one that needed an answer. He just hoped that the answer would be favorable.

"We can't be absolutely certain but the odds look to be in Mr. Weasley's favor. The werewolf who attacked him, Fenrir Greyback was not in a transformed state during the attack. Also there are very few bitemarks, mostly claw gashes. I will take blood samples to Professor Snape later on and hopefully he can make further progress in letting us know for sure."

Poppy led the Weasleys to two chairs and bid them to sit down as they spoke. "He will probably be affected somewhat, that is something you need to be prepared for but he shouldn't be worse off than Orion Black. He should be able to learn to manage it."

Molly held Arthur's hand tightly as she wiped at her eyes. Her baby boy hurt, her first baby.

Arthur nodded grimly. "He's alive and that's the most important thing thank Merlin, we can deal with anything else as it comes. How long will he have to stay here Poppy? How long until we can bring him home, get what I'm sure will be a very whiny curse-breaker out of your hair and into Molly's?" He did his best to lighten the mood, make things a bit brighter.
Poppy knew what Mr. Weasley was doing and she was grateful for it. "He will have to stay for a week at the least. I want to see that the gashes begin to knit together properly and that no infection occurs."

Squeezing Arthur's hand tighter, Molly showed that she knew what Arthur tried to do as well. She leaned in and kissed his cheek.

He was about to say something else when he heard Remus' voice, scolding a mile a minute as the infirmary doors opened again and he turned his head, brows lifting at the sight of a banged up Orion being dragged into the infirmary by Remus, Sirius and Harry trailing behind in amusement and just behind them was the rest of his family minus Percy.

"I'm fine Dad, this completely unnecessary since I am fine." Orion looked up at Remus who dragged him by the back of his shirt collar into the infirmary.

"You are bleeding through your shirt, that's not being fine. What on earth were you thinking? Taking on Greyback by yourself?" The heart stabbing fear made Remus lash out. The creature who'd turned his life into a living hell for years had fought his son one on one. Remus couldn't get the image of what could have happened out if his head.

Poppy shook her head. "Jump up on a cot and lose the shirt."

Rolling his eyes, Orion opened his mouth to protest but at his father's expression he closed it again and stripped until he was in his pants and climbed up on a cot.

Sirius wrapped his arms around Remus as the shallow rakes over Orion's ribs were exposed. "It's okay love, he's okay," his voice was a whisper meant only for Remus, "A little bruised and scratched but see, the worst of it is already healing. Course he still needs to be grounded for scaring the bejeezus out of us."

Harry moved around and went to join the Weasleys, giving Molly a hug and asking quietly, "Where's Fleur?"

"Be'ind zee curtain wiz mon amour, petite," the gentle French accent called out quietly.

Orion whipped his head around toward the screen, he hadn't expected Fleur to be there so quickly and alone with Bill too. It was a surprise but a pleasant one, it didn't sound as if she was freaked out and about to leave Bill behind. He hissed when Madam Pomfrey poked at the shallow wounds along his ribs but looked at his parents triumphantly when Poppy said nothing was serious and that it would heal just fine on its own.

Sirius quirked a brow, "You're not getting out of grounding so wipe that look off your face."

Fred spoke up from where he's come in with Draco and George, still leaning on his dragon, "You might be grounded but you're getting free Wheeze products for life Ri. If it weren't for you we'd be mourning Bill right now."

That made Molly's eyes shoot up and lock on Orion, for the first time taking in the changes in him. Orion was definitely not a little boy anymore. Seeing his muscled frame on the cot drove it home that he had turned into a young man when she wasn't looking.

Orion beamed. "You know that I will take that offer to heart and you might regret saying it. I am one of your best customers after all."

Sirius shook his head in amusement and nuzzled Remus' neck. "Grounded but hero chocolate
tonight?"

Remus nodded. "Yeah, a chocolate cake for pudding tonight sounds like a marvelous idea. Definitely still grounded but by Mordred's balls I am so proud of him I could burst." Remus leaned into Sirius' body.

"I am too. He almost ended him, would have if not for outside interference." He squeezed. "He's growing up."

Arthur got up once Orion was given an all clear and had hopped off the cot, and he pulled the boy into a hug, "Thank you."

Charlie nodded, "Very much you crazy kid."

Molly nodded and was the next one to hug Orion, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief while doing it.

Orion turned beet red and hurried to put his clothes back on. "There's really no need to thank me. Anyone would have done the same." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I mean...Bill's family, you all are."

Fleur came out from behind the screen, handing the bowl of remaining salve to Madam Pomfrey, and going over to Orion, cupping his face and kissing the top of his head. "Zat does not make eet any less admirable. You saved Bill's life at risk of your own. Thanks to you I will still be getting married zis summer. You are a 'ero and let no one tell you different even as you are stuck in ze dungeon."

Even as he continued to blush, Orion winced a little at that. "Ah well we'll see if I'll survive to see the beautiful bride you'll be." What had he been thinking? Kissing Pansy? He'd wanted to kiss her since Harry's birthday ball but it was still such a decidedly stupid move to actually act on his desires. Pansy was his best friend and he didn't want to lose that.

Draco snickered, knowing precisely what Orion was talking about. He still had his arms around his loved ones but he was happy that they seemed to be perking up, he hated seeing them looking so lost.

Harry shook his head as Fleur went back behind the curtain to sit beside Bill again and went over to pat Orion on the back. "Poor little wolf. You'll be fine." He noticed Madam Pomfrey eyeing him and took a cautious step back, "What?"

"Don't worry Mr. Potter, I'm not going to wrestle you in to a cot and examine you. Though how did you fare in this ambush?" Poppy's voice was filled with loathing as she spoke about the fight that had just taken place. How someone could target innocent children like that made her blood boil.

"What I was truly wondering is if you have given any thought to your profession after your schooling. You have the right touch Mr. Potter and if you have any inklings about going into healing I would be happy to take you on as an apprentice." Poppy had no idea what Harry Potter wanted to do with his life but she recognized talent when she saw it. She had only taken on apprentices twice during her career, most time not thinking it was worth the effort but she had a feeling that with Mr. Potter it would be.

He blinked. "I...er...I haven't really been thinking about what I'm going to do with my life except survive and see to it that the two great bumwarts are removed from making people's lives a misery mostly." His brows knit, healing hadn't ever occurred to him as a possible profession and really
aside from Hermione talking every now and again he didn't know much about other professions there were in the wizarding world. Quidditch, Auror, politician, teacher, curse-breaker, dragon handler, and now healer were the only ones that had ever blipped on his radar and that was mainly because those were the only ones he'd ever seen anything of really. "And I'm actually not anything more than a little dirty and dusty for once after a battle."

Poppy smiled and petted Harry's cheek. "Don't worry about deciding anything now Harry, I just put it out there. You should be whatever you wish to be. And it's a good thing your bed here won't have to be used this time." She looked up as several students with various cuts and bruises entered. "It looks as if I will be busy enough anyway." Poppy hurried away to administer cots and check them out.

Arthur looked at his family and kissed Molly's temple, murmuring softly to her, "I know you want to see Bill. I'm going to take our brood to the Great Hall. Come find us when you're ready to switch out."

Molly nodded and hugged her husband tight. She knew that things would be rough in the time to come but all of her family was still here and anything else they would handle together. Letting go of Arthur she walked to Fleur behind the screen to sit with her son.

Fleur looked over at her from where she sat, close to Bill's uninjured hand, holding it tightly. "I do not like zis. 'E should be moving, 'e ez always moving."

"Yes, I don't think he's ever been still since before he was born." Fleur was right, Bill was always moving, even in sleep he was always moving, sprawling, kicking. It was very wrong seeing him this still. "He is here though, to move again as soon as he wakes up." If Molly didn't concentrate on the positive she would burst out crying again and she didn't want Bill to hear that, even if he was sleeping.

"C'est vrai." Fleur brought Bill's hand to her cheek, rubbing against it. "I am scared 'e will try to push me away when 'e wakes. We will fight and zat makes me angry. 'Ow dare zat low dog do zis to my Bill?"

Molly reached out and placed a hand on Fleur's shoulder. "He is going to try and push you away yes. Thinking he doesn't deserve you anymore. Don't let him, no matter how hard it will get. You are his match Fleur in every way." She looked at her sleeping son again. "I hear that Bill stepped between Greyback and a little girl, even if he knew this would happen I think he would to the same anyway."

"Oui 'e would." She kissed Bill's fingers. "My brave, brave man. 'E can try to push me away but I made my choice to be wiz 'im and I am not going to let 'im be stupid and ruin zat because of a few scars and a touch of creature." She sniffed, "Le fou always forgets zat I 'ave veela blood."

"You're a good girl Fleur, one I am proud to call daughter." Molly pressed a kiss to Fleur's vibrant hair before moving to the other side of the bed, sitting down on the chair there and waiting for her boy to wake up.

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Harry made a few quiet rounds, asking questions and making sure that the injured were on the mend. He quietly stopped Ginny from trying to coax Fleur away from Bill's bedside to get some food and sleep and instead found an empty cot to push up against Bill's, like they'd done for him when Hermione was hurt, and asked Dobby to bring some of Fleur's favorite food.
From there he got a bed into one of the Chamber's off rooms for Fred, George, and Draco, with strict instructions that he not be made to think about what they were doing in that bed, and he did the same for Charlie and Blaise. He made Ron go with Luna so he could settle himself.

Neville, bless his gentle, practical soul, had pulled Ginny with him to harvest some ingredients for the potions Snape was already working himself to mild insanity to complete for the infirmary. Harry bullied Remus and Sirius, with McGonagall's assistance, into their quarters with Aurora and promised that as soon as Pansy was done with him, Orion would be joining them, and he asked if Narcissa could be invited to assist Snape.

Minerva pat him on the shoulder. "I'll take care of it. Now take some time for yourself, get Miss Granger to sit and settle as I understand she's been calming and mothering the younger Gryffindors who were in Hogsmeade."

He smiled. "Kay. Thanks Headmistress." He made his way to the Gryffindor common room, smiling as he saw Hermione giving a third year a hug before the third year scampered off to his dorm. He came up and pulled his girlfriend into a hug. "Hey you."

"Hi." Hermione practically melted against Harry, wrapping her arms around him in turn and holding him close to her. Many of the third and fourth years had been very upset about what had happened in Hogsmeade and she had done her best to calm them down as best she could. She knew that no matter how busy she'd been, Harry would have had it at least ten times worse. Harry always wanted to take care of everyone and it was another puzzle piece as to why she loved him so much. "How are you?"

He pulled her with him onto one of the couches, his eyes quickly scanning those still in the common room and finding himself amused by the way they looked at him and Hermione, smiled, and then seemed to relax.

"I'm okay. So's everyone else as far as they can be. Orion's trying to put off talking to Pansy as long as he can so he was helping Madam Pomfrey until she booted him out. He has to go talk to her now. Everyone else, aside from Bill, is fine, settled in and awake if maybe stuck on bedrest for a couple of days for those who were injured."

He kissed her temple. "Fleur's sleeping in a cot next to Bill and I left her a tray of bouillabaisse and mille feuille for dessert on stasis for when she wakes up. All of me and mine are safe and as sound as they can be. Bill's the worst off and he'll be okay, Fleur will sort Bill out, the two of them will be alright."

Hermione shifted so she could rest her head against Harry's chest and wrap her arms around his midriff as they sat on the couch. "My strong Harry, always looking out for everyone else. I'm so proud of you, love you so much." Hermione loved and cared for all the ones close to her, their pride but her first priority would always and forever be Harry. "Orion doesn't think twice about going snout to snout with a werewolf four times his size but he can't face his lady wolf. He must have noticed that Pansy didn't exactly look furious now didn't he? And Fleur will sort Bill out, the two of them will be alright."

"I'm not the only one looking out for everyone," he nuzzled his nose against hers with a smile, "my beautiful tigress has been looking after the troupe too like the amazing girl she is. As for Ri, well all Greyback could have done was kill him, Pansy can rip his heart out, toss it in a blender, and hit frappe. I don't think she will but love is a scary thing, so Ri's a little skittish."

Nodding, Hermione rested her head over Harry's heart, hearing the steady thump of it. "Love is the scariest thing in the world and the most amazing thing too. If she does hurt Orion without reason
though, I will tear her apart no matter how big and scary Slytherin queen she is."

He chuckled, "You'd have to get in line since Remus is number one on the 'I get to kill the heartbreakers' list. I don't think she will though, break his heart that is." He played his fingers through her hair, "She's possessive about showing her animagus form but when Orion was down she went right to wolf and nearly ripped Greyback's hand off. Plus she ruins her shoes and clothes for him."

"That's true, and we all know what her clothes and shoes means to her, especially her shoes." Hermione chuckled but it made her feel better, Harry was right, Pansy did care about Orion, probably more than she knew herself.

"Yup," he sighed, "You know I feel petty and selfish but I am so pissed off that our date was interrupted by the attack."

"Yeah, I know. I feel the same way but I didn't want to say anything...I feel so bitchy even thinking it. I've all but given up hope of us having a conventional date though, it doesn't look as if it's in the cards for us." Hermione's hand kneaded along his ribs, much like a happy cat would.

"I refuse to give up hope on that, but maybe not a conventional one until after we finally get rid of the bald wonder and the bearded bee." He ran his hand up and down her back lazily, in much the same rhythm his tail moved in when he was content. "I still plan on trying though. I hear Australia's nice this time of year, maybe we could convince McGonagall to let us floo there for a night then floo back?"

That had Hermione laughing and she reached up to press a kiss against Harry's neck. "Although the Headmistress has a terrible weak spot for you Harry, I think she will draw the line at flooing between continents. Besides the distance and time difference would make you so sick from the floo travel itself that no date would be possible. We always have the Chamber and the Room of Requirement. A blanket, some food...some music. Let's start small shall we?"

"Mmm good point." He kissed the top of her head, noticing peripherally that the more they laughed, smiled and relaxed, the more the rest in the room did the same. They really were leaders he supposed, in the best possible way. "Next weekend then, we'll have a Come and Go Room picnic."

"Though I hardly dare to say the word...It's a date." Hermione nuzzled closer until she was practically wrapped around him like an octopus. She noticed the tension of the room easing as well but since it made feel weird and self conscious to think about it she tried her best not to.

He smiled, "Good. Now, that movie you were telling me about in Carly's before the bottom dropped out, mind picking up the explanation again?"

Chuckling, Hermione pulled her feet up and underneath her as she went back to explaining said movie and all its brilliance to Harry in a low and amused tone.

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Pansy was waiting in the common room, having soothed the others and shooed them to their dorms, and she stood, hip cocked, gaze sharp and intent on the dark hair and amber eyes that slunk into the room. She lifted a brow and waited for him to notice her, and realize that his time of avoidance was up.

It didn't take long for Orion to notice that he wasn't alone and that all his avoidance plans had been
Amber eyes went to the entrance of the boys dorm and he tried to calculate if he could make it but then he took a deep breath, he wasn't that much of a coward or an arse. "Er, hi...Everything okay after the day's excitement?"

One dark brow rose slowly, and entire dissertation in the movement, and being who she was she cut right to the chase. "You kissed me."

Strangely enough, hearing those words from her lips, calmed him down, something must be wrongly wired in his brain and he blamed his father for that. "I did yes."

She kept her gaze on his, kept their eyes connected, demanding that the questions that one simple brush of lips against hers created be answered. There were several that whirred in her head but only one really mattered, the one that would tell her whether to castrate Orion or not. "Why?"

"Because I couldn't stop myself, because I've been wanting to kiss you for over six months now, because you are fantastic in every way...take your pick. All the reasons are true." He met her gaze calmly, not trying to move closer or step away, just standing still and looking at her.

Now surprise shimmered through her, her head tilting as if trying to catch the echo of his words, her eyes narrowing a bit in confusion. "You've been wanting to kiss me. For six months." They weren't questions, just repeating the answer that was most important to her heart as it had started flipping in her chest when she'd heard it. So she measured it out in her head and on her own tongue. She wasn't fool enough to ask why to that, she knew her own worth, her own appeal and questioning it was an exercise in stupidity. "You're two years younger than me," it was neither condemnation nor a 'no' simply a statement of the facts.

"I am, or you are two years older than me, depending on how you want to see it." Orion still didn't break eye contact. "I've been holding back because I treasure our friendship more than I can put into words but if you're going to let two years be the reason we're not doing this...Then you aren't nearly as smart as I thought you were."

Now she stepped forward, eyes staying on his. "You kissed me, and not because you were trying to distract me or the heat of the moment," she came to a stop in front of him, not nearly as struck by the fact that she had to look up at him now as she'd been before, "Do you regret it?"

"Not for a second." As Orion said the words, he realized that it was true. He might have worried a bit excessively over Pansy's reaction but he didn't regret kissing her at all. It had been brilliant and so much better than all his dreams about working up the courage to do it.

She measured his honesty for a moment, then softened, her frame losing the stiffness of a possible fight. Her hand lifted and brushed her fingers gently over the cut that was almost completely healed on his cheek before her lips curved. "Okay."

She stepped back and walked to the entrance of her dorm, looking over her shoulder and smirking at him. "Then you'll just have to catch me if you can." She slipped into her dorm before he could react, a grin appearing on her face. It was going to be a bit of an odd mental transition but she'd work at it, so long as Orion worked at catching her.

For a moment or two, Orion just stood there, gaping before a broad, wolfish smile spread over his features. Oh he didn't mind the chase at all, in fact he was thrilled about it, the wolf in him howling in glee. He would chase and he would capture because Pansy was something worth chasing.
Ron stepped out onto the balcony that circled one of the castle towers and smiled at the sight of Luna feeding a baby Gargoyle limestone and blood paste, "Orphan?"

"Rejected, parents are still alive but don't want her. No one can really say that Gargoyles have the fluffy, caring gene." Luna smiled and continued to feed the little one. "Everyone is worthy of a chance to grow up through, and look at her, she's so cute."

Truth be told the gargoyle looked like a slug with stubby wings and paws and a face so deformed and smushed it looked like it had been whacked with a shovel several times. It was a face that not even a mother could love but Luna was special and it made Ron proud and happy that she was so loving and fair.

He reached around his girlfriend and tickled the rough stone skin behind a floppy ear, grinning and the pleased rumble like stone grating against stone the gargoyle made, "Definitely a sweetheart."

He pressed a kiss to Luna's cheek and got his hand out of the way as more limestone paste was fed to the little one. "Bill woke up an hour ago. Tried to get Fleur to leave, wound up with four ladies scolding him into infinity and Fleur just sitting there, stubborn like, and re-bandaging his arm."

Luna chuckled as she finished feeding the baby gargoyle it's meal. She pet her and leaned down to press a kiss against the smooshed stone face, making sure the gargoyle would be safe and well until next meal. "Good. Good that he's woken up, good that he got scolded too. A wolf is a stubborn creature but they are nothing against a veela. It's so silly...like Fleur would only love his skin, what's the skin worth when all the beauty is locked safely inside?"

"Well Bill's always put too much into his looks. He's the 'pretty' Weasley lad. Not that the rest of us are hideous but ever since he first started looking at girls they looked back, the kind of stop and stare look back that winds up with people walking into walls. He's always had that and except for the goblins, to most everyone it's always been about his looks first. Bill's great on the inside but people have always given him worth based on the outside so now that the outside's a little bunged up..." Ron shrugged, "He'll adjust but there's going to be some terrific fights before then."

Luna nodded, she could understand that. "It's always difficult to lose the thing that defines you. We'll just have to continue to remind him that he is still Bill, weather the storm and the fights until he even believes it himself. Oh and we need to keep the wrackspurts away. Blackberries under the pillow should work for that." She wrapped her arms around Ron and hugged her Weasley lad tightly.

He hugged her back, "I'll tell Fleur to borrow the maroon sheets Mum hid in the closet. That way the juice stains should blend right in."

"That's one good solution yes." Luna nodded and smiled. "The other is of course charming the berries so they don't get crushed or stain but both of them works so to each their own."

He grinned and draped his arm over her shoulders, kissing her before bringing her back inside with him. It was cold out on the balcony. "I just pulled a Hermione. I'm a little too used to not being allowed to use magic outside Hogwarts I think."

She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. "Nothing strange about that. Luckily were at Hogwarts
now and in a couple of months that won't matter to you anyway." It had been rather chilly on the balcony so now she almost plastered herself against Ron, stealing his warmth.

"Oh seventeen you can not come soon enough," he grinned, "I am going to enjoy being able to cast outside of school." He tucked her as close against him as possible while they walked, "And since Hermione's been helping I should even be able to pass my Apparition test and get my license for it."

"You are much more brilliant than you give yourself credit for Ronald, you would pass even without Hermione's help but of course everything is easier with help." She inched his jumper up so she could place her cold hand on the warm skin of Ron's back.

"What do you want when you turn seventeen? Of all the things you can wish for, what would you like the most?" Luna came from old pureblood families and coming into your majority was the most important birthday a wizard or witch would ever have, she had been surprised and slightly appalled than no one had made a fuss when Hermione had hers.

"Um..." Ron scratched the back of his neck and thought. He didn't really have an answer for that actually. For years he'd felt overshadowed by his brothers but then, some time around the start of fifth year that had just...melted away. Sure he still felt a little picked on from time to time but he didn't feel less when standing next to his brothers.

Part of that was Luna, part of it was casting his patronus before everyone but Harry, and part of it was the look in his Mum's eyes these days, even when she was irritated with him he could see the pride she had in him. He had his position on the Quidditch team, fair and square and having kicked McLaggan's arse at the hoops, he was making good grades even though he was losing his mind working at it so he'd make it into Auror training and, again thanks to Harry, he didn't have to scrape his knuts together to get what he wanted anymore.

"You know I can't think of anything. The only things I really wish for these days are for Harry to finally have himself a life away from the stupid war and things like that. I have everything I need or want for myself."

"Hmm, I suppose I have to think of something for myself then." Luna's hand was underneath his jumper, stroking up and down smooth, muscled skin. "If nothing comes up I'll just give you myself." It was said in the same direct, way she said everything else, even if she spoke of creatures no one else could see or her homework. And her eyes were calm and pale blue as she looked up at her boyfriend.

His cheeks turned bright red but he couldn't help but smile. His girl was so much more confident in that area than he'd ever been and likely ever would be. Rather than reply verbally he leaned down and in and pressed his lips to hers. Mostly because he knew he'd never find the right words to say.

She hummed and kissed him back, placing her free hand against his cheek as she sucked on his bottom lip. "Mmm, tasty. Now, should we go find Neville and ask him if he can help us make a blackberry bush grow berries in the middle of winter?" She pulled her hand out of his shirt and reached for his hand instead.

He laced his fingers with hers, "It's Neville, he could make a Venomous Tentacula dance the tarantella if he wanted." He kissed the tip of her nose. "Yeah let's go find him."

He tilted his head and thought it over before walking in the direction of the library. Ginny had mentioned that Neville was doing some research on some magical form of bamboo so he was probably there. "Gin probably went to find him after she read Bill the riot act with Mum, she's still
worried about that Tess girl even though Nev would toss himself off a cliff before dating the girl
his Gran's pushing at him."

"She's right to be worried, you know how pureblood's are. Lady Longbottom is more resourceful
that one might think. I can't help it though, I feel a little sorry for this Tess, has anyone asked her
about her feelings? Is she in love with Neville? Or does she have a sweetheart of her own that she
is being forced away from? There are two sides to every story and one should always remember
that." Luna looked as dreamy as ever, as if she looked into a world no one else could see.

"I don't think she is, in love with Neville that is. MacCumhail," he trailed off and hummed a bit,
"That's one of the oldest families in Ireland with magical blood. Normally she'd be...er pushed
toward another old Irish family's son, like the O'Bannions, wouldn't she?" His eyes narrowed in
thought, "Unless...hmm, if she was a witch she'd be going here right Luna?" He looked at his girl.

"Hmm?" Luna blinked as she slowly returned to the here and now. "Oh yes...if she was a witch
being the operative word. There's much more going on here than seen at first sight Ron. My bet is
that the O'Bannions, at least the elder generation didn't want a squib in the family. Lady
Longbottom thinks of the poor girl as a brooding mare, blood of the right sort and a granddaughter
she can control as she pleases."

Ron gave Luna a smile, "What do you say that after Neville grows us some blackberries, we grab
Harry and Hermione and see if we can put a cramp in Augusta's plotting?"

"That sounds quite brilliant my lovely Ronald." They walked to the library in a leisurely pace,
Luna waving away Nargles from corners and rafters as they went.

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Harry grabbed Hermione around the waist and pulled her back into his lap, avoiding her flailing
hands, as she turned an interesting shade of red and hissed just like her animagus form, "Whoa,
easy Hermione. It's lousy and horrible, but you can't go turn Neville's grandmother into a toad."

"But I can! I know exactly how to turn the horrible woman into a toad, then we can drop her into
the black lake to be eaten." She looked at Harry's arm around her waist, holding her steady in his
lap. She was so angry. How could anyone play with a woman's future like that, try to dictate her
very life? It wasn't fair on the Tess girl and it wasn't fair on Neville. Hermione didn't want to hurt
Harry so she stopped her flailing but she was still angry enough to want him to let go so she could
track Lady Longbottom down and give her a few honest truths.

He held her tight and ran a hand over her hair. "We'll give her a proper kick where it hurts love,
right in the plans."

Ron nodded. "Plus we'll help the girl too and keep Neville for my sister's enjoyment."

Neville looked at Ron. "I'm not a pet you know."

"Well no but Ginny's keeping you cause you're hers, have been since fourth year."

"That's true, you are mine and I don't plan on ever giving you up." Ginny looked completely
serious. "I am yours in turn though, all of me." She felt bad for all the things she'd called Tess in
her mind and all the bad things she's thought about her. That girl was just as much a victim as
Neville was.

"I don't get your grandmother." Hermione was still growling. "I thought she had changed, she
spoke to Sirius about you last summer, about the garden you were making with such pride. How
can she do this? To the both of you, how can she act like this?"

"Because she is proud. Before she couldn't care less about whether I made what she considers a 'good' match or not. Now though, that I'm 'worth' the effort to make sure I'm married to a 'proper lass of good breeding' with a humongous dowry," the disgust was ripe in Neville's tone. "And Tess' family will just want to be rid of her to the most pureblooded wizard they can rope into marrying her. It's sick and wrong and exactly the way things have worked in pureblooded families for years."

"What am I then? A harlot from Knockturn Alley?" Ginny felt her temper rise once more. "Both the Weasleys and the Prewetts are part of the oldest pureblood families in Britain. Thanks to Harry I have money, I could shove a dowry in your grandmother's face." Suddenly her temper drained and she just looked sad and small. "Why am I not enough for her? What's so bad about me?"

Neville's jaw flexed and he pulled her closer to him, his arms going round her like a shield, "I don't know why she's so against you love but she can take flight off the west tower with her opinions for all I care. I love you and I'm not about to let my Grandmother take me away from you." He kissed the top of her head. "Or make you feel less like the amazing, wonderful, brave girl that you are. You're incredible Ginevra Weasley and let no one tell you different."

She leaned into him but that doubtful, broken expression didn't leave her face.

That only made Hermione angrier, a toad was too good for lady Longbottom...A amoeba perhaps, or a fungus of some sort. No one had the right to make one of her best friends, one of the strongest persons she knew feel worthless.

Ron looked at his baby sister, "Gin, really don't let old Gusty's opinion get you down. She's just like Aunt Muriel, believes the women needs to stay at home, knitting and baking and sewing and raising kids and saying 'yes dear' and 'of course dear' to their husbands' every whim." He made a gagging noise, "Merlin save us all from that. Who wants a doormat for a wife?"

Luna beamed at him for those words and they earned him a very enthusiastic kiss. "I love you Ronald Bilius Weasley, I really do."

"I'm sure plenty of blokes are looking for doormat wives but Morgana knows I could never be one. Mum's been a stay at home Mum but she is as far from a doormat as you can get. I want to do things with my life, achieve things with Neville right there with me, working together as a couple. That much be so much better." Ginny was getting some color back in her cheeks.

"And I sure as certain don't want you to be a doormat." Neville leaned his cheek against hers. "I like you just as you are Ginny, all fire and wild wind, and when you get snapped up by the Quidditch scouts I'll be in the stands every game cheering you on."

Harry smiled at them, chuckling at Ron's lingering blush from Luna's kiss. "Okay so we need to make a plot, how do we get 'Old Gusty' to drop it?"

Ron hummed, "I think we need to know what this Tess thinks first. Does she have a sweetheart and stuff like that."

Neville wrinkled his nose. "Well I can tell you that she's nineteen and reliant on her family for money until she turns twenty one."

"I think the first thing we should do is actually talk to the poor girl, in a place away from Longbottom Hall. Somewhere she can be herself and hear what she has to say about all this." Hermione was finally relaxing back into Harry though she was still quietly bristling.
Ron chuckled, "That means either Harry or Neville should write her."

"Whoa, wait, why me?" Harry frowned at his redhead friend.

"Harry if a squib gets a letter from you her family'll do cartwheels. Sad fact but fact it is."

"And actually Harry, since I've made my opinion of a betrothal contract with her very clear, Gran won't buy me writing to her." Neville shrugged casually. "But if you wrote, wanting to get to know Tess, 'just in case'..."

"Ugh." Harry grimaced then sighed, "They'd buy that more easily since if I gave a shite about appearances I'd be wanting to make sure your possible future wife is okay to be seen with. Blech, have I mentioned yet that I hate that kind of garbage?"

"You've mentioned it a few times in passing yes." Ginny's voice was dry with sarcasm.

"We all hate that you have to do things like that Harry." Hermione leaned sideways in his lap so she could kiss his cheek gently. "Everyone who knows you, knows that you're not like that. This time though, as revolting as it is, it's the best shot of getting in touch with Tess and setting up a meeting ground."

"I know," he gave her a squeeze, "Still, yuck. I may just decide to let you turn Neville's Grandmother into some slimy lifeform after all."

Those in the room laughed, the mood lightened despite the seriousness of the situation.

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Fleur tapped her foot and glared at her petulant fiance. Bill had just managed to chase his mother out of the room. He could sit up and move around on his own for short periods now but he tired easily and when Molly had tried to coax him back into bed he'd snarled and snapped and Molly had run out, tears shining in her eyes. Fleur had had enough of her man's moody, uncontrolled behavior.

Bill glared back with his uncovered eye. He knew he was a horror to be around right now, knew it but he couldn't stop himself. There was something dark inside him now, dark, growling and snapping. That and he had a much harder time to adjusting to his mangled looks that he tried to show. He had never thought himself a shallow man but now...He didn't know who he was anymore. He didn't recognize the face staring back at him from the mirror and he didn't like it.

The French woman nodded shortly then walked out to go downstairs. She came up behind Molly, who was washing her dishes by hand and making soft sniffles. Fleur gave her a hug, "Belle mere, I would like to ask you to go visiting for some time, until dinner." She pulled a delicate square of linen from her pocket and used it to dry Molly's cheeks. "It will get very loud soon. I do not wish for you to hear ze argument."

Molly looked conflicted, she knew Bill was going through a rough time and she hated that she had allowed herself to be driven to tears by him. On the other hand there really had to be a limit and if anyone was to get through to William Weasley than it was Fleur. Having come to a decision she sniffed. "Okay luv, I'll make myself scarce for a few hours. Take care and don't let him bully you."

Impulsively she threw her arms around the small French girl in a big hug. "Thank Merlin for you Fleur, don't know how we could have done any of this without you."

Fleur pat her back and returned the hug, "'Arry would 'ave 'eard about Bill being difficult and shipped 'im off to ze alpha 'oo helped Orion were I not 'ere. You know 'ow 'Arry ez," she air kissed
Molly's cheeks.

"Yes I know how Harry is, though I have a feeling Bill might have given that poor wolf more trouble that a teenager willing to learn." Molly shook her head and walked to get her cloak and handbag. "Best of luck Fleur, whack on the nose if he gives you too much trouble."

"No worries about zat. Be safe on your visits, or shopping if zat is where you choose to pass ze time."

Fleur kept her smile on her face until Molly had left then her lips firmed and her eyes grew steely as she marched back upstairs. She stepped into Bill's room and used a French locking spell on it before warding the walls of the room to be stronger and to keep sound in. Then she turned to Bill, his eyes locked on her as she laid her wand to the side. "Zis 'as gone on quite enough William Arthur Weasley." She did not yell or snarl, yet.

Bill was smart enough to look and feel wary. His lady could be a formidable force. She was wonderful and he didn't deserve her, he knew that fully well. "What has gone on long enough? Because far as I know this," he motioned to his face, "It's a permanent condition."

"Your wallowing." She marched over to where he sat up in the bed and whacked him on the back of his head careful not to open any wounds that had not scarred over yet. "I 'ave 'ad enough of it. You are not your face."

"It is sort of attached to me, not like I can leave it behind and go about my business." There was a sharp edge of bitterness in his voice. "I'm sorry if I am not happy and go lucky at the moment. No one is forcing you to stay and face my wallowing."

She growled and grabbed a hunk of his hair, giving it a yank and bending down to look into his uncovered eye, "You zink I am going to leave my mate be'ind because you look 'andsome, if a 'andsome face was all it took I would 'ave long ago bonded to a veela man." She wound a lock of his hair around her fist. "It was you. In here," she placed her hand over his heart. "Zis bitter snarling ez not you, not zat snarls are bad exactly, when not bitter zey can be...exciting."

That made his lips quirk up in a smile before he locked his eye on Fleur, growing serious again. "I don't know who I am anymore blossom. I look into a mirror and don't recognize the man looking back at me...It's more than the scars though, something inside me has shifted and changed and I have no idea how to handle it." Bill placed his hands on her hips, his thumbs rubbing smooth, comforting circles on her thighs.

"Zat ma fou, ez ze wolf and you can learn." Her fingers trailed over his uninjured cheek, "Remus can 'elp you zere, or Orion eef your pride can take zat. Zis," now her fingers ghosted over his scars gently as they were still healing, "ez only ze outside."

She closed her eyes and pulled on her veela abilities. Most of them were effortless but the battleform was not, it hurt to change into the half-bird form. Once done she opened eyes with
sharper, telescopic vision. "Tell me, do you love me any less like zis?"

"Of course I don't. I love you always, any shape or form." Bill looked troubled though and reached up to cup her changed face. "I don't like you doing this, hurting yourself to make a point." It made him ache inside that he had driven her to do that. "You're my heart Fleur."

"As you are mine." She let the veela magic go knowing the battleform would melt away with it. "So do not let scars zat I do not care about or le loup growing inside take you away from me. I will follow if you do and ze fight will be very nasty."

Bill brought his other hand up to her face as well, slowly pulling her down for a soft, gentle kiss. "I'll try and do better, be better. Can't promise not to have bad days but I'll try to get rid of the bitterness. I can't have my blossom hurting." He looked down at his lap. "I'll apologize to Mum too, I didn't mean to make her sad."

"Oui you will," she pressed her lips to a broad scar on his cheek, "apologize zat ez. I will ask 'er to leave ze mirror 'Arry gave 'er on your nightstand so zat you can call Remus when you need to oui?"

"Yes, thank you, I appreciate that." He continued to hold her as he tried to come to terms with the man he had become. Bill knew it wouldn't be easy, that he had a long way to go yet but for Fleur he was willing to do anything.

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Harry looked around the Hog's Head and wondered if it was really a good idea to meet Tess here. From the letters they'd been exchanging she seemed way too nice and sweet for Aberforth's pub. Still it was the safest place to have a meeting with someone in Hogsmeade so he'd just have to hope she'd be okay with it.

Entering the Hog's Head, Tess looked around until she saw Harry Potter sitting at a booth. She was aware of the looks she was getting and the rather unique smell inside the pub but it was nothing she couldn't handle. Tess was used to the pubs back in Ireland after all. She made her way over to the booth and offered Potter a somewhat nervous smile. "Mr. Potter? I'm Tess MacCumhail, it's a pleasure meeting you in the flesh."

He smiled back and offered her his hand. "Nice to meet you too Miss MacCumhail." He got up to help her into the booth then sat back down. "Thank you, for agreeing to meet me. I know it couldn't have been easy to get away from Lady Longbottom or your own family."

"Please call me Tess and you know what...It was much easier to slip away than I would have suspected." She shared a companionable smile with Harry. "You would be surprised what you can get away with when you don't really matter."

"No I wouldn't, be surprised that is. I matter here but not where I grew up." He took a sip of his butterbeer. "If I call you Tess then please, call me Harry. I'm not really what you'd call big on formalities." He nodded at the menu she'd opened. "I'd advise sticking to the salad if you're hungry, the stew is absolutely lethal."

"I'll take your advice...Harry." Tess smiled again, happy that the famous Harry Potter was as easy to talk to as his letters had suggested. She had been really nervous to meet with him. Tess ordered a plain salad when a bearded and more than grumpy wizard came to take her order.

Harry just asked for a refill on the butterbeer and chuckled once Aberforth was out of earshot. He liked the younger Dumbledore, he was grouchy and rude but he was blunt and honest too. He
passed the time with chit-chat and pleasantries until Aberforth came back. Once they had their orders and privacy Harry sat back. "I'm sure you've guess that there's a reason beyond what I've put in the letters for me contacting you and setting up a meeting."

"I gathered that yes and frankly I would be disappointed if I was just here to be judged as a fitting, future lady Longbottom." She took a bite of the surprisingly tasty and crisp salad. "I know Neville is your friend and I am guessing that he is about as keen to get married to me as I am to marry him."

"You'd be right about that. Thing is, he's head over heels for Ginny Weasley and she for him. We're hoping we might be able to figure out a way for Nev and Gin to be happy but for you not to be miserable as well." He turned his mug around on the table, a fond smile flirting with the corners of his mouth. "My girlfriend, Hermione, is heavily advocating turning Lady Longbottom and your family into toads until you find yourself out of their 'clutches' her words."

"Oh I like that idea, I think I would like your girlfriend." Tess smiled again at the thought of her family as toads. "They actually look remarkably like toads without any magic necessary. I am not some damsel in distress though...Promise. I am not trying to get my claws into Neville, I'm playing the waiting game until I turn twenty-one and can marry Kieran without anyone having a say."

"I don't think you're a damsel in distress. Kieran? So you have a sweetheart then?"

Tess nodded. "Kieran O' Bannion, we grew up together...Best friends. Then he got his letter and I...I didn't." She looked down at her plate of salad. "Neither family approves. A malfunctioning witch is not worth much. You have no idea, no idea at all how it is, living in the magical world and not being a part of it."

"No I can't say that I do." He reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "But I do know that you're not malfunctioning or worthless. This is coming from a boy who, for the first eleven years of his life, was told he was worthless by the way so I don't know about how it is not being able to use magic while in the magical world but I do know a thing or two about being looked down on because of something I can't control, that I didn't choose."

"I suppose that is the same thing, I'm sorry you had to go through that." She squeezed his hand back in comfort and mutual understanding. "I shouldn't complain, I don't have it too bad, except for the whole forced marriage thing."

"Well you're of legal age right? Nev said something about an inheritance that you're waiting on. I might know one or two people who could help out there, depending on the laws and stuff."

"I'm well over legal age since I'm nineteen, even as a squib. And yes I have an inheritance from a great Aunt but I can't access it until I turn twenty-one...Or get married. Guess what my family plans to use as my dowry?" For the first time since she'd entered the pub she let a sliver of the hopelessness she felt slip through. "I miss Ireland Harry. I miss my family, before I turned eleven they did care. I envy this Ginny because Neville is fighting for her...Kieran hasn't fought for me in the open at all."

He gave her a crooked smile. "Actually if it hadn't occurred to Ginny's best friend and brother that you might want not want a betrothal to Neville as much as Nev doesn't want one to anyone but Ginny...well I'd be worried for your safety cause Ginny'd probably come after you all fire and claws." He pursed his lips in consideration. "Is your Kieran a jealous sort?"

"He's Irish, of course he's the jealous sort, not that he has anything to be worried about. I'm completely mad about the berk, always have been." Tess couldn't help but return Harry's smile,
something about the younger man just made her feel at ease, those who were truly this man's friends must be very lucky people.

He grinned and leaned in over the table. "Then I think I know how we might be able to both get him to fight for you and get you your inheritance."

"I am all ears." Tess leaned in as well, eager to hear what Harry had to say. She liked to view herself as somewhat independent, even being under her family's thumb but she had to admit that she wouldn't mind Kieran actually fighting for her for once.

"Okay here's what I'm thinking, have a betrothal contract drawn up but a clause in the contract that states if one of the betrothed is challenged for the hand of the other, like if Kieran challenged Neville for your hand, and the challenger wins, however they win even if Neville tosses the contest, then they enter into a new betrothal contract with the one whose hand they challenged for. It hinges mostly on your Kieran actually challenging Neville but if he doesn't then Ginny can challenge you and you can throw the contest and still be free from ever having to marry Neville."

"It's a good plan, the best in this situation I think." Tess looked thoughtful. "I wish I could tell you that I'm sure Kieran will challenge Neville but I'm really not. You're right though, Neville's sweetheart can challenge me and I swear I'll be my most abysmal squib self and lose spectacularly. Pave the way for their happiness."

He gave her a gentle smile. "However it falls out you can consider me and mine friends. I'll even whack your Kieran on the back of the head to knock some sense into him if you like."

"I'm hoping no whack will be necessary. I do appreciate the offer of friendship though and I very much return it, for what it's worth." She snuck a glance at the thin, elegant wrist watch she wore. "Oh bugger, I'm going to have to leave soon. I have to catch the train that takes me back to Longbottom Hall. No magical travels for me."

"Alright, be careful on your way back. I'll send Hedwig by after I discuss the plan further with my brain trust." He laid payment on the table, "and I for one think your friendship is worth a great deal."

"You are too kind." Tess smiled and reached into her purse to pull out payment for her food. "It really was a pleasure meeting you Harry Potter. Please do tell Neville hi from me and tell him that I don't want to come between him and Ginny. I think he's a little afraid of me."

He chuckled, "I will but he's not scared of you, more of what his Gran might do if you're in a room by your lonesome."

"Oh, well yes. That's enough to terrify anyone." Tess looked sympathetic. "Lady Longbottom has been quite insistent. If it wasn't illegal I've no doubt that she would happy resort to love potions."

His eyes flashed a bit before he got himself under control and began walking out of the pub with her. "You might want to double check your food and drink regardless and I'll tell Neville to do the same. Recently we found out that the law means nothing to those desperate to have something fall out the way they want."

Tess noticed Harry's reaction but she didn't push for more information. "I'll make sure to be careful with what I eat or drink but I'm not sure how to check it. I do not have magic remember." She pushed honey blonde hair behind her ear and leaned in to kiss Harry's cheek. "Again thank you for today, we'll be in touch then."
He nodded and watched her head off to Hogsmeade station before dashing to find Hermione in the bookshop. They had a sneaky plot to make.

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Neville walked quietly out onto the empty Quidditch Pitch, looking up at Ginny as she flew and worked out whatever Harry's idea for getting him and Tess out of the possible betrothal had slipped into her mind.

The air was cold and stung against her cheeks as she shot through it, handling her broom with relaxed ease, rising, dipping and turning. Ginny wished that everything was as easy as flying. When her fingers went nearly numb with cold she finally made her way to the ground again, seeing Neville there and changed her angle so she touched ground just next to him.

"Hey," he reached out and tucked a flyaway strand of vibrant red behind her ear, "are you okay with Harry's idea?"

"Yeah, I know it's pretend and that it is so that we can have our future." She pressed cold lips against his cheek. "Am I happy to see you sign a marriage contract with another girl...Not so much but the end result will make it better I hope."

"Well if Tess' beau doesn't fight for her then you'll have to fight for me." He wrapped his arms around her. "You'd win even if she wasn't going to throw it. So I guess what I'm asking is more...are you okay with the possibility that you could wind up contracted to marry me?"

"You think I'm worried about that?" Ginny's eyes grew large as galleons. "Neville...I want to marry you. A contract won't bother me at all. I would be proud." Ginny pulled back a little so she could look into Neville's eyes. "Neville Longbottom...Don't you know how much I love you?"

He ducked his head and blushed, "Yes, it's just that...it's silly but I wanted to do the whole, ask your parents for your hand, plan a big amazing proposal and get down on one knee to ask thing for you. That's what you deserve."

"Hey...Look at me." Ginny placed her fingertips beneath his chin and tilted his head up. "Bollocks for the big proposal...As long as I get you in the end I end up with the winning prize. My parents let you live at the Burrow, believe me, they have already given their approval. Who cares how it happens if it ends with you and I together?"

"I know," he gave her a sheepish smile, "I just get stuck on one track and it takes a good bump to get me on another. I do want to be with you, however it happens."

"Let's see what will happen and take it from there." Ginny leaned in for a quick peck. "No matter what it is you and me and it's going to stay that way."

He picked her up by the waist and brought her close for a deeper kiss. "Always and forever Ginny."

She gave an approving hum into his mouth and wrapped her legs around his waist, her broom laying forgotten on the ground next to them. Neville was even better than flying.

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Sirius snuck on silent feet into the bedroom he shared with Remus, putting a finger to his lips to silence their son and Harry who were creeping in behind him, Harry holding a wide awake Aurora who was apparently swept up in the game and was actually being quiet. He narrowed his eyes on
Orion and wagged his finger as his son leaned a little too close to the little cake on the breakfast tray he was carrying, then he slid his bum onto the bed next to Remus to murmur gently, "Moony, wakey, wakey eggs and bakey."

There was a low groan and Remus' head disappeared underneath his pillow as he tried to shut out the sounds and light of the morning.

"You can't wake up Dad like that." Orion hissed at his father. "You know how he is in the mornings. Up dad...Or I'll eat all the chocolate by myself."

An amber eye peered out from beneath the pillow. "Chocolate?"

Sirius chuckled. "Yes my adored chocoholic, one mini death by triple chocolate cake just for you, straight from the Weasley kitchen." He kissed the spot just under Remus' ear.

Harry shook containing his laughter as Aurora squealed at the sound of her 'mother's' voice groggy though it was.

Remus squirmed out from beneath the pillow again and sat up against the headboard, hair on end and with sleep creases down his face. He looked at his family gathered in his bedroom before they zeroed in on the cake in his son's hands.

Sirius chuckled and smoothed his husband's hair down, "Happy birthday Mr. Moony. You get breakfast in bed, cake included, and our joyous company without any singing to make you burrow under the pillow again."

"Thank you for the birthday wishes and for the non singing," Remus smiled and his eyes began to sparkle. It didn't matter that he was well in his middle age, birthdays were still something special, especially when celebrated with loved ones. "Come on then. Get in bed and share this cake with me."

Harry chuckled and lit the single candle with his wand as Orion got onto the bed, settling on Remus' other side, the tray over his lap. "Make a wish." He slid onto the bed as well, Aurora squealing and clapping her hands and blowing spit bubbles like the little drool monster she was.

Grinning, Remus looked at the candle before closing his eyes and blowing it out, wish safely tucked away in his heart. When he was done he let Orion slice the cake and hand out pieces to them all and he had to chuckle at the way Harry had to struggle to keep his plate away from grabby little baby hands. His eyes found his husband's all his love shining out of them as he looked at Sirius. There was only one thing he wished for, he had everything else.

Sirius gave him a kiss. "Love you Remus, beyond infinity."

"Love you too." Remus kissed him back, his hand in Sirius' hair before letting go and turning his attention back to his cake. "Having you all here, best present ever."}

Harry smiled. "I'm in agreement on that but I feel it my solemn duty to inform you that the entire student body has a celebration planned for lunch. Be prepared for well wishes and bring ear plugs as I'm pretty sure they've got the birthday song on the list of things to do."

Sirius laughed. "Oh Merlin, maybe we should just barricade ourselves in here for the day."

"Suddenly that doesn't sound like a bad idea at all." Celebrating with family was one thing, the entire student body was another thing completely. Remus was not used to being popular to be liked.
Harry chuckled and kept Aurora from getting hold of the chocolate. "You'd never hurt all the students' feelings like that, not to mention they'd all probably just lie in wait to celebrate each class they next have with you."

Sirius shuddered. "Oh now that's just scary."

"You're not exactly making me feel better and more confident about this you know." Remus looked at his husband before finishing off his cake and reaching for Aurora so that Harry would be able to eat his in peace. He nuzzled his daughter's plump cheeks, blowing raspberries against her skin and making her laugh all bubbly and happy. "No singing though Harry, please tell me there's no singing." He looked at his oldest cub pleadingly.

"Hey I don't know the details," Harry forked up a bite of cake, "All I know is that there are plans for a celebration. I think McGonagall's taken it in hand so it doesn't get out of control but," he shrugged, "I can spread the word that you'd really rather not be sung to on your birthday other than that, not much I can do about it."

"That's more than enough, thank you Harry." Remus continued to cuddle Aury and then looked at his son. "You are suspiciously quiet."

"Chocolate." Was Orion's simple answer as he helped himself to another piece of cake. "I do have a prezzie though and I know that you will get at least a card from Alek as well...I kind of let your birthday slip our last lesson." Orion didn't look apologetic at all though.

Sirius made a soft grumble then winced as Remus elbowed him and Harry laughed at him, "Abuse I swear that's all I get."

Harry snorted, "You really need to get over the Alek thing Sirius. Especially since he and Spath keep growing closer."

"They are yes." Orion nodded. "They still fight but the edge is gone...it's more like foreplay now."

"Orion...Please." Remus groaned and rolled his eyes. "And Harry's right Siri...There has never been even a smidgen of a thing between me and Aleksander."

"Yeah, just like there's never been a smidgen of a thing between Hermione and Cormac McLaggan." He pointed at Harry when his godson growled, "See! You're no better than me cub."

"Merlin save me from jealous alphas." Remus rolled his eyes again. "And you can stop giggling because you will be no better either." He poked his son in the side. "Sirius, you know you can trust me, Harry knows he can trust Hermione. That should be enough right?"

Sirius grabbed his husband's hand and brought it to his mouth, kissing the palm. "I do trust you. It's nothing to do with trust that has me twitching."

Harry nodded. "Trust isn't the issue. Plus Moony I don't think you'd be any better if the situations were reversed."

"Bloody hell no." Remus winced at his own words and covered Aury's ears belatedly. "Sorry. No though, I would rip them limb from limb if anyone actually made a try for my Pads."

"And people question why I have temper issues...Look at what I've got to work with." Orion looked at Harry and snuck yet another piece of cake onto his plate.

"I'm actually less worried when it comes to you. Mainly because if someone tried to get close to
Pansy and she didn't want them there, well there'd be nothing left for you to rip into tiny bleeding pieces." Harry moved to sit Indian style on the bed. "I'd be more worried that she'll make other girls explode when they try and catch your eye."

Orion got a thoughtful expression on his face at that. He'd never noticed any girl look at him that way. Granted he'd never looked either since all he saw was Pansy, all he wanted was her. "Nah, it would be something sneakier than making them explode. Something slow, painful and utterly terrifying." He actually grinned at the thought.

"Only you Ri." Harry shook his head and pulled a box from his pocket, enlarging it before handing it to Remus.

Remus shifted Aurora to one arm and accepted the box with the other. "Thank you." He still felt like the lonely freak boy just coming to school when he got a gift, never could figure out why anyone would want to give him anything.

Sirius smiled and helped Remus unwrap Harry's gift, whistling when the box was opened to reveal a well preserved set of leather bound books, technically a set of Codices written by some of the greatest minds the world had known.

Harry scratched the back of his head. "They were in the Lestrange Vault. After I had Bill and Tonks check to make sure they weren't illegal or harmful I couldn't think of anyone who'd have a better appreciation for them than you Remus."

Remus stroked a finger over the backs of the leather bound books, his heart twisting inside his chest. He could already see himself cracking them open, getting lost in the words inside. It was a treasure more than a gift. "Thank you Harry, really thank you so, so much." Even his voice was choked up.

'I'm just glad you like them Papa Wolf." Harry smiled into Remus' eyes. He did view Remus as a parent despite having only known him for three years.

"I do like them, they are wonderful." Remus placed the books on the bed and handed Aury to Sirius so he could twist and wrap his arms around Harry. "Thank you cub."

He loved Harry and though he still felt and always would feel guilty that he'd let Dumbledore make it so that Harry couldn't grow up with him and Orion the love and the bond they had now was stronger than the guilt. Harry was his child, he would do anything for him.

Harry hugged him back for a long moment, loving the affection, before scooching away a bit with a grin. "Okay I'm hogging Ri's moment, he actually went shopping, on his own without any female presence giving assistance, with money he...sorta earned."

Orion just grinned. "What do you mean sorta earned? You make me sound like either a thief or a rentboy. I'm just filling the void left by two certain redhead brothers, giving the student body what they want and need." He blinked innocently when his parents eyed him. Then he reached to the floor and grabbed a rather large wrapped box, giving it to his Dad. "Here."

Remus took the box and peeled off the paper and sliding off the lid. His eyes widened at the long brown leather coat inside. "Orion...This must have cost a fortune."

The younger wolf shrugged. "I got a good deal and I thought it would suit you." He fiddled with the bedspread before he was wrapped in a hug just as Harry had been. whispering thank you into his hair.
Sirius beamed at his family, kissing Aurora's little hands as they made a grab for his hair and making her laugh even as he prevented a hair tangle. "I will be giving you my gift to you later this evening," he rolled his eyes at Orion and Harry's suspicious looks, "Not that sort of gift you two. Honestly do your brains live in the gutter?"

"No, we just know you. Your mind most often lives in the gutter and quite frankly it's too soon for another little sister or brother. Make sure to remember your potions or wear a condom." Orion wagged a finger in the air as he spoke, causing Remus to groan.

"Orion please." Remus cheeks grew red.

Harry snorted and pulled Orion into a noogie briefly. "I'm in accord with the little alpha wolf, remember your precautions if you play mump the cudie tonight."

"You are both entirely too dirty minded. Sex isn't a birthday present, not when Moony can have it whenever, however, and wherever he likes from me with just a few words. Not saying it won't happen but it's not his present for Merlin's sake." Sirius rolled his eyes at the two boys.

"Since it's my birthday, I'm asking please, please let go of the sex talk. If this conversation goes on I can promise that no one will have it for a very long time." He sent a warning look his husband's way. "Thank you so much for the wonderful gifts and for the cake...Even though Orion ate about eighty percent of it by himself."

Orion didn't even pretend to look ashamed. "Hey, I'm a growing wolf. If a cake is there I am going to eat it."

Harry poked him. "Your Dad gets the same percentage of your birthday cake that you had of his when your day rolls round." He leaped off the bed when Orion swatted at him, a grin on his face. "Or I could just tell Pansy what you sleep with when no one's looking. Matter of fact I think I will do just that, Harry Birthday Moony, see you!" He ran out the room as fast as his legs could go.

With a growl, Orion was off the bed as well. "Yeah, happy birthday, Dad...I gotta go. I have a lion to kill." And with that he was out of the room, hot on Harry's heels.

Remus blinked as their older cubs vanished out of the room before laughing out loud. "We have wonderful boys Siri."

Sirius wiggled closer so that Remus was holding their daughter and he was holding them both. "We do actually, shocking that." His chuckle gave that away as a lie.

Wiggling back against Sirius, Remus turned his head and kissed his husband's neck. "Thank you for this, cake in bed and our wonderful family. Perfect birthday."

"You're welcome." He nuzzled at his husband. "Nothing's too good for my Moony."

Remus wasn't sure he agreed with that but he didn't argue, he felt much too content. Before the hustle and bustle day began he took this moment to spend it in the arms of Sirius with their daughter blowing spit bubbles and laughing at something amusing only she noticed.
Ron rolled his shoulders and really wanted to wrinkle his nose at the pretentious decorations that were spread out all over Longbottom Estate's back lawn where this farce of a party was being held. Lady Longbottom had arranged an Easter betrothal party to celebrate Neville signing a contract with Tess. The only saving graces to this idiocy were that he knew it was going to come crashing to a screeching halt one way or another, and the ethereal presence of his girlfriend beside him.

He noticed that Luna was looking at a brooding brunette over by a hedge and leaned in to murmur in her ear, "Are you thinking he's needing a nudge love?"

Luna nodded, happily surprised by her boyfriend's perception. Ron really was wonderful. "Yes, I think he could use a little push. He is obviously not happy with what's going on here but I am not sure it will be enough for him to actually cross the line and do something about it." She looked over where Tess and Neville stood, Tess looking like a gilded daffodil in her bright yellow dress. Luna hoped Tess' sweetheart would man up. She knew Ginny would do what was needed if he didn't but she wished her friend wouldn't have to. Ginny would face enough trouble with acceptance from Neville's Grandmother as it was.

"Do you want to prod him or should I?" Ron studied the heir to the O'Bannions rolling his eyes at the petulant pout on his face while giving mental thanks that his own parents didn't care about anything but their children's happiness.

"No, I'll go poke the bear." Luna leaned up for another kiss. "Though if he doesn't lose that pout soon I can't understand why Tess would even want him. He seems like a spineless rumplestinkle to me." Straightening her light blue dress, Luna left her boyfriend's side to see if she could get the brunet boy to actually take action.

The O'Bannion heir looked over at the fae-ish blond who came up to him and tilted his head, "Is there something I can do for ya lass?"

"No, I'm just came over to say hello." Luna smiled sweetly at him. "I'm Luna, a friend of the groom to be." She gestured toward Neville and Tess. "We were all a little surprised by this but I don't really know why. Neville is great. I can see why this girl fell for him so quickly. They make a rather beautiful couple don't you think. I can't wait to see what their babies will look like."

The brunette turned so red he could have been mistaken as a Weasley and he glared at Neville, "No offense to yer friend but I don't think love is a part of this." He drank deeply from his glass of Guinness.

"No?" Luna tilted her head and looked at the Irishman with wide innocent eyes. "What else could it be? I mean even if Tess here had a sweetheart she must have gotten tired of waiting eventually...And you shouldn't make the mistake of not realizing Neville's charms. He is a wonderful man, he always shows that he puts his heart's wishes first, before anything." Luna told the truth after all, Neville was like that.

"Does he," it was ground out as hostile eyes took in Neville saying something to Tess that made her blush and laugh. It wasn't fair! That was his Tess. He'd been planning to marry her since they were children! They'd technically been secretly engaged since they were fourteen! Now some stupid contract that the pudgy teddy bear there had been bullied into was ruining that. They'd only needed
two more years why couldn't Tess have waited for him? He caught her eyes and was almost stabbed in the heart at the sad disappointment in them. Why did she look at him like that?

Luna's eyes stayed sharp and friendly at the same time. "I think a part of why they fit so well together is that Nev waived the right to a dowry. Must be so nice for Tess to know that someone wants her just for who she is and not for some inheritance she'll get further down the line."

Kieran's mind screamed that he wanted her for who she is. He only hadn't wanted to steal away the inheritance her aunt gave her and so had suggested waiting. Why hadn't she waited? 'Why didn't you-'

"-fight."

The word, echoing the thought in his mind, had Kieran blinking and he turned to see The-Boy-Who-Lived coming up to kiss the almost faeish blond on the cheek while sharp green eyes looked at him. "I'm sorry I didn't catch that."

Harry chuckled and nodded over at Ginny, who was drumming her fingers on her arm, "I said that if Ginny has to watch much longer this might go from a party to a fight."

"Why would the redheaded lass start a fight?"

"Love. Jealousy. And the loophole."

"Loophole?"

Luna nodded. "There is a loophole to the contract. Any suitor can challenge the rival for their affection to a duel. If the challenger wins the contract transfers to the challenger and the one they were fighting for. If Ginny challenges Tess and wins, the contract would stand between her and Neville instead. It's terribly romantic I think."

Harry nodded. "I feel a bit badly for Tess though. She's no push over or damsel in distress but everyone wants to know that the person they love would fight for them." He caught Hermione's eye across the lawn and blew her a kiss, eyes alight and glowing. "When I spoke to her she mentioned that she had a sweetheart but he was just waiting for the easiest way for them to be together. I suppose she accepted the contract because she felt that if he wouldn't fight for her, why should she continue waiting for him?"

He smirked when the O'Bannion looked over at Tess again then stiffened before setting his glass aside and striding over to the area where Neville and Tess were standing. "Took him bloody long enough."

"Finally! Thank you for coming over and helping me push him over." Luna let out a deep breath and patted Harry on the arm. "I was about to pull him on the ears and scream at him for being such a blockhead. His brain must be absolutely infested with wrackspurts. Worst case I've ever seen."

Harry chuckled. "A genius he's not but then again, old prissy pureblood family, set in their ways, it's no wonder the wrackspurts swarmed."

He watched as the Irishman pulled out a glove and threw it into Neville's face. "Seriously? That's how you officially challenge someone to a duel?"

"It is the official way to challenge someone but I can't help but wonder where he got the glove. He wasn't wearing gloves, does he always carry some around just in case? Otherwise he might be brighter than he looks, I never saw him pull his wand to summon a glove." Luna looked at the
Irishman curiously before noticing Ginny's pleased smile as Neville accepted the challenge. Lady Longbottom though looked as if she was about to have a heart attack.

Neville looked over the yard and gestured to Harry. "I choose Harry Potter as my second."

Harry rolled his eyes as Augusta tried to protest, saying that Neville couldn't use magic outside of Hogwarts without risking expulsion and as he stepped up just behind Neville he cleared his throat, "Well not without the Headmistress' approval that's true. Neptune?"

The phoenix appeared on his shoulder and he smoothed his fingers over the vibrant blue feathers.

"Would you mind getting Headmistress McGonagall for us? If Mr. O'Bannion doesn't mind waiting for her to arrive?"

Kieran nodded shortly, "Of course."

Neville smiled, summoned a house-elf to bring him some parchment and a quill, penned a note to McGonagall, and handed it to Neptune. "Here, so she doesn't get too angry over her Easter being disturbed."

Neptune took the letter, gave Harry a look that spoke volumes about being used as a common letter owl before flashing out in a flurry of blue flames.

Hermione had to smile at that as both she and Ginny moved closer to where Harry and Neville were.

Now Lady Longbottom was trying to make Tess speak up in protest but the young woman just shook her head stubbornly.

Kieran's family was also squawking up a storm behind him, demanding he drop the challenge or they'd kick him out of the family home, take away his inheritance, and disown him among other things. After a solid five minutes of this he turned sharply, facing his family and slashing his hand through the air.

"Enough! I don't care. It's Tess I love and it's Tess I'll have even if I have to fight a boy for her," he looked over at her, "It's only her who can tell me to retract my challenge."

Tess' eyes widened as the whole hoard of both hers and Kieran's families turned on her expectantly but at the same time her back straightened. This was one time she wouldn't back down no matter what. "Don't." She met Kieran's eyes. "Don't retract the challenge. I love you."

He gave her a smile, "Then I won't retract it. I've loved you since we were younger than him," he nodded at Neville.

"Well then," McGonagall appeared, Neptune on her shoulder, "as Mr. O'Bannion will not retract his challenge I see that there is no other course of action except for me to grant Mr. Longbottom permission to use magic outside of the school."

She cut a look over at Lady Longbottom's squawk, "Enough Augusta, you should have learned the first time around that you can not force the hands of the young. Now if all but the combatants will please clear the area. I will referee."

Neville gave her a short bow, "Thank you Headmistress."

Giving Neville's Grandmother a defiant look, Ginny hurried over to give Neville a kiss for good
luck before she walked back to give the two duelists room. Even though she knew Neville would lose on purpose she was still worried. A duel was a duel after all and something could go wrong.

Harry pat Neville's shoulder and stepped back into the second's position as Neville and Kieran bowed to each other and paced off. At the signal spells immediately began flying. Harry noticed that Kieran was fast, very fast, and Neville had some trouble dodging but Neville's spells were stronger. He and Neville had talked this out and agreed that before he tossed the duel Neville would give his best. From what Harry could see, his speed was Kieran's only real advantage. Neville had more experience, stronger magic, and better reflexes but all it would take was one fast stupefy for Neville to lose.

It was completely silent around the two fighters. Lady Longbottom, Tess' family and Kieran's family were still white faced and shocked looking. Tess and Ginny couldn't help but watch the whole thing with scrutiny and worry despite that the two of them were almost sure about the outcome.

Luna was busy talking to some flowers in a corner of the garden though, mock duels didn't interest her.

Neville hissed as a weak cutting curse got past his guard and knicked his bicep but it was the perfect opening for him to throw the duel. He dropped his guard and heard the stupefy incantation then saw only black as it hit.

Minerva lifted a brow in quiet amusement before announcing Kieran O'Bannion as the victor of the duel.

Despite Augusta's growl of annoyance, Tess flew down the stairs from the patio and threw herself into Kieran's arms, holding on to him tightly.

Ginny went over to her fallen hero, placed his head in her lap and asked Hermione to perform enervate on him, placing kisses all over his face as he waked up.

"It's all like a romance novel by Estrelle Lorange. All it needs are throbbing loins and ripped shirts." Luna shook her head at the happenings around her, fixing a ribbon of flowers in her hair before reaching for Ron's hand.

Ron laughed and kissed her cheek. "I personally like our love story better. Come on, let's go congratulate Neville on a masterful performance."

Harry slipped an arm around Hermione's waist watching as Neville sat up and gave Ginny a much more through kiss and as Kieran spun Tess round in a happy circle. "Not a bad outcome, though I do need to apologize to Neptune for asking him to play messenger."

"I don't think he minds as much as he pretends to." Hermione leaned against Harry's side. "Notice that he never fails to do what you ask of him. I think he was rather bored before he bound himself to you and yes not a bad outcome at all. Two happy couples and meddling witches and wizard stopped. All in all I'd say that's a very good day."

Harry saw Kieran murmur in Tess' ear and grin mischievously before the two of them apparated away and he had to laugh at the sour looks on the three family's faces. "All hail the end of meddling families. Now if I could just get rid of one more meddler things would be perfect," the last sentence was muttered irritably.

He kept getting notes from Dumbledore and he had no idea how he was getting them into
Hogwarts. He did tell McGonagall but she was baffled as well.

Hermione wrapped her slim arm around Harry's waist. She knew he was bothered by the notes Dumbledore was leaving. "Maybe you should take him up on one of his many offers and meet with him? Not alone of course...More like a set up. Maybe Tonks could finally apprehend him. Even the bee can't wiggle out from all the crimes directed toward him now."

"No but he can still hold Orion hostage," he rested his head against hers, "I don't want to risk it until Snape has figured out the counter ritual."

Hermione sighed, it irked her that she'd managed to lose sight of Orion's plight. "You're right, Orion has to come first. Hopefully Snape can figure out the counter ritual soon. Before Parkinson takes things into her own hands."

Harry chuckled. "She'd rip Dumbledore's head off and make someone eat it. It's cute, the way she's letting Orion chase and court her."

"Cute in a completely terrifying way." Hermione agreed with a smile. "Orion is certainly taking the chasing and the courting seriously too. Last weekend he'd managed to charm a bathtub full with her favorite French confections."

"Then he got chased around the castle by his own trousers for trying to make her fat and he was grinning the whole time." Harry grinned. "I don't think he'd mind her actually biting him."

"No, I don't really think he would mind it at all. He would wear such a bite like a badge of honor. I believe it will take quite a lot before she bites him though. Lots of hexing first." Hermione was grinning too. "So...Tess and Kieran. Gretna Green?"

"I'd put money on it," he tilted his head as the music started up again at Neville's request, a lively tune that had those not pouting or fuming tapping their toes. "Come on my Athena, let's dance." He pulled her to the center of the lawn and lifted her up by the waist in a brief circle before falling into a dance step. They'd get back to the daily grind and his worries after the Easter Hols but for now he was going to have fun with his girl.

Severus sprinkled a few drops of alphyn blood to the phial, stirred, and settled to wait. It would take another hour until he would know if it worked or not, until then he supposed reading would have to pass the time.

"So...You get a girlfriend and suddenly you have no time for your favorite student, favorite part wolf...Well your favorite in all categories really?" Orion flounced inside his Uncle's workroom and splayed himself out in a chair. "I'm bored, entertain me."

A dark brow lifted in vague amusement. "Is your courting not going as well as you'd like? As I recall the last time I spoke to you about learning a new brewing technique you mentioned having to set up a surprise for Miss Parkinson so who's fault is it that you've not spent time with me recently?"

"All your fault, I am young and driven my hormones and horniness. You're old and should know much better." Orion shot Severus a fangy smile from an upside position as he had his legs up on the back of the chair. "Besides, I already know the brewing technique you tried to show me. You need to up your game here."

"I am not going to show you master level potions Orion, Remus would have my head." Snape
turned the page in his book. "Perhaps you should attempt to learn meditation, tame some of the excess energy you've collected."

"Meditation is too dull, I need something challenging. You know I could handle the master level potions Severus, Dad should be proud instead of angry. Besides, I think he's still all hormonal after his pregnancy...Wanna bet I can make him weep by being sentimental?" A wicked light entered amber eyes.

"If you are that eager for something to do, you could clean the cauldrons in the classroom," he turned another page, lips twitching, "and I would prefer if you did not make Remus cry, thank you. What I know you can handle and what your mother is willing to let you handle are two quite different things. However," he flicked his wand in a wordless spell that had a book flying toward Orion, "that was mine."

Orion managed to turn into an upright position and snatch the book out of the air just before it hit his head. He started flicking through the heavy, leatherbound book before going back to the beginning to read it more intently. "This is great, can I really borrow it?"

"Not borrow, have. On one condition," Severus' gaze met Orion's seriously.

"What condition?" Orion kept his eyes on Severus, turning serious as well, he knew better than to joke around when his Uncle got that expression. Also, he really wanted this book and the secrets inside it.

"Anything in there labeled as strictly for enemies you do not even attempt without me being there to instruct you in their counters. Especially sectumsempra. Same goes for if you wish to share any of those spells with another."

"I promise, I can show restraint when I really try." Orion grinned but grew serious again. "Thank you for this Uncle, I promise that I won't abuse the trust you show in me. I just want to learn. More and more and more until my brain is full with it."

"You're already full of it." Severus smirked at his nephew. "Aside from that, take a whiff at the phial and tell me if it smells vaguely familiar."

After sticking his tongue out at Severus, Orion went over to smell the phial, his sensitive nose curling a little at the smell. "It does smell familiar but I can't place it." He looked up at his Uncle. "Why can't I place it? I'm usually ace at placing scents."

"Because, if I've managed it correctly, the last time you smelled that was when you were a week old."

Amber eyes turned wide as he jerked up to look at Severus. "You've managed to create the potion?"

"I think I have yes but I won't know for certain until," he checked the time, "thirty more minutes pass. Then it's simply putting it in the ceremonial goblet and adding two other ingredients...which could be a problem."

"The Father Christmas wannabee's blood being one of the two I'm guessing?" Orion looked at the potion. "Still Severus, this is awesome. I can't believe you managed to do it. Maybe you still have something left to teach me after all."

"I have plenty to teach you brat, I am only restricted by your current age and Remus' overprotective tendencies. Yes Dumbledore's blood is one of the two, your hair is the other as this is the ritual in reverse." He closed his book. "I don't know how we'll manage to get his blood however."
"No but my hair you can have anytime, I have lots of it to spare." He pulled at his long, wild, black curls. "Maybe I can sniff him out. All we need is a scratch, a few drops. I could cut or bite him and then run."

"Not very far as he'd manage to bring you down even with the dragon protection before long. No Orion, we'll find a different way of getting his blood," he got up and pat Orion on the shoulder, "and then we'll bring him down."

A soft growl rose even though Orion knew that Severus was right. Sometimes he really did hate his young age and the fact the he wasn't strong enough. "We will, somehow we will bring him down. I know it." For the past few years, Orion hadn't had many dreams like he'd had when he was younger but he still had them at times, now they were more like feelings though, instincts.

"I have faith that's true," Snape smirked and squeezed Orion's shoulder after a few moments of silence, "Look on page twenty eight of that book, you might find something to both occupy your time and further your pursuit of Miss Parkinson."

"I'll get her too, in time." Orion smiled and gave his Uncle a rare hug before moving back to the chair to turn to page twenty eight, his eyes lighting with pure interest as he read what it said.

Severus settled back with his own book, amused at Orion's expression. He hoped the spells and potions he'd once made to charm Lily would help Orion catch Parkinson.

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Harry came out of a roll and cast a bone breaking hex at the practice dummy before moving aside so the next person could give it a try. Remus was back in full form teaching Defense and it was exciting and enjoyable though occasionally Sirius would interrupt with a panicked Daddy moment, which made everyone laugh.

Harry was still the absolute best student in Defense but Remus was very happy with everyone's progress. All his students gave their all in his classes and Remus couldn't ask for more than that. It felt great being back to normal though. Remus loved his children, even loved being pregnant but feeling weak and less than himself was not an emotion he favored.

Ron executed the roll and hex as well and came to stand next to Harry, watching the others and grinning. "I'm just a little shocked that it's already April, a few more weeks and we'll be back to summer holidays."

"I know. It feels like time's gone by so fast this year, kind of weird."

Hermione came out of her roll and went to stand next to her friends, smiling as she'd heard their conversation. "And you're seventeen now Ronniekins, feeling any different now that you're legal and everything?" She poked him in the side with her elbow and winced when Parkinson's hex actually blew the training dummy to splinters.

Ron shuddered as Remus just replaced the dummy and congratulated the Slytherin. "Nope but I'm going to enjoy the sweetness of being able to cast outside of Hogwarts."

Harry poked him. "You are not allowed to use any spells on me until I turn seventeen and can properly retaliate."

"Aww take all the fun out of it why don't you?"

"Don't worry Ron, I can still hex you all you want. That would be fun for me." Hermione gave him
an angelic smile.

"Uh...no thanks. Harry'll hex my hair off and I'm okay with that. You though, you'd hex things off I want to stay there." Ron held up his hands in surrender making Harry laugh just as a frantic Sirius rushed in and started rummaging through Remus' desk.

Remus winced as his husband startled the Slytherin girl just having her go so that her hex narrowly missed her fellow students instead of hitting the dummy. "Um...love? Any reason you're going through my desk and disturbing my class?...Again? And do you not remember the conversation we had about knocking?"

"Sorry but I am at my wit's end, not a word out of you!" He pointed at Harry, "Aury's screaming like someone's jabbed her in the foot with a needle, teeth."

He fumbled through another drawer. "Ah-hah! Knew it'd be here," he came up with an ever-cold teething ring and wagged it at Remus, "Leaving me with a teething infant and no teething ring is cruel and unusual Moony, now if you'll excuse me, back to Poppy I must go, sorry for the interruption."

"Wait, what...You took her to Poppy? For teething?" Remus watched his husband slink out of the classroom without answering. He reached up and rubbed at his temples. "Alright then, let's disregard our Transfiguration professor's little visit and finish this then shall we? Mr. Zabini, I believe it is your turn."

Blaise smirked and sat out to do the course flawlessly.

Pansy rolled her eyes at him and his vanity as she started to file her nails, leaning against the wall next to Draco, "Such a show off."

"Says the girl who blew the dummy to smithereens. I don't think you're one to talk in this particular instant darling." Draco smirked and plucked the nail file out of her hands to file of a snag on his thumbnail, couldn't have bad nails after all. He might scratch himself.

"That was not showing off, that was natural talent." She lifted a brow at his meticulous smoothing of rough edges, "Worried you might scratch up some pale, freckled skin next Hogsmeade weekend darling?"

"No, they like the scratches, something about marking and possessiveness...I was a bit busy at the moment and not listening all that well. No this is all for me." He struck out a snowy white arm in front of her. "Look at this skin, can't have any blemishes on that now can we?"

"Darling no mark on your skin could possibly outshine your pointy chin." She snatched her file back and returned to shaping her nails into sharp points. "So all is well with the foxes?"

"Better a pointy chin than that button you try to pass off as a nose." Draco polished his freshly filed nails on his robes. "And yes the dodo duo is well and fine as far as I know, business is apparently going very well and their oldest brother is doing much better."

"Well that's good to know. Ah the preening peacock returns." She gave Blaise a smirk. "Both of you completely caught by Weasleys. I do wonder about your minds at times."

"At least I'm not out robbing cradles." Blaise fixed his hair. "And I can tell you about what's going on in my mind, in detail if you wish it. You see last time I saw Charlie he did this amazing thing with his tongue. I swear my legs went out beneath me."
"In other words you're not robbing the cradle but your cradle is being robbed." She inspected her nails. "Keep in mind Blaisey boy that you are several years younger than your tamer."

"I know and it's glorious. I'll make him feel naughty and keep him young all at the same time. Besides I've turned seventeen now so no one can say anything. Your little morsel is only fourteen so I still have the right to tease you. Now do you want to hear about the tongue thing or not? Maybe you could learn something to use on your pup. You're a progressive woman after all and your tongue is certainly sharp enough."

"Why am I friends with you again?" Draco shook his head in dismay.

"Because we're the only ones who you can bounce your wickedest thoughts off of without getting odd looks," Pansy paused, "or getting your bones immediately jumped?"

"Yes, that is a good reason. My bones are only to be jumped at my explicit permission." Draco gave an absent nod before grinning much more like a wolf than the bunny he was. "Oh and Blaise, imagine that tongue thing times two...I win."

Pansy chuckled at the disgruntled look on Blaise's face. "I do so adore both you idiots."

She tilted her head as an origami wolf snuck into the classroom and made a straight line toward her. She bent to pick it up and it unfolded in her hands becoming a bouquet of night blooming jasmine and luscious sunset roses. She brought the flowers to her nose. "Mmm. Oh I will absolutely take my wolf over your redheads any day boys."

Blaise had to give it to Orion, he was wooing Pansy just right, not pushing too strongly or being too meek. He and Draco would of course have to have the talk with the little twerp anyway. Didn't matter that he was a friend. Hurt Pansy and he would end up a wolf rug. Blaise was pretty sure he could convince one of the dragons at the reserve to eat Orion if he asked. The dragons liked him, especially the queens.

Harry noticed the look Blaise and Draco exchanged as Pansy enjoyed her flowers and made a decision of his own to talk to the two Slytherins before they could corner Orion. Not to warn them away, he didn't want to do that because if Orion couldn't stand up to her idiots, then he wasn't ready for Pansy. No he just wanted to make sure they wouldn't actually hurt Orion, threats were perfectly alright and he'd offer to tell them just what he'd done to Orion's hair for another threat they could use.

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Harry looked around at everyone in McGonagall's office. The entire 'pride' was here as well as Snape, McGonagall, and Tonks. "What's going on?"

Severus brought out a phial of wine red liquid and set it on Minerva's desk. "I've managed to deconstruct and reverse-engineer the ritual that bound Orion to Dumbledore. However there is a problem. Just as blood was needed for the original, so too is blood needed for the reversal and not Orion's."

Orion looked rather calm considering everything but that was because he'd been there when Severus brewed the potion. He wasn't as calm as he looked though, his heart was pounding at the thought of being free and earlier when Severus had told his parents, his Daddy had cried. Orion knew that Remus still felt guilty for what had happened and if nothing else he wanted this for his Dad's sake.
Tonks was looking unusually somber, Orion was of her blood after all and she'd been tracking Dumbledore unofficially for a while now. She knew it would be far from easy getting hold of the old bastard's blood. The old geezer was more cunning than most and he was paranoid about his safety.

Sirius stood, arms around Remus, and studied the people in the room. Minerva was fidgeting quite unlike the stern woman but then again she'd looked up to Albus for years and even with the truth about him this talk had to be distressing for her. Neville and Ron both had their arms around their girls' shoulders, faces serious. Fred and George, both there, were flanking Draco who looked just a touch bored as if he somehow knew that he wouldn't have much of a role in this. Blaise leaned against the wall calm and cool as could be, a classic Slytherin.

Pansy though, had moved to Orion's side and had one perfectly manicured hand on his shoulder, her eyes going from Snape to Harry and back again. Hermione, at Harry's side as always, was holding his hand and his godson sat still and grim faced.

Harry's jaw flexed. "Dumbledore's blood," it was spoken with flat, somber tone.

Snape nodded, "Indeed."

Minerva spoke up, "As you have all been involved in the quiet battle against him for some time now we felt it was only right to bring you all here as we ponder a solution."

Hermione felt the callouses on Harry's hand against her palm as she squeezed his hand tighter. 'Ponder a solution'...She had a terrible feeling that she knew what that solution would be and she didn't like it. She could understand it being unavoidable and she did love Orion and wanted the best for him always but she did not like the thought of Harry in danger once again.

Orion placed his own hand over Pansy's on his shoulder. More comforted by the easy touch than he liked to admit.

Harry shook his head. "Not much need to ponder. He won't come out of hiding unless it will further his agenda and only one thing would do that. Me."

Pansy heard several start to make protests and spoke up sharply. "He's right and you know it. The old man won't come out of hiding unless he thinks it will allow him to sink his claws into Potter again. You can bicker and argue and snipe over it all you want but it's fact and it's one you have to deal with."

"As much as I hate to admit it, Parkinson is right." Hermione rubbed her thumb over the back of Harry's hand, her jaw set in a grim line. "Dumbledore will only come out at Harry's beckoning. The thing we need to concentrate on now is how to keep Harry safe during said meeting. And how to keep us hidden since there's no way I'm letting Harry meet the moth eaten beard bastard on his own."

"I've an idea about that actually," Ron spoke up, long acquaintance with Harry having given him the experience needed to know where his best friend's head was going. "There's an old ruin, about four kilometers out from the Burrow. The muggles around think its cursed so no one goes near it at night.

"Is it cursed?" Harry tilted his head.

"Nah, just haunted by a run of the mill spectre. Thing is there's one room almost intact in there, right Gin," he gave his sister a grin. It had become almost a Weasley right of passage to sneak out
and spend a night in the old ruin.

"Yeah, the roof is still there and the walls are only partially caved in. Rather cozy if you disregard the spiders." She through her big brother a look, knowing that the spiders were the main reason Ron had had some trouble with his night in the ruin.

"Ah, the ruin. Many fond memories from that place." George was resting his head on Draco's shoulder. "Practically the only place for privacy when you have siblings up over your ears."

Fred grinned. "So atmospheric too, the room's got lots of dark shadows where anything can hide, especially if you place your light in just the right spot." He tucked a strand of blond hair behind Draco's ear. "Plus the ghosts are good cover for any odd noises."

Ron shook his head, "Anyway there's room in there for six people to hide while Harry meets the old bastard. Hermione and I will be going of course that leaves four adults."

Severus steepled his hands, knowing it futile to keep the Golden Trio out of this, "Two Aurors are required. Tonks obviously, and would I be correct in assuming Kingsley will be partnering you for this?"

"Yeah, wouldn't trust anyone but Kings." Tonks nodded. "He is absolutely incorruptible and he is the best at what he does...Except for me of course."

Remus wanted to come but even he recognized that it might not be the best idea. This was about two if his cubs now and Remus didn't think he would be able to turn off his emotions and he might do something very stupid at the mere sight of Dumbledore.

Minerva's lips firmed. "Then Severus, as he is Deputy Head and the mastermind behind the ritual's reversal, should go and so too should Sirius, if he thinks he can contain his temper?" She lifted a brow at the dog animagus.

He nodded. "I can, you have my word."

"That should provide adequate cover for you Mr. Potter however I will not mince words, you will be in great danger simply being in the same room as Mr. Dumbledore. As unstable as he's become he is still clever and well experienced as well as possessed of the Elder Wand. Are you certain you want to do this?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes. It's something I have to do Headmistress."

She sighed, "Very well then, when you arrange this meeting I will see to it that you have permission to use your magic outside of Hogwarts."

Remus hoisted a sleeping Aury higher on his shoulder and looked around at his family. He would worry sick when they left but at the same time he couldn't believe that this was finally happening. It was something he'd dreamt about since he'd been stupid enough to hand Orion over to Dumbledore that day.

"One other thing." Harry looked over at Orion and Pansy. "We need some way of immediate warning in case Dumbledore figures out that I know about the bind on Orion and starts trying to use it. If he does I don't think you'll be able to let me know Ri."

"No, I guess I'll be busy dying if he starts using it." Orion answered casually, ignoring his Dad's sharp intake of breath. It was the truth after all. Orion didn't know how Harry expected a warning to help. If Dumbledore used the bind then he used it, there wasn't anything to be done once it was
in progress, he'd always known that.

Pansy flicked his ear, "What do you have in mind Potter?"

"Something like the DA coins, only you just hold it and use a trigger word and I'll have the other object in my pocket."

"And it's me you're tasking with this?" She lifted a brow.

"If I asked anyone else you'd horn in Parkinson."

She smirked. "This is true."

Orion rubbed his red ear and looked at Pansy. "Aw, will you be my very own guardian angel then? Watching over me to keep me from any harm other than that which you've inflicted yourself."

Remus looked at his son in disbelief, still in some strange way it was very much comforting that Orion wouldn't change, even in a situation like this.

"Guardian she-wolf more like." Sirius rubbed Remus' back, knowing he didn't like even the suggestion of Orion dying. He didn't like it either.

Pansy studied her nails. "Much more accurate, I am no angel."

"I know." Orion's voice practically dripped with admiration.

"Flirt later wolfie, let's focus on keeping you alive for now shall we." Blaise was still leaning against the wall, his eyebrows raised. "You're nearly worse than I am and that's saying something."

This was a day of wonders, first Hermione found herself agreeing with Parkinson and now Zabini. The world was turning upside down.

Fred snorted, "Who says he can't do both at the same ti-ow!" He rubbed his bum and looked back at his little sister in shock, "Now what was that for?"

"You being an idiot as usual. Do I need another reason?" Ginny was still gripping her wand, one red eyebrow raised.

George watched his brother in sympathy but shrank more behind Draco if Ginny would get any ideas.

"Really? Hiding behind me? How utterly charming." Draco's voice was as dry as could be.

"Well," Fred rubbed the sting out of his bum, "Gin-Gin won't hex you if you've not made her mad."

Before Ginny could hex Fred again Harry barked, "People can we focus please? Fred I would have thought you learned that flirting while in a dangerous situation is a bad idea, do I have to tell Molly?"

"Uh no, really, no." Now Fred joined his brother in hiding behind Draco, making Ron snort.

"There is no way Malfoy's skinny arse can hide the two of you. Stop acting like idiots will you please and apply your sneaky brains to figuring out how to hide the others without disillusionment spells in case Dumbledore casts a finite."

George actually looked chastised even as Malfoy looked affronted. "My arse is not skinny Potter,
it is quite perfectly shaped actually."

"That is true, very nice shape." George gave a quick grin before sobering and meeting Harry's eyes. "Fred and I have worked on something like that so I think we can help you. We've used the idea of your nifty little cloak actually, making a line of invisibility jewelry."

Fred nodded. "Only issue is that there's a four hour time limit from activation and then they can't be activated for another week. We're working on constant invisibility but it's slow going."

"Four hours should be plenty." Ron played his fingers through the ends of Luna's hair. "Dumbledore wouldn't risk making Harry wait too long since him being gone from the school for any appreciable amount of time would make it easier to discover Harry 'missing' and have people sent to look for him."

"Appreciable, that's a big word Ronniekins, you sure you know what it means?"

Ron just flipped his brother off.

"Careful Freddy-boy, I am not opposed to hexing you again, making it stick this time. Do what you do best and then keep your mouth shut. You're really getting on my nerves today." Ginny felt unsettled, she didn't mean to take it out on her brothers but couldn't really stop herself. Being left behind was difficult for her, her only comfort was that Neville and Luna weren't going either.

Neville wrapped both his arms around her and kissed her temple, murmuring softly to her, "Fred's just handling things the way he always does love. It'll be okay."

"I know. I'm sorry Freddy, didn't mean to be a bitch witch." Ginny wasn't above apologizing when she was wrong, especially not when she had Neville to support her when she stumbled. "I just wish this was taken seriously, we're sending our brother into battle...again and I want him to be as prepared as he can be."

Hermione shot Ginny a grateful look, she couldn't agree more.

"It's alright Gin, you just know me. I make a joke out of serious situations. Comic relief and all that twaddle." He gave her a cheerful smile.

Harry sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Fred always got more ridiculous the more worried he was, just as Ginny got snippier. "Fred, George the two of you go get those jewelry pieces ready please, Ron," he looked at his best friend, "What's this ruin called?"

"Maclaren's keep."

"Okay, I'm going to write a letter to Dumbledore asking him to meet me, two am April twenty-third at Maclaren's keep. You and Luna stay here and hammer out a full plan with Tonks, Snape, Sirius, Remus, and the Headmistress. Orion, Draco go to the Chamber lab please and come up with some potions that I might be able to use against Dumbledore, topical with fast results."

Draco nodded and untangled himself from his redhead lovers. Surprise of all surprises he and Orion actually worked well together when brewing, once they had gotten over their egos. He pretended not to see the Headmistress' eyebrows rise at the mentioning of a chamber lab and grabbed the younger Slytherin by the scruff of his neck, starting to pull him out of the room. They needed to start brainstorming immediately if they would have something worthwhile to give to Potter when he needed it.

Orion waved to the people in the room, blew Pansy a kiss and followed the pointy blond out.
"Neville could you go to the greenhouses and get some bubotuber pus? The two potion prodigies don't need to do anything to that for it to work against Dumbledore. Parkinson you and Hermione work out the warning system. Zabini...I'm going to regret this but see if you can get your hands on some weapons we can use."

"Why regret it when you know I'll find you some sensational weapons? Won't even have to look far to find them." Blaise's voice was a slow drawl as he pushed off the wall and walked out the room with a lazy salute.

Hermione eyed Parkinson with some apprehension. The two of them didn't exactly get along but for Harry she would work with anyone. And she couldn't deny that Parkinson was certainly brilliant. The two of them should be able to come up with some sort of warning system fairly easily.

Pansy eyed her back before sighing. It was for Orion so she'd work with the know-it-all with minor snipping. "Well then Granger, Chamber or kitchen? So long as there's tea and biscuits I don't care where we hammer this out."

"Let's choose kitchen. I need sugar to handle this." They could always summon the books they needed and quite frankly they would probably have more privacy in the kitchen than in the Chamber, especially with both Malfoy and Orion already down there. She turned and stood on her toes, kissing Harry before turning back to Parkinson. "After you Parkinson, let's do this."

Harry watched them go and gave Ginny a crooked smile. "Meet me on the Quidditch pitch in fifteen minutes?"

"Make it ten." Ginny smiled back at her brother, still enclosed in Neville's arms. It didn't matter what the purpose was, she heard the word Quidditch and she had to make a challenge out of it. It was just in her blood.

Neville chuckled and kissed her cheek. "I'm going to squeeze some pus. Have fun with Harry."

Harry watched him walk out and waved at everyone before going to pen the letter. He would have made it short and concise except that Dumbledore needed to underestimate him. So instead he made it sound as if something horrible had happened or he'd had a vision from Voldemort and desperately needed advice as no one else would listen to him. Tossing in an apology as well he sealed the letter and went up to the owlry. "Hedwig? You here?"

An answering chirp was heard almost instantly as was the flap of wings as a snowy owl took off from the ceiling beams to land on Harry's arm, nipping at his longer hair affectionately.

He smiled and smoothed his fingers over her feathers. "Hey girl. We're setting Dumbledore up so I need you to deliver this letter to him," he handed her the letter to carry in her beak, "Just drop it wherever you find him and fly right back. I'll make sure to get you some special treats since it might be a long trip."

Since she had a letter in her beak, Hedwig just rubbed against his hand in affection before taking off, flying out one of the many hatches in the owlry to deliver the letter.

Harry smiled then headed down to the Quidditch pitch, grabbing his broom and a Quaffle on the way. He smiled at Ginny and tossed her the Quaffle. "I'm after a hard challenge so how does me trying to out score you as a Chaser sound?"

"Sounds quite brilliant actually and don't worry, I always play hard when it comes to Quidditch.
You'll have your challenge." Ginny grinned broadly as she straddled her broom and took off, she knew Harry wouldn't need the warning. The wanker was born to fly.

He grinned and kicked off, needing the release of a good, hard game of Quidditch more than anything else right now to chase the worries out of his mind.

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Sirius slipped up behind his husband and rubbed the tense shoulders. "Hey."

"Hi." Remus let his head fall forward against his chest as Sirius rubbed at his knotted muscles. He was far too tense to relax but it still felt good. Sirius' touch always felt good.

"I'm not going to tell you to relax or not to worry." He kissed the nape of Remus' neck. "Because I'm tense as fuck and worried as hell myself."

"Good, not that you're tense and worried but that you're not trying to tell me anything. You can suggest though, never tell." Remus made a soft sound of appreciation at the kiss and turned so he could wrap his arms around Sirius' waist. "How can this be right Siri? Saving one child by putting another in harms way?"

Sirius ran his hand over Remus' hair. "It's not but there's not much choice is there? Harry would go ahead on this course even if we tried to stop him, stubborn kitty cat that he is."

"I know that and the really fucked up thing about all this is that I don't want to stop him. It's mad and it makes me a horrible person but I know this is the best chance...Hell the only chance we'll have to get Orion's life back." Remus buried his nose against Sirius' neck, the scent of his mate calming him as nothing else could.

"It doesn't make you a horrible person love. It makes you human." His arms tightened around Remus. "You want an end to the constant worry that we'll lose Orion to Dumbledore's madness."

"Don't you know by now...I'm not human." Remus quirked his lips in a parody of a smile. "Of course I want to end that worry...I was the one who put our boy in this position to start with." He sighed. "Merlin, listen to me...I'm like a pathetic teenage girl. If anyone can do this it's Harry. I am going to stay pathetic though until he's back and he's safe and it's over."

Sirius nipped Remus on the ear, "You are not the one at fault for this situation Remus, you're not. And you might be a werewolf but you're human too."

"Only because you make me so. You and Harry, Orion and Aurora." Remus was dead serious. "I could so easily have turned the other way. You really have no idea how easy it would be. To shed this human skin and become the monster I was meant to be. I would even like it. So, so easy."

"Maybe it would be easy, and maybe we give you a reason to fight and take the hard way but it's you who chooses to take that reason and hold on tight to it. You make the choice to fight the wolf Remus and that makes you more of a man than any I know."

Feeling tired and scared and feeling as if he did nothing but whine all the bloody time, Remus stayed silent. He clutched Sirius still, and tried to show without words how much he loved his husband. How much he needed him. "You better come back in one piece too love. I can't do it without you. Not again."

"I promise, no pieces will be getting lopped off." Sirius nuzzled Remus' hair and held him closer. "It'll be alright Moony." He'd make certain of it, even if he had to kill that old bag of bones himself.
Harry wiggled into his dragonhide jacket and the dragonhide pants Bill had gotten him for Christmas. They didn't have the protection of his dragonhide armor but they'd provide some from spells without making Dumbledore suspicious. He made his way out of Gryffindor tower to where everyone was waiting.

Kingsley Shacklebolt looked up as Potter entered the room and moved to greet him, hand held out to grasp his forearm in a handshake, "Mr. Potter. You're taking quite a risk here I'll tell you."

"I know but it has to be done. He's gone without facing the consequences for his actions for too long and if I don't do this my little brother might never be free of him. And please call me Harry. Mr. Potter makes me feel like I'm about to get a detention."

The Head Auror chuckled, "Alright, Harry. Here," he handed the teen a badge, "obviously tuck it out of sight but for tonight, as you and your people are assisting in the confrontation, and hopefully apprehension of a dangerous criminal, I've arranged to have you made Junior Aurors for twenty-four hours. Except Sirius, as he's a former Auror he's just been reinstated for tonight."

Harry took the badge and tucked it in his inside jacket pocket, looking over at Ron who was studying the one he'd been given with a look that was somewhere between terror and bliss with a sprinkling of utter determination. "Thanks, mind if I ask what that means though?"

"It means that you may use any spell, even the Killing Curse, to protect yourself or your fellows should Dumbledore try to attack. He's registered as a 'dead or alive' capture so if he doesn't co-operate then you don't play nice. Use the deadliest spells you have."

Harry's face set into hard lines and he nodded, "Understood."

Hermione's fingers clenched around the badge she'd been given. She hoped that Harry wouldn't have to use any deadly spells. She absolutely understood why it might be necessary but even with the core of pure steel her Harry possessed, he was still gentle too and he still had another wizard madman to take down and Hermione hated that so much was placed on his shoulders. Now if she could only get her mind back on track and not get it stuck on the way Harry looked in dragon leather, she might even be of some use during this meeting.

"See Kings, that's what I am talking about." Tonks wrapped an arm around Harry's neck and motioned up and down with the other hand. "Leather, movement. Not the billowing red robes we're stuffed in. We're walking, bloody targets."

He rolled his eyes, "Tonks we've covered this before, I don't make the uniform code. Bring it up to the Minister or the Wizengamot."

"I have brought it up to them, you know I have. You were the one who bailed me out when I stripped naked in front of the Minister in protest. Nothing ever changes though. The word of the Head Auror would weigh more than of the crazy pink haired girl taking her kit off." Tonks was practically hanging off of Harry now, leaning heavily on him.

"Er Tonks?" Harry twitched a bit, "I'll talk to them once I'm seventeen for you if you'll stop treating me like a coat rack for yourself. Aside from the fact that we really need to get going soon, I'd rather have my girlfriend plastered against me. No offense meant but to me, my girl's the best."
Tonks gave the blushing bushy haired girl an amused look. "Don't worry luv, as fond as I am about our Harry here, this is all about the leather." She did step back though.

Hermione didn't say anything since for her it was all about the boy inside the leather.

Sirius shook his head, "Nym you're just a bit cracked."

Kingsley ignored the look of death that Tonks shot her cousin, "Is everyone ready? You all have the invisibility items the Weasley twins gave you?"

Ron nodded and held up the pendant around his neck, Sirius showed his cuff bracelet, Snape only nodded, the cloak pin gleaming innocently at his throat. Sirius looked over at Remus and strode over to capture his husband's lips in a scorching kiss. "Just a little something to tide me over until we get back."

Remus only looked surprised for a moment before grabbing Sirius' hair and pulling him close for an even more heated snog before letting go. "You dog...Just be careful. Keep a leash on my mutt Severus, he's not quite trained to heel yet. Has a tendency to run ahead, ex Auror or not."

Snape and Sirius exchanged sneering looks before Severus lifted a shoulder, "I shall endeavor to make certain your personal brand of insanity returns to you hale and hearty. However I expect tea waiting to soothe the nerves."

Ron snorted, "Aren't they just super fluffy and full of love for each other?"

"Adorable beyond words." Hermione replied dryly, eyeing the large rhinestone ring on her finger with distaste. Everyone else had donned tasteful looking jewelry but hers was absolutely gaudy. She and the twins would have words when she got back.

Harry saw it and went over slipping it off and instead draping his invisibility cloak around her shoulders, pocketing the ring before he fastened the cloak, "I think they knew I'd be having you use the cloak but that's still no excuse." He kissed the tip of her nose.

Running a hand over the light, silky fabric of the cloak, Hermione looked up at Harry before wrapping her arms around his neck. She kissed him lightly. "I know I've already told you but do be careful. No unnecessary risks and don't let the bastard get a drop on you. I'll have your back as best I can." She rubbed her cheek against the scruff on Harry's chin, once again wondering lightly when he'd become a man.

"I know. I'll be careful," he looped his arms around her waist and gave her a squeeze, brushing his lips lightly over hers. "If things go to hell in a handbasket you watch yourself too okay?"

"You know me, I take cautiousness to a new level." That wasn't quite true, Hermione was a tigress at heart but she was careful. At least she believed she was. She kissed him again before stepping back. They would have to leave soon so Dumbledore wouldn't get there before them. Not much point hiding then.

"Alright if everyone's done saying their goodbyes and good lucks," Kingsley held up a belt, "We're portkeying into the room itself," he ignored Harry's groan though it prompted chuckles from the rest of the assembled people, "Hands on the belt if you're going."

Harry sighed and grasped the leather strip. Portkeys, joy. He met Remus and Orion's eyes and gave them an encouraging smile. He didn't know what was going to happen but he was certain he'd survive at least.
Remus wrapped an arm around Orion’s shoulders as they watched their family members blurred out of the room. He could feel his son’s tension, a tension that matched his own but there was an underlying excitement as well. Remus couldn’t but keep his fingers crossed and pray that his loved ones would come back safe and sound.

As always Harry was face down on the dirt floor of the ruin, "I hate portkeys, loathe even."

Ron chuckled and helped him up, "Yeah we all know you're pants at magical travel mate."

Kingsley lifted a brow, "Well not all of us but enough of that for now. Into positions everyone and activate your invisibility trinkets." He moved into one shadowed corner as Tonks did the same opposite him.

Harry dusted himself off and paced around the room, leaving runes Bill had taught him hidden in his wake. When Dumbledore entered the room he’d lay the last one down and activate the ward that would keep the last person who entered from leaving. He tugged on Hermione’s hair just a bit before she covered herself with the cloak and went to lean on the wall opposite so that when the old man arrived, Hermione would be at Dumbledore’s back, in the perfect position to Stupefy him.

Hermione held her wand tightly beneath the folds of the cloak. Her whole body was tense as a bowstring and she hardly dared to breathe, wondering if her heartbeat sounded as loudly out in the room as it did in her ears. She wouldn't have worried if this was about her but it was about Harry and she wouldn't disappoint him. It was disconcerting not seeing any of her comrades but they were there and that was a comfort in itself.

It didn't take long really, only thirty minutes past two and then Harry was tensing and straightening at the sound of a soft foot step outside the room. It took perhaps two minutes, likely during which finites and other detection spells were being cast, but then Dumbledore stepped into the room and Harry activated the last rune. The old man wouldn’t be leaving here, unless Harry took down the ward or he was in a body bag.

The old wizard gave Harry a smile, "Harry, my boy I’m so glad you asked to meet me. I understand something’s disturbed you?"

Harry nodded, "Yeah I have some questions." He knew that though Dumbledore was already a criminal in the eyes of the Wizengamot, they still needed proof and in this case it would be the recording crystal Shacklebolt was making.

"Well let's have a seat and I'll answer what I can my boy." Dumbledore tapped a couple of fallen stones and turned them into chairs.

Tonks was standing vigil. After years working with Kingsley now, even before the other became Head Auror, it almost felt as if she knew how Kingsley thought. It was part of what made them work together so well. Right now she had to reign herself in, not to go after Dumbledore straight away.

Hermione was also keeping her bond on herself, actually hating the old man standing with her boyfriend.

Harry used his wand to summon the second chair closer to the wall and out of grabbing distance of Dumbledore, noting the furrowing of the old man’s brow. He sat carefully in a way that would allow him to get out of the chair and into a battle stance quickly.

"Now what can I help you with my boy?" Dumbledore didn't like the apparent mistrust Harry was
blatantly showing but he knew he had to keep control of that dislike. One wrong step and he'd lose any and all chances of falling into Harry's good grace again.

"First I want to know why you put that bind on my magic, and don't try and tell me you didn't or that you had my parents' or my aunt's permission. I know it was you and I know neither my parents nor my aunt would have given you the okay, for different reasons but still neither would."

Dumbledore twitched at the insolent tone Harry had but nodded, "Magical binds go back centuries when a baby's magic was particularly powerful. Yours was so strong that leaving you in a muggle neighborhood with it unbound would have been disastrous."

Sirius had to bite his tongue to keep from growling at the old bastard. Only his promise to Remus to control himself kept him from lunging out of the shadows and strangling Dumbledore.

Hermione gripped her wand tighter at the placating tone, Dumbledore used. He was so full of shite and the fact that he actually thought Harry was stupid enough to buy into it made her twitch. Dumbledore should have learnt how utterly bright Harry Potter actually was. Right now though it was probably a good thing that the old bastard underestimated Harry.

Harry nearly spasmed with the need to call bullshite but instead he folded his arms and leveled a look on Dumbledore, "So instead of putting me with a wizarding family you went against my parents' wishes and left me with Petunia and her family, using an illegal ritual to bind my magic."

He shook his head when Dumbledore would have spoken, "Don't. I've heard the reasoning for putting me with the Dursleys before and I don't buy it and I don't want to go into it. Why did you keep Remus away?"

"I beg your pardon my boy?" Twinkling blue eyes blinked in false confusion.

Harry narrowed his eyes, "I spent five years in the same house as Fred and George, three riding herd on Orion, and the last two dealing with Sirius Black on a regular basis. Stop trying to hose me. But you know forget about the Remus question I've got a better one. What did you do to the muggle authorities?"

The air was getting tense and it was almost staggering how quickly Dumbledore seemed to change from kind old grandfather to shrewd wizard as the old man reevaluated the young man in front of him. Hermione wondered if Harry would mention the cursed stone at the house in Godric's Hollow or if he would save that until an actual trial if that happened. She made sure she had a clear shot at Dumbledore if the wizard would try anything at all. She really didn't care what he would say next as it would most likely only be more lies.

"Now what makes you think I did anything?"

"I'm not as stupid as you like to think, Albus."

"Nothing much my boy, just a few compulsion charms and obliviations to ensure you remained where you were safest."

"You mean where you hoped I'd have the magic beaten out of me." Harry tensed, ready to dodge the strike he knew would come. "The Aurors found your charming little gift of an exacerbation curse to the Dursleys. I know more than you'd like me too. Including the fact that Fawkes isn't really your familiar."

As always Tonks became completely calm when it became real. It was probably the only time in her life that she was actually graceful. Dumbledore's face had twisted into something dark and ugly
and Tonks had a feeling that was his true expression beneath his gentle mask. She wanted to arrest him, take him in and see his wand broken. She’d been there the night Harry broke the bond on his magic and she knew what kind of man the old wizard was.

Harry nodded, "Yeah I know that you placed a blood bond on a phoenix that trusted you. Fawkes is supposed to be bound to the school, not any one headmaster. It's amazing what the Sorting Hat knows that no one listens to. I know what you did to my parents and I know what you tried to do to me with the bind on my magic."

He watched Dumbeldore's expression growing darker, "And you know that little bit of magic you've been missing since my fifteenth birthday? The magic you placed as an active siphon on me? I broke the bind myself and claimed that bit of magic for myself." He rolled off the chair as Dumbledore sprang into action, casting a cutting curse where he'd been that had the chair in pieces.

As soon as Dumbledore lost his composure and actively went after Harry, the other people jumped into action as well. They stayed 'invisible' to confuse Dumbledore further as their wands were drawn. It was difficult since any hex in the small room could hit Harry by mistake or hit one of the others still in disguise.

Hermione watched everything with narrowed, intent eyes. Just waiting for an opportunity to disarm Dumbledore. Once she had it she wouldn't hesitate to take it.

Sirius concentrated on shielding Harry when Dumbledore would cast rather than actively attack him. The others were doing well enough with that. Unfortunately the shields cast by the Elder Wand were too powerful to penetrate, even for Harry's magic.

Harry narrowed his eyes and pulled out a throwing dagger Blaise had found for him. He cast a confundus charm as he threw it, sending the blade slicing along Dumbeldore's cheek before it clanged into a crack in the stone. "And another thing," he ducked, "I've sent the German Ministry as well as ours proof of just how much you did behind the scenes during Grindlewald's reign. They're currently bickering over whether to place you in Azkaban or in a cell right next to the lover you betrayed."

Dumbledore's face contorted in rage and he sent a tripping curse at Harry, connecting and as the boy was down, "Avada Ke-"

Hermione was acting before she even had a moment to think about about it, sending off both an Expelliarmus and the strongest cutting curse she knew at the same time. She looked on in something aching to horror as Dumbledore's wand flew out of his grasp and a line of red spread across his throat and down his chest along with a gurgling sound.

Everyone froze as the old man collapsed, bleeding out into the dirt floor, shock on their faces. Harry rolled to his feet and pulled out his communication mirror as he felt the medallion round his neck burning, "Parkinson?"

"Something's going on with Orion, he's glowing, bent over and groaning like someone just punched him in the gut," she paused, "or like a girl just kicked him in the bollocks but you get my point!"

"Oi!" Orion had enough geist left in him to protest that. "Come back when it feels as if someone is turning your insides out and then you can complain about some groaning."

"What's happening over there?" Remus sounded almost frantic, it didn't seem as if something terrible was happening to his son though except for the glowing and writhing on the floor part. He was still breathing, still alive.
"Dumbledore's dying," a horrible rattling then utter silence came from the old man, "dead. Here talk to Sirius," he tossed the mirror to his godfather and went to where he knew Hermione was, pulling the hood back from her face and then turning her away from the sight of Dumbledore on the ground. "Hey, look at me."

Hermione's eyes were wide open but she couldn't see beyond the lash she had made across Dumbledore's neck and the amount of red that had spilled from it. There was so much of it, she could smell it and it made her want to be sick. She could hear Sirius speak to Remus in a low tone and she could hear Kingsley and Tonks discussing something over the body...the 'body'. Oh god, she had killed someone.

"Hermione," Harry shook her gently and firm'd his voice, "Hermione!" He growled when her expression remained shocked and unseeing and kicked out a rune before picking her up and walking out of the room and the ruin until they were in the fresh, cool air of the night, "Look at me, look at me Hermione."

It did take a long time but eventually Harry's voice got through to her and she locked eyes with him even as her own filled with tears. She wasn't sorry Dumbledore was dead, she wasn't sorry she had protected Harry but there had been so much blood and the sounds he'd made. She couldn't make them stop echoing in her head.

He sat down on a tumble of stone, her in his lap, and ran one hand over her hair, the other cupping her cheek tenderly, "It's okay Hermione. It's okay. You saved my life."

"I know, I'm glad." Hermione's voice sounded far away even to herself. "I don't regret it and I would do it again. I slit a man's throat in there and stood still as he bled out on the floor and I'm not sorry." What sort of person did that make her? Hermione wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer to that, even in her own mind.

He kissed the bridge of her nose, "Why should you be? For the last three years we've learned just how duplicitous and rotten he was, each betrayal seeming worse than the ones that came before, so why should you be sorry? The only reason I did not literally blow his head off is because I couldn't get through his shields."

"I'm not sorry, I'm really not." She said it as a mantra with fresh tears slipping down her cheeks. "But why can't I stop shaking?" Hermione still held her wand in a death grip, knuckles and slim fingers white from the strain of it.

He gently worked her wand out of her hand, tucking it back into her holster and held her close, rocking her gently as his hand continued to stroke and pet over her hair. "Because seeing death is never easy and causing it, even when you're protecting yourself and others, is harder." He kissed her temple, "You did what you had to do love. I'm alive and many others are safe from Dumbledore because he's gone now."

Hermione leaned her head on his temple and focused in an effort to stop crying, her hands lying quite useless in her lap now that Harry had managed to take her wand from her and put it away. She thought about the underwear she'd bought during easter break, the black ones with the embroidered white flowers. She'd hope maybe to have a chance to show them to Harry and instead she's slit a man's throat for him...And she wasn't sorry. As long as she kept telling herself that it might be okay. Harry was safe, Harry was here holding her and that was all that mattered.

He just kept holding her and petting her. This was something he didn't know how to help with but it tore him up inside to see Hermione so shell shocked. The first thing he was going to do once they got back was ask McGonagall to find someone Hermione could talk to about this, a psychiatrist or
something. Someone who could help her cope with the burden of having killed. A sound caught his attention and he lifted his head to see Sirius. "Is Orion okay?"

The animagus nodded, relief in every line of his face and body, "More than. He's got the bit that the old bastard stole back. It's finally over."

Tonks peeked out as well and made a motion for Harry to keep Hermione occupied before Dumbledore's body was levitated out of the ruin, covered in a sheet so she and Kingsley would be able apparate it to the ME back at the Auror department. Since they had been given Junior Auror badges and since Dumbledore had been about to cast an unforgivable, Hermione would not face consequences, well not legal ones at least. Not to mention that Kings had recorded everything happening with his crystal. For her and Kingsley though there were still questions to be answered and reports to be written.

Harry kept Hermione's face pressed to his neck, kissing her temple, "You hear that? Rì's safe now, Merlin only knows what that little bit he was missing will do though. Think he'll get into more trouble?"

A small chuckle made its way through her and she rubbed her nose against his neck. It was warm and she could feel Harry's pulse against her skin, she needed that right now. "More trouble? Is that possible you think? Perhaps the lost little bit was his manners and self restraint."

"Good point," there was his girl, "I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

Sirius gave Harry a smile then angled his head at the ruin, letting him know he was going to go back in to help clean up.

A little while later, after Dumbledore's body had been taken away, Ron came walking out to sit at the base of the tumble of stone Harry and Hermione were perched on, looking at Hermione in worry and understanding. He looked up at the stars and tried to think of something to soften the events but he couldn't think of anything so he lean his head back on the stone. "So...what now?"

Hermione twisted her head so she could look at Ron, pondering his words as she curled up against Harry. She was still feeling hollow and horrible and supposed she would for a long time but she was herself again. With Harry's help. "Now we move forward. Put one big threat behind us and face the things still needing to be taken care of. Maybe take a second to breathe."

Ron looked up at her and pouted, "Just a second? How about a whole summer? Come on Mione, I think we deserve a summer of nothing but fun don't you? Hey maybe we can go to a tropical beach or something, you can make Harry blush by walking by in a bikini." He grinned and pointed at Harry, "Look he's already blushing just at the thought!"

Turning to look, Hermione noticed that it was true, there definitely was a red tint to Harry's cheeks. "Really? Well I think we could arrange a bikini day no matter what. And don't you laugh Ron, I know you would swallow your tongue if Luna wore a bikini so no schadenfreude from you."

"I'd swallow a lot more than my tongue."

Harry lifted his foot and used it to shove Ron over, rolling his eyes when his friend just laughed, "Can it Chuckles."

Ron sobered and wiggled around to better look at Harry, "Hey mate, how much of that was true? That you taunted the old bee with?"

"Well you already knew about the curse at the Dursleys and everything but having seen my parents
wills was true. I won't be able to be read the wills until I'm seventeen."

"Judging by his expression you were quite spot on with the wills too. And the things you do know about are more than enough." Hermione was getting back more and more of the usual tone of voice, a little bit of the know-it-all creeping up again.

"It was an educated guess. Neither Mum nor Dad were fools and they'd have known what waited for me with Petunia and Vernon," he took her hand and started playing with her fingers.

"How'd you learn about Fawkes?"

"Neptune told me," Harry rolled his shoulders, "At least he mentioned a wrongfully bound phoenix and suggested I talk to the Hat. The Sorting Hat told me about how Fawkes had originally been bound to Godric Gryffindor and that he asked Fawkes to transfer that bond to Hogwarts herself so that future Headmasters would still have more than one source of guidance in keeping the school on the path he and the other Founders set it on. When Dumbledore took the post he managed to fool Fawkes just long enough to steal some of his blood after a Burning Day and he used it to make a false familiar bond."

Hermione hissed quietly. "He did seem overly fond of blood stealing...Bastard." She did her best to focus on that instead of red, red, red soaking through his beard and robes. "Hopefully this will free Fawkes as well, allow him to return to Hogwarts and be the support he is meant to be. I'm sure Headmistress McGonagall would appreciate the guidance." She placed her head back on Harry's shoulder again. "It always amuses me the way you and Neptune talk together. He never says anything to anyone but you."

He started unfastening and unwinding the braid she'd tamed her hair into so he could tangle his fingers through it. "Well he's a very proper phoenix."

Ron snorted, "Picky you mean still, it's the bird's choice who he talks to." He looked to the side as Sirius and Snape came up to them.

Sirius gave Ron a hand up, "You lot ready to get back to Hogwarts?"

Hermione nodded and got up from Harry's lap though she did take his hand instead, not able to lose all connection with him. She was more than ready to return to the school though, not wanting to spend a minute more than necessary at this place. She didn't think she would ever feel comfortable here again.

Harry squeezed her hand and grasped the belt Snape held out with his other hand. The familiar hook behind his navel yanked him forward and he was spinning and freefalling and then landing, face first, on a floor cushion.

"I rather thought that might be needed for you Mr. Potter," Minerva McGonagall's tone was dry and lightly amused.

Remus chuckled at Harry's expression and sprawled position, before walking over, hooking his hands beneath Harry's arms and pulled him up from the floor hugging him tightly. "Thank Merlin you're back safely." He hugged Harry for a while longer before hugging Ron, Hermione, even Severus despite his lethal glares before moving into Sirius' arms.

Orion was beaming from where he stood. Giving his Dad his hug time before it was his turn.

Sirius kept an arm slung around Remus' waist as he hugged his son with the other. "You feel alright there kiddo?"
"Mmhmm, better than." Orion hugged his father back. "Kind of like when a fever breaks, or a chest cold. When you can breathe again after being stuffed up for days."

"I'm glad."

Harry immediately caught Hermione up in his arms again even as he gave Orion a smile then looked over at Pansy, mouthing a thank you.

The Slytherin girl nodded, studying Hermione briefly before stretching with a yawn. "Well I don't know about the rest of you but I, for one, would like to actually get some sleep before breakfast."

Remus nodded and gathered his husband and son close. Tonight he wanted Orion to sleep in their quarters. If he could he would have dragged Severus and Harry there too, just to be able to watch over all of them. Since he didn't have pull over those two men though he would have to settle with his immediate family.

Hermione didn't think that she could sleep but she was in desperate need of a shower or a bath and she felt like burning the clothes she wore.

Harry gave Ron a speaking look then nodded, "Right. We all need rest after tonight," he leaned in close to whisper in Hermione's ear, "Meet me in the Chamber in a little bit?"

Nodding, Hermione squeezed his hand and said goodnight to everyone before heading to the bathroom to scrub her skin raw and change into a thick, flannel pajamas and the thickest socks she could find. Maybe then she could actually feel warm again.

Harry waited until it was just him and the Headmistress before telling her what had happened and basically spewing all his worries out. "Is there someone you could get to talk to Hermione, someone to help her cope?"

Minerva's gaze was soft and a little sad for Hermione as she nodded, "I know of one or two Harry. For now however you can best help her by staying with her. I'll turn a blind eye to your empty beds and such."

He gave her a grateful smile, "Thank you Headmistress."

"Now go on with you Mr. Potter and get your rest for this evening."

He nodded and rushed out, heading for the Chamber but he paused before opening the sink, "Myrtle?"

"Hmm?" As always these days the ghost was standing by her special stand reading. Luna had gotten her hooked on comic books now. These superheroes were really very interesting, the way they flew without wands and could bounce metal balls off their skin. "What can I do for you Harry?"

"I thought you'd like to know, Dumbledore's dead."

A silvery, transparent hand came up to straighten equally ghostly glasses as Myrtle turned completely still, as if petrified mid air. "Dead? Good."

He nodded, "Yeah. Hermione and I are going to be settling in the Chamber library tonight. It...she took him down but it's a hard thing for her."

"Poor girl, death is never easy, not even your own. I should know." Myrtle tilted her head to the
side before drifting closer and running ghostly hands over Harry's cheek. "I probably won't be around much longer then. With Dumbledore gone...You are a good man Harry Potter. A good friend. Thank you."

He disregarded the chill and ran his fingers over her cheek, "I'm going to miss you Myrtle. You've been an amazing friend and not just to me. I hope you get to have a long next life where you'll find love and happiness."

"Who knows, maybe we'll meet again somehow. How a good life yourself Harry...Kick Riddle's bum for me. He always was a vain git too full of himself." Myrtle smiled and decided to spend some time in the U-turn, just for old times sake and a way to say goodbye to the school.

"Oh I will, that's a promise Myrtle." He nodded emphatically and stepped back to let her do as she pleased, "Bye."

"Goodbye Harry Potter. I can honestly say it was a pleasure meeting you and that you've only gotten better looking in the bath with the years." She winked at him, smiled and was gone.

Harry knew he was crying, could feel the tears falling down his face, but he couldn't bring himself to care about the rule that men didn't cry. Saying a permanent goodbye to Myrtle deserved a few tears.

Hermione walked in, hair still damp and grew frantic when she saw Harry. She rushed over to him, cupping his cheek and wiping his tears away with her thumbs. "What's wrong? What's happened?" She looked around as if trying to sense a threat somewhere.

He leaned into her touch, hands coming up to lightly circle her wrists, "Not wrong so much as...bittersweet. Myrtle's gone, moved on."

"Oh." Hermione didn't know what to say. Myrtle had always been there and she had become very dear. Hogwarts and Hermione's life would be emptier without her and Hermione would miss her a lot. Still she was happy Myrtle was able to move on, not be stuck in a bathroom and a Chamber any longer.

"I'm not sad that she's moved on, just...I'm going to miss her is all," he nuzzled her hand again, "I think we should see if McGonagall would mind having a plaque or something around, to honor her."

"I don't think the Headmistress would mind that all. She always liked Myrtle and Myrtle deserves to be remembered. She did more for this school than most people realize." Hermione moved closer to hug Harry. "I'll miss her too."

He held her tight, pressing his cheek to hers for a few, quiet moments. After a little while he leaned back, kissing the tip of her nose, and turned to open the slide to the Chamber. "Come on love, let's go down and rest."

"'Kay." Hermione let Harry lead her down the familiar slide and into the now cheery, warm and comfortable chamber. It had been such a long day, so much had happened and now Hermione felt numb. A fact she was actually grateful for. Better feeling numb than feeling too much.

He brought them to the library and transfigured one of the sofas into a wide chaise lounge, pulling her onto it with him and kissing her brow, "I love you."

"I love you too Harry." Hermione curled close, stealing warmth from Harry. "I bought black underwear, hoping you would see it. Should have bought red." She had no idea what she was
saying. She did know that being close to Harry made her feel better, just as always.

He felt heat washing over his cheeks, "Bikinis, underwear, you're trying to make me pass out from mental images too glorious for mortal man aren't you?" He summoned a warm, fluffy blanket from a chair and draped it over her.

"Would it make it better or worse to tell you I'm not wearing any at the moment?" A small smile tilted her lips up at the corners and she moved even closer, wrapping the blanket around them both. Hermione wasn't after anything other than comfort and closeness. It felt good to tease though, to know that she still could.

"Worse and you know it sneaky girl," he gave her a squeeze and nuzzled his face into her neck, the rest of him wrapped as close around her as he could get.

Releasing a breath, Hermione wrapped herself around Harry in return, tangling so close she wasn't sure where she ended and he began. As always feeling safe in Harry's arms. She closed her eyes, hoping Harry's scent and closeness would keep away the dreams of red.
Harry rubbed the back of his neck and twitched just a bit as he waited in the Headmistress' office for her to return with the new Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour. He knew that the Minister was likely to be...irritated that he'd been keeping the Horcruxes hidden and he really wasn't keen to be yelled at...or arrested come to that. It had been over a month since Dumbledore's death and he still worried about Hermione from time to time though she was doing much better since her sessions with McGonagall and the woman she'd contacted to help Hermione come to terms with what she'd had to do. In a week the school term would be over, and just before leaving for the train Harry intended to destroy the Horcruxes. He wanted to let Minister Scrimgeour know so that he could be ready for Voldemort's retaliation.

The fire roared green and McGonagall stepped out, closely followed by a tall man with wild curly auburn hair, streaked liberally with gray. The man wore a grim, unreadable expression as he looked around the circular office with alert eyes. Some emotion flashing through them when they landed on Harry. Scrimgeour brushed the ash off his perfectly tailored robes he waited for the Headmistress of Hogwarts to offer him a seat before he did sit down and only then he turned to Harry again. "So Mr. Potter. I am told you have some news for me."

"Yes Minister. You're probably going to be angry at me for it but I did have my reasons." Harry nudged the box he'd brought up from the Chamber with the toe of his boot, he'd taken to wearing the dragonhide boots more often than his trainers since they seemed to get a reaction from Hermione without fail.

"See over the summer I went around gathering the Horcruxes Voldemort created, they're all here," he nodded at the box, "and I've been waiting to destroy them until the school is empty of students. I don't exactly...trust the Ministry so I never sent word to the Aurors about the Horcruxes. See every time one is destroyed, Voldemort loses more and more of the grip on his already shaky sanity becoming more unstable. I didn't trust the Ministry not to just destroy each one as it was retrieved while Hogwarts was full of students."

Steely gray eyes narrowed and Scrimgeour was clearly trying to keep a reign on his temper. "The Ministry is not what it was. We are taking an active stand against the darkness but that does not mean we would ever put a single student's life in jeopardy." The Minister's nostrils flared. He desperately needed to have Potter on his side to gain and keep the people's trust. The Ministry had been turned into a laughing stock and Rufus would do anything to turn that around.

Minerva cleared her throat, "Minister please, I would ask you to recall that Mr. Potter's dealings with the authorities, both magical and muggle, have left a very negative impression upon him. Not only because of the very unjust way he was treated under Minister Fudge's reign but also the complete lack of action on his behalf for almost all of his life."

Harry gave her an irritable look before sighing and shaking his head, muttering, "That makes it sound like I'm going to go all rogue because I had a rough time of it." He met the Minister's eyes. "You're definitely off to a good start from what I hear but long standing habit isn't really easy for me to break. This meeting here, it was harder for me to ask the Headmistress to arrange than you can imagine. I don't know you, I don't yet know what kind of Minister you are or how the Ministry under you is going to be outside of what the Invocation of Merlin has assured so how was I supposed to know if I would or would not wind up with a boot in my face again?"
The ex Auror in Rufus understood Potter completely but the politician in him was still annoyed. For all intents and purposes he was the leader of Wizarding Britain and he was responsible for them all now whether he liked it or not. "I will strive to make your dealings with the Ministry a better experience than it has been. My Aurors speak very highly of you and if you take my past into consideration I put much faith in them."

He leaned forward and perched his fingertips beneath his chin. "Would you allow a member of the Ministry to be present when you destroy the Horcruxes? It is something that needs to be recorded. It can be someone you are comfortable with, as one of my Aurors...Or your guardian perhaps, Mr. Weasley." Rufus wanted to show that he was willing to meet Potter half way.

Harry studied him closely glancing over as Neptune flared into existence on his shoulder and stared at Scrimgeour before making a simple trill then set to preening his feathers. Harry relaxed, hearing Neptune's approval and advice in his mind.

"To be honest I've had to destroy one of them already, though I didn't know what it was at the time, and it was far from pleasant. I'm not what you'd call keen on experiencing it again. If I can have your word, not so much as Minister but as the Auror you are, that Nymphadora Tonks will destroy the ring personally and if the stone in it survives she'll return the stupid thing to me, that the box won't be opened or out of your possession until you destroy them, and that you'll destroy them when all the students are away from Hogwarts, you can have the blasted things and the Basilisk venom to destroy them now."

Scrimgeour regarded him seriously, eyes reading every little twitch Potter made. His eyes slid over to the blue phoenix and he bowed his head in respect to the bird. Just as he had done to the red and gold one sitting on a perch next to the Headmistress desk. "I give you my word as ex Head Auror and as a wizard believing in a free Britain for everyone."

Harry nodded and pulled out his communication mirror. "Hey Ron?"

"Yeah mate?" Ron grunted as his distracted face filled the mirror and he made a move that was obviously a shove. "Finnegan bugger off I'm not telling you what Lavender told Luna."

Harry snickered, "Seamus still on about that?"

"Like a niffler on gold. Tell me you need my help with something please? Save me oh great chosen one."

"Well when you put it like that I suppose I can just call Hermione instead."

"Oi! Forget I said that then. What do you need?"

"Mind getting the sealed jar of Basilisk venom with the red lid and bringing it to the Headmistress' office for me?"

"Not a problem, later Finnegan."

Harry had to laugh as the mirror call cut off on Seamus' whine. "Ron should be here in fifteen minutes then the Horcruxes and the responsibility for their destruction are all yours Minister Scrimgeour."

Rufus nodded in gratitude. "Thank you Mr. Potter. You will be notified when the objects are destroyed." A small, barely there flicker of amusement twitched around his lips as he'd heard the conversation Potter had had with his friend. It seemed schoolboys would be the same no matter the state of the world. That was a comforting thought. "So while we wait...What did Lavender tell this
Luna then?"

Harry laughed, "Just that she fancies Seamus but all he knows is that Lavender said something about him. No one's letting him know to see how long it takes him to get up the nads to ask Lavender himself."

Minerva rolled her eyes, men remained the same no matter their age bless their tiny brains.

Scrimgeour listened in amusement and conducted more small talk, getting to know Harry Potter a little as a real person and not an icon. He had to admit he liked the real person better than the stories surrounding him. They chatted until a tall redheaded boy entered the office after a respectful knock.

Ron blinked at the Minister then walked over to Harry and handed him the jar of the virulent yellow-green liquid. "Mate do you have any idea how many potion obsessed twits just about tackled me on the way here?"

Harry chuckled, "Good thing the jar's unbreakable then."

"Laugh if you want Harry but I told them it came from you and you've got more." Ron gave Harry a noogie before nodding respectfully at Scrimgeour over Harry's soft curse. "Minister."

"Mr. Weasley." Scrimgeour answered in reply, nodding his head back. He had nothing but respect for Arthur Weasley and had tried to promote the man several times but Arthur always claimed to be happiest where he was with his muggle things.

Harry elbowed Ron away sharply before opening the box, shuddering at the malignant aura the Horcruxes gave off as he settled the jar of venom in with them. He shut the lid with a snap and locked it, getting up and handing the Minister the key and sliding the box over to him. "I repeat, more than happy to not have to deal with those things myself now. I don't know where Voldemort will attack first after they're destroyed when Hogwarts is out of session, he might still attack the school but I doubt it."

Minerva nodded. "He'll attack someone or something he has a special hatred for. It's never been the school he hated but rather Albus and as Severus has more than enough reason to actually go on vacation this year he won't be in either."

Harry frowned. "Special hatred..." he exchanged a look with Ron.

The redhead nodded. "The Burrow most likely. No one else he hates more than you now that the old bastard's dead."

"If wished the Ministry is prepared to offer any protection available." Scrimgeour furrowed his brow, knowing that the young men were probably right. Voldemort would strike quickly and hard when he found out that his Horcruxes was being destroyed. "We can also go public with us destroying the Horcruxes, to draw his attention to the Ministry instead of you."

Harry looked over at McGonagall in question, making her startle when she realized that he was looking to her as a guide in this. Her eyes softened momentarily before she drummed her fingers on her desk in thought. "William and Miss Delacour are still intending to marry this summer correct?"

Ron nodded. "Yeah, Mum's gone mad with planning it for the Burrow but they'd postpone it if," off Harry's immediate scowl he lifted his hands, "Whoa okay mate no postponement."

"No but perhaps a relocation? If Minister Scrimgeour can arrange to have Harry emancipated
before the last day of term," she looked at Rufus, "The Potters have an island in the South Pacific that the wedding can be held and the family can summer at."

Harry's eyes nearly bugged out, "An island?!!"

"Yes Mr. Potter, among other things. I suggest the island because it is covered in Anti-Apparition and Anti-Portkey wards, the only way to get on the island is by boat actually. There's not even floo capabilities and it's warded against all but the Potter yacht." She looked at him in amusement as he sat down hard, staring at her, "Yes a yacht as well Harry."

"Bloody hell."

"Of course we'll arrange for Mr. Potter here to be emancipated. He really should have been a long time ago." Rufus nodded. "He's had all the responsibilities of an adult on his shoulders for years, he should have some of the perks as well. Also I think it is time he got to read the will his parents left him."

He turned his steely eyes on Harry again. "You have no idea the standing the Potters had in society do you Mr. Potter? There is a reason the Black family couldn't even protest when their heir left to live with his best friend's family."

"I take it that you didn't know anything about this. Come to the Ministry before end of term, if you want a particular barrister handling your businesses bring him or her. I will have the paperwork for the emancipation ready and make sure there is a will reading."

"I'll...do that. If you'll excuse me please, I think I need to go have a long talk with my brain." Harry waited until Scrimgeour and McGonagall both nodded and then rushed out with Neptune on his shoulder.

Ron caught the curious expression on the Minister's face at Harry's comment of having a long talk with his brain. "He meant he needs to talk to Hermione. Any time he's confused or lacking information it's to Hermione he goes since she's the smartest witch...well in existence probably."

"Hermione is Miss Granger I suppose." Rufus didn't know about the smartest witch in existence but he had heard things about the girl that made half the Ministry sit up and take notice. He got up from the chair and bowed slightly to McGonagall. "I have to get back to London, apparently the Ministry thinks it's a holiday without the Minister there. Please tell Mr. Potter to owl me about a time that will fit him for the meeting." He picked up the box with Horcruxes and venom with a curl of his lips and headed for the floo.

Minerva nodded and opened the floo for him, "Of course. I'm certain that as soon as he's had a day or so to process he'll send Hedwig with a letter for you Minister though I do warn you, don't be surprised if you find a Snowy owl at your breakfast table rather than a letter arriving in your official inbox. No one knows how she does it but Harry's owl has a talent for getting around wards and whatnot."
"I wouldn't expect anything less from Harry Potter's owl. Such master, such bird I suppose." The Minister nodded his toward Ron and Minerva in goodbye and stepped into the flames, calling out for his office.

Fawkes looked toward the fireplace before fluffing his wings and began to preen his feathers.

Ron shook his head. "Well I'd better go write Mum about this so she can make adjustments with Fleur and Bill."

"Do use a school owl as I think it is perhaps best to get the letter there as quickly as possible and as...eager as he is Pigwidgeon is a bit..."

"He's a flighty little prat I know. I'll use a school owl, thanks Headmistress." He waved and clattered out of the office.

Fleur hummed as she sliced the carrots for Molly's stew while the woman was out in the yard feeding the chickens. It wouldn't be much longer before the house was crowded and busy with teenagers as well as wedding preparations so she was going to enjoy the peace while it was here and then enjoy the busy when it came as well.

Molly talked to the chickens around her feet, lightly scolding the too greedy ones with a soft voice. She looked up when a brown barn owl flew in over the yard and landed on her shoulder. She took the letter and laughed when the owl turned his head away at the chicken feed in haughty disgust and walked inside to find a proper owl treat for it.

Once inside she opened the letter and her red brows rose as she read it, mentally calculating what do now and how much of the food could be moved on a yacht. "I think you better read this dearie." She handed the letter to Fleur.

"Hm?" Fleur took the letter, reading over it three times before shaking her head. "Well I 'ad best write Maman and Papa and let zem know to gazzer ze troops for ze wedding early so zat we can board all togezzer oui?"

"Yes." Molly nodded. Happy and surprised that Fleur was taking this as well as she was. A bride was always more emotional when the date for her big day approached. "Luckily your dress will look absolutely stunning on a white beach surrounded by the ocean and tropical flowers." Molly leaned in and kissed the top of her new daughter's head. In the time following Bill's accident, Fleur had cemented herself firmly inside Molly's heart.

Fleur smiled and gave Molly a hug. "Oui and Maman does so enjoy ze beach." She was, perhaps, a little bit irritated about having to shift things about but this was to protect her family and her man's family and she was still getting married. A simple change in location, especially to an island beach, was a nothing to be upset about.

"You are taking this a lot better than I would have, which is probably a good thing." Molly hugged the slender girl back, petting her flowing blonde hair. "I will get this owl back to school then, let Harry know we're willing do this and get the ball rolling. You write your parents, let them know too."

Fleur nodded and went upstairs to pen the letter to her parents. She hoped that the yacht would be able to safely hold all the wedding party at once, more than one trip would be wearing on everyone's nerves.
Harry badly, very, very badly wanted to chuck one of the thickest books in the Chamber library into Malfoy's smirking face. He'd found his girlfriend arguing about an Arithmancy equation with the blond prat. When he'd pulled her away from it to murmur what had happened in her ear she'd squawked about his family being so old and Malfoy, being Malfoy, had gone all superior on Hermione, asking what the big deal was. Harry hissed at the blond, "The big deal, Malfoy, is that I didn't know any of this!"

"Well that's hardly surprising is it? You're always walking around with your head up your own arse." In truth Draco was surprised by that. He'd always thought Potter knew exactly where he came from and who he was but he couldn't let an opportunity to goad Potter pass him by. It was a too good one and he couldn't allow himself to rust up completely.

"Oh put a sock in it Granger, I am joking and you know it." He watched her go red in the face, ready to jump to her boyfriend's defense. A good quality he supposed, though tediously predictable. He thought about the thick tome back in his room and summoned it, handing it to Potter. "Here, a history of purebloods. Most of us learn all this with our mother’s milk. Your family has a whole chapter dedicated to them."

He groaned out a thank you and flopped into a chair with the book. "An entire chapter, Merlin save me. That does it, I am begging McGonagall on the behalf on all future children not raised in the magical world to have a class for all this mess. Right of Conquest, life debts, family histories, the whole bloody mess."

He thumbed quickly through the book until he found the chapter devoted to the Potters and gawked at the very large family tree it started off with. He leaned in close and followed up a straight line of first sons from his name right to the apparent founder of the Potter family, at least the magical version. He looked through the other branches and found a few surprising names, chief among them being Gryffindor and Peverell. That explained how he'd inherited the cloak, the last Peverell died out so it trickled through other branches of the family tree. "This is...well interesting. The Gryffindor and Peverell lines both sprouted from the principal Potter line, look Hermione," he angled the book so she could see the family tree.

Hermione leaned deeply over his shoulder so she could read after sending one more scathing glare Malfoy's way. She did not appreciate the git's sense of humor but she had to admit that her fingers itched to grab that book of his and study it closely. The Gryffindor and Peverell stood out brightly against the family tree and Hermione was both very much interested and a little bit intimidated if she was to be honest. "No wonder Dumbledore wanted control over you."

Harry found it a little scary that his pithy opinion of the deceased former headmaster blended and synchronized with Malfoy's. He met equally disturbed gray eyes. "Okay we're just going to pretend that never happened."

"Done, not like I want to remember something like that anyway." Draco rolled his shoulders uncomfortably. He was spending much too much time with Gryffindors, he definitely needed to find some little first or second year and intimidate the living wits out of them. That was always fun and healthier than comfort food. "Just leave the book down here when you're ready with it." He moved to stalk out of the Chamber.

Harry shifted, creating a space enough in the chair for Hermione and looked up at her. "Want to read with me?"

"You even have to ask?" Hermione gave her boyfriend a smile before squeezing down half next to
Harry and half on top of him and snuggled down so she was ready to read.

He slipped one arm around her waist and started reading about the family history he should already know. By the time they'd read the chapter he was both embarrassed, stunned, and a little intimidated. His family had somehow contributed majorly to every major restructuring of their laws and always for the good of the people as well as put the major force of money behind almost every public structure that wizard-kind used. He leaned his head on Hermione's shoulder. "This...is insane."

She nodded. "It really is." It was still just Harry, the boy she loved but she was intimidated by his family history. More than ever she felt like just a nobody. "Why didn't anyone tell you? Why didn't Sirius tell you?" Most likely Sirius was from such a prominent family himself that he didn't even think about how shocking it would be for Harry to discover this.

"Knowing Snuffles, he probably figured someone else had already told me." He closed the book. "I think I was happier not knowing but it's something I have to know so I know how to deal with people's expectations and how best to tell them all to go take a leap."

"Exactly, you have no expectations except your own to live up to. But you're right. You should know, it's better knowing than to be taken by surprise by someone warping the truth." Hermione snuggled up to him, kissing his scruffy cheek. "You're still my Harry, my wonderful Harry."

"I don't know about the wonderful but I am definitely yours." He levitated the book onto the desk and pulled her more firmly onto his lap, nuzzling her just under the ear. "That's one family example I'll happily follow, utter devotion to our ladies."

Smiling, Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck and tilted her head to give him more room to her neck. "Well I am not an illustrious Potter but the devotion I have down as well. Who could want anything else when they have the best?"

He kissed along her neck affectionately. "That's round about my thinking. You're the best lady in the world, no one else holds a candle to you." His lips brushed along her jaw then over hers in soft touches.

Her fingers pulled out the tie of Harry's longer hair, so she could play with the wild strands as she kissed him more vigorously. Hermione shifted so her upper body was pressed against Harry's as they kissed, loving the closeness.

His hands ran over her curves lovingly as he sucked and gently nibbled on her bottom lip. His tongue flicked over it teasingly, his fingers tickling along her ribs and pulling her even closer. This right here was all he needed, his Hermione.

Sighing contently against his lips, Hermione curled her fingers in Harry's hair, holding him tight and just kissed him. She kissed him over and over again, feeling fully content and happy with just the touch of his lips against hers and his hands on her. It was more than enough.

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Sirius opened the door to the quarters he and Remus shared and blinked at Hermione and Harry standing outside the door, Harry's brow raised and his stance bleeding attitude.

"Snuffy~y you got some 'splanin to do," Harry folded his arms over his chest after saying that and got maybe just a teeny, tiny bit of satisfaction over the slight panic that entered Sirius' eyes as he obviously wracked his brain for what he might need to explain.
Hermione almost smiled at Sirius' expression as he looked between Harry and her with wide gray eyes.

Remus came in behind Sirius, carrying Aury who squealed in delight at the sight of Harry, stretching her chubby arms toward him, making grabby fingers.

Harry's expression and attitude softened and he reach out to the baby in return, taking her from Remus and placing a smacking kiss on one chubby cheek. "Hullo there gorgeous girl, keeping your Papa and Daddy in line?"

His answer was another happy squeal and a loud, "Ha" as she pat his face happily becoming fascinated with the scruff on his chin.

Sirius had to smile and relaxed a bit. "Okay you can't be too mad at me for...whatever if you're cuddling Aury. What is it I have to explain?" He moved aside so that Harry and Hermione could come in.

"Oh the list I have," Harry shook his head, "but let's start with, why exactly didn't you tell me anything about the insane amount of status the Potters apparently have?"

Remus' eyes shifted to Sirius at that and he pulled off his professor's robes. Leaving him in trousers and a fluffy jumper. He knew how Harry felt. He had been shocked and quite honestly scared when he had found out just important his friends actually were. He had pulled away from them then, not feeling worthy to be around them. A notion both James and Sirius had quickly stripped him of.

Sirius blinked, "Er...no one told you?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I knew it, you figured someone else had already told me. Well no, no one told me oh ye of little brain cells. Who could or would hmm? Most of the wizarding world thought I was raised spoiled and pampered worse than Malfoy and would have assumed I already knew like every little brat raised in a pureblood household. Bad dog, no biscuits for you."

Hermione chuckled and leaned in to kiss Aury. She was still very, very much wrapped around the little girl's fingers.

"It's not all Sirius' fault Harry. A part of Dumbledore's plan was keeping you in the dark about your inheritance and he did whatever it took to keep it that way. Compulsions and curses were placed to keep people silent. Even Severus wasn't allowed to say anything and believe me, he would have used it to belittle you if he could back when you first started school." Remus' voice was calm and soothing.

"I'm not mad Moony, if I was I'd be pulling the silent treatment and yeah I can see Snape jumping on the chance to snark at me over it."

Sirius rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "You should be mad, at the very least irritated with me since I didn't have any compulsions or curses on me. I should have at least asked if you'd been told."

Harry shrugged. "Not a big deal. I just read the chapter on the Potters in that pureblood heritage book Malfoy loaned me so I know most of what I need to know yes?"

Sirius nodded. "Anything else will be covered when you turn seventeen and inherit fully."

"Ah, that's actually more of the reason we're here than me wagging my metaphorical finger at you for having a brain fart."
Not able to resist anymore, Hermione reached out and poached Aury out of Harry's arms so she could snuggle the little princess properly as Harry spoke with his parental figures. She smoothed her fingers over soft sandy colored curls and smiled when Aury leaned her head against Hermione's shoulder, holding onto her shirt with sticky little fingers.

"So what news do you have then Harry?" Remus furrowed his brow, as always he couldn't help but worry when it came to one of his cubs. Harry had had so much bad luck that Remus always feared it would be bad news.

"I had a meeting with Minister Scrimgeour and we came to an understanding. After getting Neptune's advice I turned the Horcruxes over to him with the criteria of Tonks being the one to destroy the ring and return the stone to me if it survives and that he won't destroy them until the school is empty, or let the box containing them out of his possession until they're destroyed. We talked some more and it occurred to me, and Ron since he was there, that once they're destroyed Voldemort is going to strike out but not at the school. Dumbledore's gone and Snape won't be here so that leaves one person he has a special loathing for as a target."

Sirius sank into a chair by the fireplace. "You."

Harry nodded. "Me."

Remus' eyes flashed bright amber, he wasn't bound by any chains anymore and now he would fight to the bitter end to keep Harry safe. "Well he will bite the dust if he tries. Any plans to keep safe? Wards? Relocation?"

"The latter and well I guess it's combined with the former too. McGonagall mentioned an island that belongs to the Potters." He looked at Sirius, who was nodding.

"Mapayapa, I have no idea what the name means but it's a five hour ride on the Potter yacht from Tahiti. The only way on or off the island is the Potter yacht unless you're a post owl with a letter or package or a house-elf bound to the island."

"That's news to me too. An island?" Remus looked surprised but he felt comforted at the same time. "That does sound like the safest place possible though. An island is defendable and even better so with the wards you're speaking of. Besides, I've always had a feeling of Voldemort melting in the sunlight."

Hermione snorted. "Well I don't know about melt but he sure would need plenty of sunblock to protect his bone white self."

Harry and Sirius snickered and Harry blew Hermione a kiss. "Okay well since you do know about it Sirius, how much room is there for people on the island and how many can the yacht safely carry at one time?"

"Why?" Sirius tilted his head curiously.

"Because there's a Weasley wedding in the works that'll be relocated from the Burrow to the island and I'd really like to have as few trips taken between Mapayapa and Tahiti as possible so I need to know how many people the island can play host to for two months since Bill and Fleur are getting married at the end of July."

Sirius nodded, "Well the yacht can carry forty five across at a time and the island can support as many people as can fit in the house for as long as they stay. The house, by the by, fits up to two hundred people."
"Two hundred people?" Hermione was happy she was holding Aury because her knees might just have buckled if she hadn't. "That is not a house Snuffles, that is a Manor, a bloody castle even. Even with magical expansion that is a whole lot of people. How large is Mapayapa? Can you walk around it in a day? A week? A month?" Hermione just wanted to know what to expect when she got there.

Harry was just staring at his godfather in shock. Hermione was right, that wasn't a house, it was a bloody village all in one building.

Sirius shrugged. "I don't know how long it would take to walk around it but it's about half the size of all the Tahitian islands put together so definitely more than a day. And the house was built," he did some mental calculations, "around the same time that Emperor Zhao of Han was ruling I think. Back then the Potters all lived together as a rule so it had to accommodate a lot of people."

"It's still beyond massive." Hermione rocked the child in her arms, Aury having fallen asleep, heavy and pliant against her shoulder. "Do you know what it looks like? The island and the 'house'? Have you been there? If you have could you show us?" As always, Hermione couldn't help but asking questions and wanting to know more and she did want to know what awaited her if she was to spend the summer there. She would have to have a conversation with her parents about that as well. She knew they were disappointed she chose to spend so much time away from them but all of it wasn't exactly by choice and so much was happening. As much as she really did love her parents, Harry meant more.

"Yes, yes, yes, and I don't see why not," he shrugged, "if ye old Hedgehog doesn't mind us borrowing his pensieve."

"Since I'll be offering Lady Malfoy a room with the rest he'll probably want to have a look himself." Harry puffed out a breath. "But let's have Moony ask him." He gave Remus a sweetly innocent, pleading smile, "Please?"

A sandy brow rose. "You think he'd respond better to me? This is Severus, he is prickly on his best of days but I will ask. You know he won't say no." Remus' voice was both dry and amused at the same time. "And Harry, you're good but I've raised Orion, no need to put on the fake innocence." He reached for Aury to put her in her crib.

Harry chuckled. "Yeah but I need to stay in practice. And Professor Snape is scared of you so of course I want you to ask him."

"And he hates me so yes Moony, it's always you we want asking him." Sirius gave his husband a grin as Hermione reluctantly gave the sleeping baby over.

"What on earth makes you think Severus would ever be afraid of me? And he doesn't hate you Pads, not anymore." Remus squeezed Hermione's shoulder as he gently carried Aury to her crib and tucked her in with her blanket and favorite plushie.

Hermione wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly they felt too empty and cold.

Harry moved to wrap his arms around her and spoke to Remus when he came back. "Why do I think he's scared of you? It might have something to do with the fact that Orion's been complaining that he won't share the advanced potion techniques for fear of facing your wrath." He grinned at the werewolf.

"He's turning fifteen, no matter how brilliant he is he's not an adult. He has time for the advanced potion techniques without hurrying things." Remus nearly rolled his eyes. "Orion knows that,
Severus knows that and I definitely know it. It won't happen yet and I don't have to go into some 
wrath to keep it from happening."

Sirius chuckled. "Whatever you want to believe Moony, whatever you want to believe."

Harry snickered at the evil look that earned from Remus.

"I do, believe whatever I want that is. Especially when I know I'm right." Remus turned his nose 
up at his husband. "We're being bad hosts, tea?" He smiled pleasantly at the cuddling couple and 
for some reason that was actually more frightening than if he would have growled.

"Sure." Harry rubbed his chin on Hermione's shoulder and watched Sirius almost cringe. "Who was 
that barrister that you got to sue Skeeter by the way? Because Scrimgeour is having me emancipated so I can get everyone to the island after school lets out and I don't really know any barristers."

"Hopefully you won't have to know many of them, they might have their uses but they are all more coldhearted and driven than the most ambitious Slytherin." Remus' tone made it perfectly clear what he thought of the lawyer profession as he walked over to their kitchen area to get the kettle started. "I don't know the name of the one Pads' used since she only presented herself to me as the Viper, charming creature."

Sirius chuckled. "And she's not really the sort to deal with an emancipation. Actually Andromeda's husband is a barrister so for this he'd likely be your best bet. Not to mention Vi's damned picky."

"She's creepy and horrible, not picky." Remus was plucking the blue stoneware cups from the cupboard. "Ted is great though, one of the few barrister's with a heart and a conscience. He is like Tonks, right down to the clumsiness but like her he has a brilliant mind."

Hermione could sense some strong vibes of possessiveness and jealousy regarding this 'Viper' from Remus' direction and wondered if the woman had flirted with Sirius.

Sirius shook his head. "She's picky, and enjoys metaphorically eviscerating people and businesses a little too much and you don't like her for the same reason I go pouty when Alek's name falls from your sexy mouth," he craned his neck to give Remus a knowing smile.

"Hmm." Remus didn't want to answer that smile with one of his own but he couldn't help himself. His husband was much too charming for his own good and deep down Remus was sure that charm was all for him when it mattered. "She's still horrid." He reached for a chocolate biscuit and leaned over to stuff it in Sirius' mouth before turning to Harry. "I would talk to Ted though, he will help you."

Harry grinned as Sirius just chewed and swallowed the biscuit. "I do prefer to keep things in the pool of people I know or who the people I know are related to. Less chance of getting smacked in the face. Ted Tonks it is. You guys are coming to stay on the island right?" He wanted them safe too and he'd spent so long without family that cared about him that it made him twitchy to think of them being so far away or so hard to get to.

"Mmm, I guess we are. We're invited to the wedding after all and I still have lessons or talks more like it with Bill. Besides, you don't think we would leave one of our cubs alone all summer did you? Even on an island surrounded by people?" Remus smiled and poured the tea, fixing it as he knew they liked and invited them to the table. "One important question though? How do you plan for all the gingers to make it in the sunshine?"
"If Bill can survive in Egypt then the entire Weasley family can survive in the South Pacific plus I'm pretty sure that sunblock works. They'll be fine."

"Fine if more freckled." Hermione grinned and reached for a cup, humming approvingly at the precisely right amount of milk in her tea. "I would worry more about Malfoy...If I cared that is. He's so pale he will burn in the shade...Poor boy." Hermione's voice dripped with fake concern.

Sirius snickered. "I'd place my bets on him staying inside all day long to avoid that actually. If Narcissa accepts the invitation that is, she may not."

Harry nodded. "I know but I'm making the offer nonetheless."

"Even if lady Malfoy doesn't come, Malfoy will. Fred and George will make sure of that or else they won't come either and they are brothers of the groom." Hermione spoke with confidence, knowing she was right about this.

Harry grimaced. "Sirius the house there has silencing wards right?"

Sirius laughed. "They do yes, no need to worry about hearing the threesome going at each other."

"Oh gods...I do not need that image in my head. Bad dog Sirius, bad, bad dog." Hermione groaned into her tea.

"I would have thought the newlyweds would have been worry enough but that really was taking it one step further." Remus shuddered, not because of the threesome really but because in his eyes they were all children still and thinking about any of them in the bedroom was making his head hurt.

"Why am I being blamed? Harry asked about the silencing wards so his head went there first!"

"I spent too long ferrying the letters the twins wrote to their bunny to him, I know where those perverts' minds go thanks to Malfoy being so willing to share snarky little tidbits," he shuddered, "So of course my head went there first to save myself the further horror."

"Horror is right, I'm still reeling here." Hermione looked miserable as she nabbed a biscuit. "I want to think Malfoy is asexual, completely non sexual in every way."

"As Sirius said, the house takes two hundred people. I wouldn't worry too much. Besides there's always the surf and the bushes to get busy in." Remus smiled.

"If I come upon you or Sirius in the surf or bushes Remus I promise you, I will dump ice water on the proceedings." Harry drank deeply of his tea. "So if you do give it a try, do it far, far from wherever I might be."

"Oh please, like I would ever let you catch us. I would smell you kilometers away." Remus quirked his brow. "You do well to remember that if you get any ideas in the surf with that pretty girl of yours...Also...Orion will smell you as well and he won't be polite about it."

"As well as being miserable with Miss Parkinson...wherever she hides over the summer so he'll be happy to rain on someone else's parade," Sirius smirked.

Harry just nibbled on a biscuit. "Unlike certain horny adults, who I might add have been caught more than once," he gave Remus a pointed look reminding him of how he'd ended up walking in on them the summer previous, "we know how to be discrete and how to hide from a certain alpha in training."
"I'll save my judgements until the first time you have been caught in pure passion, which considering Hermione's blood red blush has not happened yet." Remus took a sip of tea.

"Change of conversation...Please?" Hermione didn't care that she was begging.

Sirius reached over and poked Remus' cheek. "You're starting to sound like me Moony," his expression was curious concern. "Plus you're tormenting Hermione trying to embarrass Harry. Is something up?"

"No...I apologize. If you look at the calendar you will see that the moon is in two days. I'm testy and horrible and taking it out on everyone. I'm sorry." Remus bowed his head over his cup.

Sirius got up and went to Remus, tilting his chin up and brushing his lips over his lightly. "It's okay Moony, we all understand."

Harry nodded. "And the wolf bit never likes hearing about threats to your cubs and we started out with that so it's more than understandable."

"No one is upset." Hermione agreed, even though she was still blushing lightly. Normally Remus was the kindest most gentle soul she knew. It was so easy forgetting there was another side to him, he kept it hidden so well that it was always a shock when it reached the surface.

"Still, I do apologize. It's harder now with Aury...Knowing she hurts when the full comes."

Harry got up as Sirius wrapped his arms around Remus and added a hug of his own into the mix. He knew that nothing would ease Remus' guilt over Aurora's inherited werewolf characteristics so he said nothing.

Remus answered the hugs and looked down at the table. There was nothing that would ever change the way he felt but having loved ones around helped. Even if he was a dick at them at times, they were still there.

Sirius nuzzled Remus' temple. "We love you, wolf and all."

"And none of us are going anywhere." Harry gave Remus another squeeze.

Now it was Remus' turn to blush. "Thank you...I'm sorry for putting such a damper a things. In the lovely Miss Granger's words, change of conversation please."

"Sure, how about we talk about Orion, since he's not here to take offense." Harry grinned and release Remus before heading back to sit next to Hermione again.

Sirius chuckled and sat down, pulling Remus into his lap as he did so. "That works."

Remus chuckled. "What about our wayward son? Don't tell me he's done something new?"

"Define new?" Hermione tilted her head curiously. "Panting after Parkinson is not new is it?"

"Not technically but the way he does it and his little wooing tricks are definitely cause for conversation." Sirius grinned. "Also his attempts at turning toilet water into beverages, any clue as to why yet?"

Harry shook his head. "No but he's gone back to it when not wooing Parkinson since the second floor girl's lavatory is empty again."

"I blame you for that. You are the one drinking out of a toilet bowl on a semi regular basis." Remus
poked his husband in the chest before kissing his neck.

"His wooing tricks may be the strangest I have ever witnessed but they seem to be working on Parkinson so it does look as if he knows what he's doing." Hermione smiled and reached for another biscuit. She would have to watch it if she wanted to turn Harry's head in a bikini come summer.

Harry chuckled as Sirius grumbled that he did not drink from the toilet then smiled at the kiss as they all fell to picking apart Orion's tricks and mindset. It was a good way to spend the evening before curfew.
Ron wobble-walked out to the end of the bowsprit looking decidedly green as he went to sit next to Harry, who was enjoying nearly hanging off the edge, one arm and leg holding onto the rope railing while the others dangled to feel the spray of the surf and his head peered down to see the dolphins gamboling in their wake. "Urg, how can you stand being perched out here? I swear if you fall off and wind up keelhauled I am not taking the blame."

Harry turned his head and grinned at Ron, "I guess I was just been born with sea legs. Kind of funny considering I'm a cat."

Ron held tight to a railing post. "You and Hermione both suck. She's bouncing all round this great barge and leaning over the rails to coo at the dolphins too."

"Poor baby." Luna, clad in a thin, short summer dress came to wrap her arms around Ron. "You do know that there's only a simple spell needed to cure you from the sea sickness right? Then you can enjoy the dolphins and saltseupers too."

He looked over at her curiously, pressing his hand to his mouth to keep in his bile for a moment before asking. "There is?"

"Of course there is, we're wizards. Allow me?" At Ron's nod she raised her wand and muttered a simple spell, pointing it at Ron, watching him with interest afterwards.

Harry winced as Ron turned an even more violent green and turned in time to vomit over into the sea. "Easy Ron, eyes on the horizon mate," he pat Ron on the arm bracingly.

"Hmm, that really should have worked." Luna looked down at her wand as if it was faulty. "You always deviate from the set parameters, I find it most intriguing." She leaned over to pat his back as he leaned over the railing of the yacht.

Harry flicked his own wand and had a pair of ginger pills and a bottle of water flying into his hand, "Here try this. It's a muggle remedy but it should help after little while."

Ron groaned and took the pills and water, "I'll try anything at this point." He downed the pills.

Luna continued to stroke his back, waiting for anything to help her boyfriend. She didn't want him to feel ill, no matter how interesting the data was to record. She had never seen a living, breathing person turn that pale shade of green before. "Feeling any better?"

"No but muggle remedies tend to take time. Something about having to be digested first." Ron kept his eyes fixed firmly on the horizon. "I hope they'll work soon though, I can't take another three hours of this."

She wrapped her arms around him from behind, pressing her cheek between his shoulder blades. "I hope it works soon, I hate seeing you ill. Just look at the horizon...Or imagine me in my underwear. I'm wearing blue lace. Blue like your eyes."

"Oookay and on that note, I think I'll leave you two here," Harry dashed away and soon found himself in front of Bill, who was in a pirate's costume, complete with eye patch, and looking like he was about to kill someone. That added up to one thing, "The twins?"
"Who else? I am going to kill them when I find them. It's a god damned ship, they can't hide from me forever." It was an actual true growl rising from Bill's throat and his scarred face scrunched up as he tore the plush parrot from his shoulder, throwing it on the floor and stomping on it.

Harry shook his head. "Instead of going after them directly," he crooked his finger and drew Bill's attention over to Draco Malfoy staring out over the ocean while lounging in a deck chair, "Why not hit them where it would really be felt? Just make him look like a bunny and you'll have made your point."

"Hmm...to take revenge or to die under Malfoy's wrath?" Bill scratched his chin. "I could do that easily...But to be honest, his mother scares the broom printed pants off of me." Bill nodded toward Narcissa who stood close to her son, looking out over the waves.

"She scares the pants off most people with a brain but it's either make Malfoy a bunny boy and risk Narcissa not understanding or sicking Fleur on the twins if you want vengeance."

"She would seek vengeance. My girl is scary when she wants to be." Bill smiled in obvious pride even as he pointed his wand at the pale blond boy and made bunny ears and a round fluffy tail sprout on him.

Narcissa jumped when Draco made a loud, insulted shriek and spun to see him with the ears and tail. Her eyes narrowed and she scanned the deck quickly to see Bill Weasley with his wand out, looking rather ridiculous as an overblown Redbeard. She put the puzzle pieces together quickly and put her hand on Draco's head to direct his attention to Bill, "I think, perhaps, you should go find your two miscreants and let them know that you are the one suffering for their exuberance."

One pure white, velvety ear twitched. "Oh they'll know, and they will suffer ten times the way I am." Silvery gray eyes narrowed and he suddenly made Bill Weasley's face fill with warts before he rose from the deck chair to go find his lovers and let them know just how displeased he was with the current situation.

Narcissa rolled her eyes and flicked her own wand to remove the warts. Both to assure the eldest Weasley child she wasn't going to seek punishment on her son's behalf and because he was getting married in a little less than two months and she wasn't so cruel as to force him to marry with warts.

Harry gave her a salute then smiled at Bill, "You have dodged a bullet."

"I'll believe that." Bill nodded and stroke his fingers over his bearded, scarred face. "I had something on here didn't I? Something very not pleasant?" He bowed his head at lady Malfoy in gratitude, dodging the glare he got in return.

"Warts, lots of them," he pat Bill on the arm then went in search of Hermione.

Bill shuddered and touched his face as Harry walked away. Fleur would have killed him if he'd managed to end up with warts for their wedding.

Hermione was hanging half off the railing, leaning over as far as she could, almost touching the nose of one particularly curious, jumping dolphin.

Harry slipped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, "Careful, I don't want you falling overboard just trying to say hello."

Hermione startled at the first touch before quickly melting against the man behind her, leaving her new found friend in the water and straightening up to lean backwards against Harry. She turned her head so she could look at him before looking down at her feet. "Sticking charm on my left foot,
didn't want to fall overboard either."

He chuckled and nuzzled her temple, "My brilliant lady. Sirius says that the dolphins swim in the
lagoon so you might get to say hello to one there. They are beautiful."

"They really are and so bright and playful. I've never seen one for real before so I suppose I might
have gotten a bit over enthusiastic." She cast finite incantatem on her foot so she could turn fully
into Harry's arms. "How are you feeling? Feel okay playing the host all summer?"

"Yeah I'm okay with it. Besides like Sirius said and we saw in the pensieve, it's a big island. Plenty
of places for me to slink off to avoid people I don't know or want to deal with." He nuzzled her
nose, "Plus Molly and Apolline promised they'd keep the guests under control so I'm happy to
leave them to it."

"Mmm and the house-elves will care for the rest." Hermione had had to revise her stand on house-
elf politics after learning the full story and after actually sitting down and talking to the elves
themselves. She still thought they should get paid and that all of them should have better protection
though. "I just want you to have a good and restful summer, if anyone needs it, it's you."

He kissed her lightly, "I'll have you and all my family safe and here with me, on a tropical island
with wards stronger than Hogwarts. I think my summer is going to be amazing so long as you're
happy." His eyes gleamed. He'd had Molly and Fleur's family take the boat over early, as soon as
the will reading was over, along with two surprise passengers that he hoped would make Hermione
happy when they docked and she saw them.

"Look at the sun and the sea and you. Could I be anything but happy with that?" Hermione smiled
at him and leaned back against the railing behind her. It would be a perfect summer, except for not
being with her parents. She had spoken to them though and they said they understood. "How much
longer until we get there you think?"

"Hmm," he cast a tempus, "About two hours. Want to go to the game room on this big hulk and
pass the time with air hockey or pinball?"

"Yes, that sounds like a plan." She'd been out on deck for a few hours now and as lovely as the
weather was it would be fun to do some gaming. "I still have to beat your bum in air hockey."
Hermione grinned and leaned forward to nip lightly at the tip of his nose before ducking inside.

He laughed and followed her happily.

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They pulled into the dock without incident and as Molly was busy smothering her redheaded
children and husband with happy hugs, Harry took Hermione's hand and turned her so he could
direct her attention to the couple standing just behind the Weasley horde and whispered, "Surprise
love."

"Oh..." Hermione looked at her parents, then she looked up at Harry before dragging him along by
the hand as she ran forward to hug them tightly. It was incredible that they were here and she loved
Harry, loved him so much for bringing them to the island. To make it possible for her to spend
some time with them. "Thank you, thank you Harry." She squeezed his hand before letting go so
she could hug her Mum and Dad with both arms.

Hermione's mother wrapped her arms around her daughter, "Oh you look so grown up sweetheart,"
she pet at Hermione's hair, tamed into a french braid for now, "and you're positively glowing you
look so happy." She looked at the young man who'd asked them if they would mind spending their
summer holidays on a South Pacific island instead of their usual trip to France and just couldn't
help but melt at the wonderfully loving look he gave her baby girl.

As she hugged her Mum, Hermione didn't feel very grown up. It didn't matter that she was turning
eighteen her next birthday, when it came to her parents she thought she might just always feel like a
little girl. Always loved and protected. "You look great too, both you and Dad. I am so happy
you're here." After the long, tight hugs she returned to Harry's side, wrapping both her arms around
his middle, pressing close.

Harry slid one arm around her waist and kissed the top of her head, "I wanted you to have your
family here too." He held out a hand to her father. "How are you liking the island so far? And I
hope the boat ride went well for you."

"The island is beautiful, it's like a paradise," Dr Granger shook the boy's hand. His daughter could
have done much, much worse for herself but he was still her Dad and any beau would be put
through the tests. So far Harry Potter was the only one deserving of his baby but that could still
change. "The boat ride was great too, I got some fishing done."

Harry tilted his head. "Catch anything?"

Hermione's mother chuckled. Asking Herbert that was just inviting a 'one that got away' story
really. She met her daughter's knowing, amused eyes and lifted a brow, asking if she should save
her young man from Herb's fish stories.

Hermione gave her mother a small nod, still absolutely beaming. Her Dad's fishing stories could go
on for hours once he started and the fish got bigger and bigger every time he told them. By now
they must be the size of the squid in the Black Lake.

Mrs. Granger took Herbert's arm, "Dear I'm certain that a young man like Harry isn't much too
interested in fishing. He doesn't seem the type to sit in one spot waiting for a lucky nibble." She
graced Harry with a smile.

He grinned sheepishly. "Well I'm not very good at sitting and waiting no. I'm more of an action
type."

"Ah, I was like that too when I was young. I think the glory of just sitting still waiting for a lucky
nibble comes with age. It gives you time to think and just be," Herb smiled and hooked his wife's
hand through his elbow. "I shall not bore you then. We'll let you unpack and get settled."

A house elf popped into existence in front of them, startling the Grangers. It was a bit different
from the elves in England, wearing what looked to be a tie dyed towel like a sarong, big green eyes
and a darker skin tone. It looked at Harry and bowed, "I is Matsing, head elf of Leon Bahay.
Matsing is being happy to welcome Master Potter to Mapayapa. All elves happy to be working
again. Tiisin and Umabot be taking your bagses and putting them in your rooms."

"Er thank you Matsing," Harry shifted a bit uncomfortably. He never really knew how to handle
house elves, "And thank Tiisin and Umabot for me as well please?"

"Matsing will be doing that Master Potter. Is Master Potter being in need of anything?"

"No I don't think so, not at the moment. I'll uh, make sure to let you know if that changes."

Hermione watched the little creature bow and pop away again after telling Harry that he only
needed to call. She took the time really look around. The house was big and white in front of them, the sand was almost as white and the air was filled with tropical flowers, large, colorful and sweet smelling. It really was beautiful. "It's lovely Harry, more so than a Pensieve memory. It is really lovely."

He smiled, "Yeah it is. I wonder why my parents didn't just live here."

Sirius came up to ruffle his hair, "Well England was home kiddo. Everyone they loved had their lives there so they did too. They had their honeymoon on the island though. On the other side in, well that little cottage is called Pag-ibig Kubo, again no idea what it means. It's secluded with its own little lagoon."

Hermione could understand the Potters. This was an amazing place, probably the most beautiful place she'd ever been to but she would go spare living here. She was British, she needed the fog, the cold and the bustle of London. She was a true daughter of the Commonwealth. Also the cottage sounded wonderful, small and intimate was always better in Hermione's mind. "Everything here seems wonderful. I think I'm going to have the summer of a lifetime."

Harry nodded, "Definitely going to be one of the best," he saw the Weasleys heading in and tugged on Hermione's hand, "Let's go explore the house then." He pulled her toward the house excitedly, feeling light and secure in their safety here.

Of course a week later, right in the middle of a boys vs. girls volleyball game, something had to upset the balance. Harry crouched, eyes on the ball, ready to intercept it and hit it over the net, when a sharp, blinding pain seared through his scar, making his vision blank out so he couldn’t see or avoid the ball heading right for his face.

Making a choked sound of concern as the ball smacked right into her boyfriend's face, Hermione ducked under the net and rushed over to him as he sunk down on his knees. "Harry? You okay?"

Hermione drew her wand to heal his swollen and bleeding nose but she didn't like how deathly pale he'd gotten or the fuzzed out pain in his eyes. Something was wrong and it made her heart stutter in her chest.

Harry rolled with the brief, breathless searing pain until it slowly ebbed and faded away and he could see his worried girlfriend hovering over him, the others who'd been playing around him in a rough circle. He reached up and cupped Hermione's cheek, "I'm alright," his voice was a little breathless and croaky.

"No Harry, I don't think you are alright." Hermione's eyes were dark with worry as she looked him over, smoothing a hand through his hair and ignoring Luna who was apparently waving her hands around to shoo the wrackspurts away. "What happened? What made you go down like that? It wasn't the ball, something happened before you took one to the face."

He sat up, rubbing his forehead, "Scrimgeour destroyed the Horcruxes. Since it probably happened all at once the pain Voldemort felt zapped right along the link between us and past my occlumentic shields just from the force of it. So basically, ow."

Hermione continued to pet his hair, brows drawn tight in concern. "Good that the Horcruxes are destroyed, bad, bad, bad that you had to feel the pain going with it."

"Are your shields back up then?" Ginny stepped closer. "Voldemort can never be fun to have in your head, much less when he's hurting and pissed. One good thing is that Scrimgeour seem to be a
man of his word, destroying the Horcruxes and doing it when no students are left at Hogwarts."
Suddenly Ginny was very happy that they were all here on this island and behind such strong
wards.

Harry poked at his shields, making sure they were in place and reinforcing them as well, "Yeah,
they're back up and solid." He heard a trill and smiled as Neptune lit on his knee. He stroked the
blue phoenix's feathers reassuringly, "Hey, this is a good thing. One step closer to being rid of
Voldemort for good."

Neptune nipped at his fingers before breaking out in a soothing song.

"You getting hurt is never a good thing." Hermione muttered. She knew Harry was right, without
the Horcruxes they might actually stand a chance to take Voldemort out but she hated seeing him
in pain, no matter the reason. She pressed a light kiss to a shoulder who was already turning a
mouth watering golden color, even after only a week in the sun.

He cupped the back of her neck and kissed her brow, "I'm really alright. It was more like having a
really painful bandage ripped off, a quick flash and then it fades."

"Still mate, none of us like to see you hurting. Not even the polka dot menaces," Ron referred to
the twins, who were still sporting Draco's punishment for provoking Bill.

"Ronnie boy is right there." George crossed his arms over a bare and very polka dotted chest. The
spots he could bare, the fact that Draco had refused them to come close for a week now was a
much worse punishment. "You're our Harry, no pain wished for you."

Fred nodded, he was feeling the burn of their 'no touchy' punishment as well. He missed their
dragon. "Exactly. Pain for you is simply not allowed."

Harry shook his head and got to his feet, Neptune flapping up to his shoulder, "You two are
damaged. Pain happens, it's how you deal with it that matters. Now are we going to finish the game
or are we heading back for lunch?"

"Since we were losing and losing badly I vote for lunch." George leaned on his twin dramatically.
"And we might be damaged but deliciously so. Of course pain happens, sometimes it's even
enjoyable but still...No freaky Voldy pain for our Harry. It really is not allowed, we are very firm
on that point." His eyes slid over to Draco. "Very, very firm."

Harry snickered and murmured to him, "You want to get back in his good graces?"

Fred perked up, "Tell us."

"I'll give you a map to a cave three hours walk inland, you can figure out what to do with what's
inside yourselves."

"Oh we are very good when it comes to cave exploration." George's grin was filthy.

"One more word and I swear I will hex you so badly you won't care about Malfoy giving you the
cold shoulder because your equipment will be useless for life. I won't give a toss about underage
magic use." Ginny glared at him.

George raised his hands in surrender.

Fred blinked innocently, "Why Ginny what do you think Georgie was about to say? We are good at
exploring caves. Cave slime is an essential ingredient in more than a few of our products."
Harry rolled his eyes, "Should I mention that as we're on a private island in the South Pacific the underage magic decree is actually void for as long as Ginny is on the island?" He took Hermione's hand and began walking toward the house.

Hermione heard Ginny's glee and twin yelps of fear even as they walked. "You are a very wicked man Harry Potter, I love it." She smiled and entwined their fingers together as they walked to the house. "Lunch on the veranda?"

"Sounds good to me. But speaking of that cave, you want to see it before I give the terrors the map?" he leaned in to murmur in her ear, "It's supposed to be an opal cave."

"Really? That is...Amazing. Of course I want to see it, just as long as you can guarantee that I won't see the twins and Malfoy at it when we get there." Hermione almost bounced already at the mere thought of being able to see an opal cave with her own eyes. "It seems there's a new wonder every day here."

"There is. We still need to meet the dolphins in the lagoon too." He played with her fingers, "and I promise no twins or Malfoy at the cave."

Smiling, Hermione raised their joined hands to her lips and kissed his knuckles. "Thank you, as I said I would love to see the cave with you, I want to experience everything here with you."

"Except maybe the hang gliding Sirius talked me into for next week?" He gave her a knowing grin. She still hated flying.

"Yeah, except that. I don't even think I will watch it from the ground. The thought of it alone makes my stomach flip and not in a good way." She pressed her free hand to her belly. "Flying and I will never be friends I suspect...I can live with that as long as I get to keep my feet on the ground."

He squeezed her hand, "That's fine. You can keep me from flying off too far into the clouds." He kissed her cheek. "My earth angel."

"Not an angel, no not an angel in any way but all yours. You're right about that." She leaned her head on his shoulders as they walked up the steps leading to the house.

Harry stood in the doorway of the kitchen, watching Molly wring her hands, her hair sticking up oddly, and fret over what looked to be cake batter. "Molly?"

"I can't get it to taste right." Molly looked around the kitchen before reaching for a jar and adding a pinch of something into the batter and stirring vigorously. "Taste." She thrust a wooden spoon in Harry's face. "I need to practice, need to get the wedding cake perfect but it does not taste right."

He hummed and examined the taste. It did taste like there wasn't quite enough of something. "What sort of taste are you trying to get it to?"

"Lemon curd, vanilla cream." Molly looked about ready to tear her hair out. "Fleur wants fresh and light. I've never had trouble before with a cake. I don't understand it."

Harry hummed and looked over her ingredients she had set out before patting her on the shoulder. "Be right back."

He dashed out into the sensual garden on the west side of the house and picked a few flowers from the vanilla orchids growing there then returned. He grabbed a mortar and pestle, split the flowers
into small pieces, then bruised the pieces in the mortar and pestle before stirring them into the batter briskly. Then he held the spoon out to Molly, "How's this?"

Prewett blue eyes widened. "That's perfect Harry, that is exactly it, what I've wanted...Thank you dearest boy, thank you so much." Molly skipped across the floor of the kitchen to finish the batter and then bake it into a cake. "You are a life saver Harry. A true life saver."

He blushed a bit and chuckled, "I'm just glad I could help. Extract doesn't always give the right flavor so I figured some of the orchids would work."

"I didn't even think of the orchids and they are growing right outside the window. It was just the thing missing and I cannot thank you enough for thinking of it." Molly hummed as she worked now, all frazzled nerves gone.

He gave her a hug then went to the ice box to pluck out a snack, "You, Fleur, and Apolline are all so frazzled with this. If there's anything else I can do to help any one of you let me know okay?"

"I will. And of course we are frazzled, a wedding is the most important day in a girl's life. It must be perfect." She reached out and ruffled wild hair. "You'll see when you and Hermione tie the knot, she will turn frazzled as well."

"Maybe though it wouldn't surprise me if she's had her dream wedding planned out for years only occasionally updating for changes in taste and things like that. I suppose I'm just your average guy in thought when it comes to weddings and the fuss over making them perfect."

"You're a man Harry. You are never going to understand the fuss and you're not supposed to." Molly smiled. "Now go on and get out of here, it is summer and you have better things to do than spend it in the kitchen with an old witch."

"Says who? I happen to love the 'not old at all' witch in the kitchen right now you know. She's absolutely the best. But if you really don't need me in here I suppose I'll slink out, head hanging in dejection, and find something to do."

"Oh you are impossible." Molly's cheeks were red though and she had trouble hiding her smile. "I don't think I need you in here any longer since you've already saved the day but I always want you here and you know it Harry Potter. I happen to love you too and if you really want to stay then there are some dishes to be done." He pulled him in for a hug. "You can still run though, I heard Gin and Hermione talking about a red bikini earlier."

He hugged her tightly for a moment. "Oh dear. You know I love you and I don't mind doing the dishes but Hermione in a red bikini trumps that as I am a man and as such slave to my hormones," he kissed her cheek as he stepped back, "Really though if you need any serious help I'll even leave happy bikini land okay so let me know."

"Go luv, frolic as a slave of your hormones." Molly smiled at him, cheeks a little red from the hug. She still treasured every hug her children gave her. "I promise I don't need help. The elves take care of everything before I even have a chance to get to it." The house-elves had needed to be convinced to even let her into their kitchen to begin with, reeling with horror that one of their guests wanted to do her own cooking.

"Alright, see you later then," he left the kitchen and made his way down to the lagoon to see if Hermione was there.

Molly shook her head fondly as she watched him leave before returning her attention to the cake.
she was making.

Hermione and Ginny were at the lagoon, warming in the sun after a swim.

Harry paused by a tree, eyes sweeping over his girlfriend's body, lying chest down on the towel. Her smooth shoulders had taken on a lovely tan in their time here so far and this was obviously not the first time she'd been in the bikini because that tan extended all the way down her body, covered only by red swatches of spandex that didn't do much to leave things to the imagination. Being a man his gaze was fixed firmly on the half covered bum of his girlfriend and his mouth went dry. She really was the most beautiful girl.

Ginny looked up from her spot in the shade and snorted when she saw where Harry's gaze was fixed. She was a little bit jealous of Hermione though, unlike her friend she didn't turn a nice golden brown, she turned lobster red and even more freckly than normal. "Your boy is here Hermione, about to swallow his tongue from the looks of things."

Being roused from her sun coma, Hermione turned around and smiled at Harry. "Nah I think he's good, he certainly looks good enough."

Rolling her eyes, Ginny got up and shook her towel to get the sand out. "On that incredibly corny note I am going to leave the two of you alone. See you later back at the house."

Harry waved his fingers at her as she passed though his eyes were still all for Hermione, his feet crossing the sand so he could go crouch beside her, running one hand over a sun-warmed shoulder, "Hey there pretty girl."

"Hi there yourself." She moved on the towel to make room for him to sit if he wanted to. Harry's hand felt nice on her shoulder, she felt goose-bumps rise on her skin despite the warmth of the sun.

"You look utterly gorgeous out here in the sun you know that? Like a selkie that's shed her skin and come to grace we mere mortals with her presence for a time." He leaned in to kiss her shoulder, his hand slipping down her back.

The heat on her cheeks now had nothing to do with the sun and all to do with Harry's words. Hermione fought the urge to squirm, it was still amazing to her that Harry even gave her more than a second look. She was a frizzy haired bookworm. Nothing like a selkie but when Harry looked at her like that she could almost believe it.

"You're one to talk, you look good enough to lick Harry." He did too, skin turning nicely bronzed, stretched over smooth muscles and the green of his eyes standing out even more as he tanned.

He hummed, "But I am a mere mortal in the presence of a goddess my Athena," he brought her hand to his lips with a mischievous smile then dodged her blushing swat. "Okay I'll stop." He settled on the sand, leaving the towel to her. "Have you had a swim already?"

"Mnhmm, I could always be convinced to go for another one though." She gave him a smile from beneath lowered lashes. "The water is so warm, it's incredible. It's nothing like home where you turn into a living icicle no matter how warm the air is."

He chuckled. "The warmer water currents are definitely a plus. Want to go for another swim? See if we can find a dolphin? Or would you rather stay in the shallows and play Marco Polo?"

"Marco Polo? I was thinking we could stay in the shallows and snog but if you want to play then sure, we can do that." She gave him another flirty smile and rose from the towel, holding her hand out toward Harry.
His grin was playful. "How about a snog when I catch you then?" He stood taking her hand and pressing a kiss to her wrist.

"Well I suppose that depends on whether I let you catch me or not." Hermione matched his grin before squirming out of his grip and running to the water.

He laughed, pulling his shirt off over his head and running after her, closing his eyes fairly before calling out, "Marco." In his head he was going over how to keep her once he'd caught her, and he would indeed catch her.

"Polo." Hermione replied dutifully from her spot in the water, trying not to make too much sound. Of course she wanted to get caught but that didn't mean she would make things easy on Harry.

He headed toward her voice but he was also listening for ripples in the water that didn't blend with the sound of the ocean itself that would give away what direction she might decide to move in. They laughed and played for several minutes, with him nearly catching her a couple times, before he called out Marco one last time. On her reply he lunged, diving through the water, his hands closing around her legs, knocking her off them so that he could lift her in his arms as he stood up, waist deep in the water and grinning as he opened his eyes, blinking away the sting of the salt water. "I win."

Laughing and gasping to catch her breath, Hermione wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "It seems you did win yes." She reached up and pulled his face down toward hers so she could kiss him good and properly.

He fell into the kiss, deepening it and ravishing her mouth with all the skill they'd both acquired through the last two, almost three, years of practice. He was careful not to let the kiss get too far out of control since they were in full view of anyone who wanted to look but he kept it long and steamy.

Oh Harry was really getting good at this whole kissing business. Hermione was practically clinging to him like a limpet as they kissed. It was actually a good thing he was already holding her because as cheesy and cliché as it was she might not have been fully steady on her legs on her own. Hermione would lie if she said she didn't want to take things further, hopefully sooner rather than later but not here or anywhere where her parents could look out a window and see them. Kissing was good though, in fact kissing was bloody brilliant.

Harry was debating carrying Hermione into the house, or perhaps to somewhere else on the island, when something collided with the back of his knees and he went down, Hermione with him. His eyes shot wide open and his mouth came off of hers in a sharp squeak he'd deny having made to his death.

Flailing to get some sort of control and not swallow a litre of saltwater, Hermione tried to get her feet underneath her when something brushed against her legs, making her jump. She was just debated whether to scream or not when a smooth rounded nose came up over the surface and she found herself face to face with a dolphin.

Harry surfaced and saw what was facing Hermione and had to laugh. "Well we didn't have to go looking it seems." He watched as the dolphin started swimming around them playfully, pausing every now and then to squirt water at them until he splashed a little back, and wound up with a tailfin splashing him back and a dolphin squeaking at him.

Still a little bit shocked, Hermione was baffled of how playful the dolphin was. She found herself melting and almost cooing, just as she did when Aury was close. The dolphin splashed them again,
before turning and sounding as if it was laughing at the silly humans in its water. Hermione
couldn't help but laugh too.

Harry wrapped his arms around Hermione's waist in the water, a big grin on his face as a set of
clicks and whistles came from the mouth of the lagoon, where a few more dolphins were. The one
playing with them answered back, splashed them once more then swam away to join its family. "I
think we made a friend there."

Hermione nodded. "So adorable, wish we'd had a camera but still...I'll always remember being
snog-blocked by a dolphin. Hopefully she or he will come back and play some more while we're
here."

He laughed and kissed the side of her neck, "I'm sure it will. Come on pretty girl, let's go dry off."

She hummed in agreement, one more shiver going through her at the touch of his lips on him as
she started walking with him out of the water. As warm as it was they had been in it for quite a
while now and drying off and getting warmed up by the sun again sounded like a great idea.

He picked his wand up from where it was lying on his shirt and transfigured some sand into a large
terry cloth blanket next to her beach towel, sitting down on it Indian style. "So other than donning
temptation incarnate, what have you been up to today?"

Brushing her fingers through damp and sea frizzy hair, Hermione had to smile at the way her
boyfriend's eyes stuck to her bikini when her arms were lifted. Not that she was much better,
eyeing Harry's wet form greedily. "Not very much. Mum, Dad and I walked one of the trails, it was
nice until a large bug of some kind fell into Mum's hair. Luna insisted it was a good luck bug when
we got back but I don't think Mum felt too lucky. How about you? What have you done today?"

"Tried to coax a pouting alpha in training out of his room, unsuccessfully I might add, visited
Hedwig in the air conditioned aviary, destroyed Ron at ping pong, forced the parents of the
pouting alpha to take a day ride with their daughter around the island, helped Molly with a cake
 crisis, and now I'm spending time with you, definitely the highlight of my day." He draped his arm
over a raised knee.

"You've been busy." Hermione smiled at Harry and tilted her face toward the sun. "And Orion
really needs to get a grip, he's taking teenage angsting to a whole new level. I'm afraid I'll hear
melancholy love songs being composed as I walk past his room."

"Oh gods I know. I'm about one more day away from sending Hedwig with a letter to Parkinson
begging her to toss her summer plans and come here to put Ri out of our misery. I'd do it if it
wasn't for the fact that the more she misses him the more likely she is to cave further to his
courting. It is driving me demented though. I should threaten to tell Parkinson about how pathetic
he's being."

Hermione nodded. "Please do. Sitting curled up in his room with the curtains pulled tight moping
isn't helping anyone. It certainly won't impress Pansy Parkinson. She is a Slytherin through and
through and she wants someone take charge and self reliant. Not the troll of darkness that Ri's
turned into."

Harry grinned, "I'll word it exactly like that. I know Orion's still arranging little tokens and such but
Parkinson's going to want stories of what he's done here when they meet again." He shook his
head, "I'm just glad Ginny's not following Ri's example with Neville being at Longbottom Manor."

"She's stronger than that, though sometimes I think she wants to curl into herself and just wallow. I
am glad we're not sharing a room here because from what she's told me their communication mirrors are getting a good workout...Enough to fog them up actually." Hermione leaned back on her arms, letting the sun warm her.

He sent a thankful look heavenward. "I for one am grateful that you and I aren't in Ginny and Neville's positions. I wish I could have convinced Neville to come with us but he was insistent on making sure his Gran understood his stance on who he wants to marry when he's ready and on her machinations to change that."

"I admire Neville for that and I understand why he is doing it. If he doesn't really put his foot down now then lady Longbottom is going to try and walk over him forever. Imagine coming in as a wife to someone who works against you at every turn and never lets you forget that you're not really wanted there. Neville would never put Ginny through that." Hermione was still in favor of turning the old handbag into a toad.

"No, he wouldn't," Harry saw a tropical bird fly over and settle in the branches of a nearby tree and studied it. "This'll be better in the long run for both of them. I just feel a bit badly that I have the love of my life here with me and Ginny's reduced to a hand mirror."

He gave Hermione a sheepish smile. "I just want everything for everyone I care about to be right and them all to be happy I guess."

"That's one of the reasons I love you so much." Hermione reached out and placed a hand on his arm. "I imagine neither Gin nor Neville are their happiest right now but as you say it will be better for them later on."

He covered her hand with his and tangled their fingers together. "Yeah but I just get all twitchy knowing I can't help," he shook his head at himself, "So to the effect of shaking off my twitchiness, want to help me get Orion from his room? Drag him out if necessary?"

"Yes, let's go pull him from his cave of misery and darkness, see if he explodes in the sun like the troll he's become." Hermione was quite frankly more than fed up with Orion's behavior and more than ready to pull his head out of his arse.

He rolled to his feet and held out his hand to help her up, eyes gleaming in mischief as she slipped her hand into his and they dashed into the house and up to pound on Orion's door. He knocked hard. "Orion, enough! Get out here and stop moping!"

Orion glared at the door, not planning to get up and answer it. He was hurting here, couldn't people understand that? He didn't want to see sunshine and butterflies. Not when his soul was just a dark, black hole without his sweet lady near.

"Orion Jonathan Black do not make me break open this door and drag you out, and believe me I will. Stop acting like some belly-crawling jackal that's had his favorite bone taken away." Harry kicked the door in counterpoint.

He didn't shout the piss off that was on the tip of his tongue but it was a close call. Orion was not some jackal scavenger, he was a bloody wolf. A wounded wolf...A wolf in pain...Lost without his mate, doomed to wander the world alone and miserable. "Go away, leave me alone." Let me perish in peace. Again the last words weren't said out loud but Orion certainly thought them.

"If you don't get out of that room and man up like the alpha you're supposed to become one day I'm going to write Parkinson and send her pictures as well as chapter and verse on just how pathetic you've been acting since we got here." Harry glared at the door.
Amber eyes widened at that, as Orion sat on his bed, hugging his pillow...Which incidentally had some of Pansy's stolen perfume squirted on it. He couldn't let Pansy see that...He would never live it down and she would definitely choose someone else. Still, he couldn't just go out there and pretend to be happy...But maybe, just maybe Pansy would look at him more if he came back with a tan. Crawling slowly out of bed, Orion opened the door a tiny crack, peering out at Harry.

"Oh gods." Hermione looked horrified. "Shower first before you do anything, please for the love of magic shower! Unwashed teenage wolf...Blegh!"

Harry pulled out a camera he'd summoned and snapped a quick picture, "What Hermione said. Shower you pathetic lump, then, when your parents get back, I'd suggest talking Sirius into teaching you how to surf. Acquire a skill and a tan so you can fool Parkinson into believing you didn't act like a depressed *Hufflepuff* all summer. Honestly," he shook his head sadly.

Puffing his cheeks out in annoyance, Orion pulled his t-shirt off and threw it at Harry before slamming the door in their faces. If he smelled as rank as they said he did then they could just as well suffer for pulling him out of his lonesome cave of solitude. He did sniff his armpit gingerly and he had to admit that he had smelt better. Orion walked to the adjoining bathroom and got the shower started, washing up as he pondered just how he would be able to snatch that camera from Harry and prevent that image from ever seeing the light of day.

Harry gagged and set the shirt on fire before slipping the memory card out of the digital camera he'd purchased just for this trip. It didn't take wizarding photographs but it didn't need to. He summoned a second memory card from his room and put it into the camera before handing Hermione the first. "You'll hide and guard that for me right? When it comes to himself in there a little blackmail is always good to have on hand."

"Sneaky, sneaky Harry. You are right though when dealing with the Slytherin wolf, blackmail is a very good thing." Hermione smiled and took the memory card. "I'll go hide it in my underwear drawer. If Orion looks there then blackmail will be the least of his worries. Be right back." She walked down the hall to her room to hide the memory card before it got wet or exposed to the sun.

Harry smiled and watched her go down the hall, leaning against the wall and waiting for Orion to emerge from his self-imposed exile. He started humming a tune caught at the back of his head, not really sure where it was from but it passed the time.

Hermione was back after only a few moments, she had changed to shorts and a t-shirt. If they were to get Orion outside then she should probably wear something more than a bikini. "Sesame Street." She snuck up next to Harry. "Fitting song though, especially with Mr. troll there on the other side of the door."

He blinked and tilted his head, "Is that what I was humming?" He compared his fuzzy memory of hearing Dudley watching the public broadcasting channel, while he himself was stuck in the cupboard unable to see what was being watched, to the melody he had in his head. "Huh, I guess it is."

Swallowing the anger and resentment she felt when she saw how Harry had to think to even have any idea what she was speaking about, Hermione leaned her head on his shoulder. The Dursleys were gone, no one would benefit from her still feeling such rage against them for all they had deprived Harry.

Orion finished his shower and dressed in fresh clothes. Sighing forlornly as he was forced out of his den. He still got ready though and opened the door to see his keepers standing on the other side.
"By Merlin he lives." Harry smirked at his little brother. "Outside you, ugh you're more pasty pale than Malfoy was the first day." He pinched Orion's bicep and shook his head, tsking, "Lost muscle tone too. I see we have our work cut out for us if Parkinson isn't going to be repulsed as soon as she sees you again.'

"Hey!" Orion rubbed at the spot Harry had pinched. "I am not repulsive, I am much too charming for that." The other things he couldn't argue, no matter how much he wanted to. He was pale and maybe, perhaps he needed to get back into action a little bit...He would have to work through his pain, the tearing in his soul. It wouldn't do to lose Pansy because he had longed for her all summer.

Harry shook his head and prodded Orion down the hall and out of the house. "I can not believe you're acting like the heroine in some Shakespearean tragedy. It is pathetic in the worst way. You really should take a page from Ginny's book."

"What? Wank one out in a mirror? No thank you, I may be pathetic but I haven't quite sunk that low yet." Orion did heed Harry's prodding and shuffled out in the sunlight, squinting as the sharp rays stung his eyes. "No need to poke me, I'm not a sheep and you don't need to shepherd me. I'm here, I'm out...And suddenly I feel I should wave the rainbow flag but I'll leave that to the parentals."

"I was referring to the fact that Ginny's still getting out and having fun despite missing Neville." He flicked Orion on the ear. "And apparently someone needs to herd you around since you wouldn't have come out of your room otherwise."

He gave a sad sigh. "It's such a sad state of affairs, the supposed son of two Marauders finds himself on a tropical isle with caves and exotic animals and potion ingredients to explore and what does he do?" Harry made sure Orion couldn't see him give Hermione a wink.

"I've heard what goes on in those caves, I have no wish to see a Weasley, Malfoy sandwich thank you very much." Orion scratched at his arm, did something bite him? No, he didn't think so. As bitter as it was he thought it was the soap...Since he hadn't exactly used it during this trip he might have become allergic to cleanliness. Oh that was sad. The potion ingredients did cause a twitch of interest inside him. Malfoy had probably already gathered plenty and he couldn't let that twit gain an advantage over him. No, absolutely not.

Hermione had to turn away to hide her smile. Orion was too easy to read and Harry had said exactly the right thing.

Harry subtly herded Orion down to the beach with the best waves, "They only splunked the cave once, Malfoy refuses to do it again. Something about imaginary bats and cold damp stone," he snickered at Orion's professions of disgust. "Since he's been dragging Fred and George with him on his gathering expeditions. Snape and Lady Malfoy happen to be up on the crater today collecting silver fireweed. They said it's a rare ingredient."

"It is." Orion nodded. "It's both rare and very useful, making it valuable." Slowly but surely the Slytherin within started to show weak signs of life inside him. His nose nearly twitched at all the interesting scents coming at him all at once. Perhaps he could talk Sirius into shifting into Snuffles and they could go for a run, new territory to explore.

"Oh my gods! It's emerged!"

Heads whipped toward the voice and there was Sirius, miming a very convincing expression of utter shock as he clutched at Remus' shoulder.
"Moony, it's a miracle! Oh happy day he lives!"

"I'm not sure about that Pads, it could be a spectre from the look of it." Remus wrapped one arm around Sirius' waist and held Aurora with the other as he looked at his son with amused eyes.

"Oh ha ha ha, you are all so incredibly funny. I'm almost peeing myself with laughter over here." Orion was not amused in the slightest by his parents lame humor.

Harry grinned back at Remus, "Oh he lives, a pale and atrophied shadow of his former self but that's nothing a little sun and exertion won't fix. And Orion please, don't wet yourself. I've still got my camera after all."

Orion's eyes narrowed at the mentioning of the camera and the horrible evidence lurking inside it and he stalked down the beach, waving his arms in the air, muttering something about 'vengeance and just you wait' under his breath.

"That drama queen streak comes from your side of the family...Definitely a Black inheritance." Remus looked from his son to his husband.

"Yeah but at least we're pretty enough to make up for it right Moony?" He kissed Remus' jaw, "While you Lupins are just drop dead sexy. I'm going to go catch our son and force him to learn the art of surfing."

"Hmm, you do that. I'll just be here and watch." Oh yes, Remus would watch alright, there was nothing sexier than a wet Sirius with a surfboard and Remus would not miss out on that sight.

Harry exchanged a look with Hermione and sidled up to take Aury from Remus. "I'll babysit, you drool to your heart's content then send Ri to the game room when his lesson is over so you and Sirius can have some time to yourselves."

"Bless you, both for this and for getting the prince of darkness out of his room." Remus handed Aurora over to Harry, his eyes still tracking Sirius' lean form.

Hermione chuckled and leaned in to tickle Aury underneath her chin, making her giggle.

"Hermione gave me the idea to get him out." Harry kissed the top of his sister's head. "Otherwise it would have been a lion carting him out by the scruff of his neck. Have fun Remus."

He turned and gave Hermione a smile. "Shall we repair to the game room?" It was said in a very phony posh accent.

"Indeed we shall." Hermione stuck her nose in the air and curtsied before leaving a still staring Remus on the beach. Hermione could have made fun but she was pretty certain she would be just as smitten with Harry no matter how many years they were blessed with together so she did keep her mouth shut and left Remus to his view.
Ron ducked under a flying bundle of flowers, weaved around a trio of people levitating chairs, and ran to the room Bill was getting ready in, shutting the door and leaning back against it with long, relieved huff of breath. "It is insane out there. Chairs and flowers and ribbons flying all over the place."

"I don't know if it's much better in here." Bill was slumped on a chair, tie hanging loosely around his neck since his hands were shaking too much for him to tie it. This was it, the big day and he still couldn't understand how such a gorgeous, brilliant and wonderful woman as Fleur had accepted to marry him.

"You're having an attack of the wrackspurts aren't you?" Ron lifted his brows. Luna's turn of phrasing was rubbing off on him because when he could find the right, normally used word, Luna always had another term for it.

"I suppose I am." The corners of Bill's lips quirked up, the scars on one side of his face pulling a little with the movement. "It's...It's like I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. For something big and bad to show up and wreck things. I want this more than anything, I want to call Fleur my wife. A part of me thinks I don't deserve it though."

"Bill since when does any poor bastard on the planet actually deserve the woman who loves them?" Ron gave his brother a smile and started fixing his tie for him, "It's only by magic's grace and a few hundred miracles that they put up with us in the first place. I know I don't deserve Luna but I'm not about to let her go either, part of the reason I don't deserve her is the being a selfish bastard."

"Selfish is good when done moderately. If we weren't keen on doing our all to keep them then we sure as hell wouldn't deserve them." Bill tilted his chin up and let his baby brother fix the tie on his muggle inspired tuxedo. Apparently Fleur liked the look of them and Bill just wore what she told him to. He really didn't give a fuck about flowers, hair, dresses, tuxedos or food. He just wanted her and she wanted this so here he was. "How bad has Mum gotten out there?"

"Well she was getting pretty bad, actually tearing out her hair, but then Harry just stepped right in, nudged her to another, calmer area and proceeded to take charge and fix what went wrong."

He finished fixing his brother's tie and pat his shoulder. "It's a little bizarre how well he handles this wedding stuff. He's been poking his head in all summer whenever Mum, Mrs. Delacour, or Fleur are about to lose it and just manages to take care of the problem to their exact specifications. I'm starting to think that if there's not a problem to be solved he goes spare."

"That sounds about right in regards to our Harry. The boy needs to be needed. Fortunately since he's thrown in with our lot there will always be problems for him to solve, even if only small ones." Bill chuckled. "I'm glad he stopped Mum from tearing her hair out though, she would have looked terrible in the wedding pictures half bald."

Ron couldn't help but snicker. "Yeah that's Dad's job anyway." He looked up as the door opened and Harry poked his head in.

"Everything going alright in here?"
"All is good. I had a wrackspurt moment but luckily Ronald was here to chase them away." Bill greeted Harry with a smile. "How are things on the rest of the battlefield? Ron said things were getting hairy before he came in here."

"Maybe a little bit. The bridesmaids were...er well let's say not all of them look very good in yellow and they weren't happy about it; one of Fleur's cousins almost threw a fireball. Then there was the problem with running out of ribbons for the reception's decorations, Fleur's sister crying because she'd lost her hair pin, some miniature Weasley cousin had a rush of accidental magic that made all the flowers smell like Ron after eating cabbage, and the officiate tried to get here on his own boat."

Harry ticked off issues on his fingers looking supremely unflappable.

Bill made a face, knowing he would have had more than a moment of the wrackspurts if he'd had to face all that. Fleur's cousins were a handful on a very good day, throw in wedding nerves and unflattering colors and there could be war. "Well mate, I'm glad you were the one out there smoothing ruffled feathers instead of me. I would probably have made everything worse...There's a reason the groom is locked away on his own before the ceremony."

"It wasn't so bad, some chocolate, a discussion with Fleur, and a promise that they could change the color of their dresses after the ceremony and pictures and they were satisfied, the elves popped out for more ribbons, an accio took care of the hair pin, Snape was roped into de-stenching the flowers, and I sent Sirius out on the yacht to get the officiate."

Ron shook his head, "You ought to be a wedding planner or something mate. A constant stream of problems for you to deal with without the constant deadly consequences fighting Voldemort creates."

Harry flipped him off casually. "Anyway once the officiate arrives you're expected to come out of hiding Bill and wait for Fleur at the altar on the beach."

"I think I can manage that, just knowing she will walk up to that altar and stand next to me makes me thing I could wait forever." Bill, ran his hands over his hair, making sure it was still neatly confined at the nape of his neck.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Your hair still looks perfect Bill, not a hair out of place and Fleur would marry you even if it was a frizzy putrid yellow afro."

Ron snickered at the mental image of Bill with that sort of hair.

"I don't have much left to fuss over in my looks, allow me my hair panics." Bill was smiling though, having settled and come to terms with the person he was now. The talks with Remus had helped immensely. "And you Ronnie, continue to snicker and you will walk out of here with exact that hairdo."

"Fleur would kill you and see if I help you chase away wrackspurts ever again you twat," Ron stuck his tongue out.

"Okay interrupting this brotherly love fest, Ron your Mum wants you to help her carry the cake out, Bill someone will come get you for your part in this massive spectacle."

Bill nodded. "I'll be here waiting for my small part, I'll even do my best to remember all the right words in my vows." He slung an arm around Ron's shoulders and gave his brother a one armed hug. "You should get thrashed for calling your marvelous big brother a twat but somehow I love you anyway."
Ron poked Bill in the ribs and maneuvered out of his grip. "You are a twat but I love you anyway too Billy boy." He grabbed Harry and yanked him, laughing, out of the room to go help his mother.

In what seemed to be no time at all, the guests were all seated, Bill was waiting for Fleur at the altar, and the bridal march began playing. Harry stood with the rest of the guests as Fleur was escorted down the aisle and he chuckled at Bill's awestruck expression as Fleur came toward him. They sat once more and Harry took Hermione's hand as the ceremony began.

Fleur was beautiful, absolutely radiant and Bill looked at her as if she was his own personal heaven. Hermione smothered a sigh at the sight and squeezed Harry's hand. She was a levelheaded girl but gods...babies and weddings still slayed her, made her not so secretly romantic heart soar.

Harry pulled a handkerchief out of his coat pocket and passed it to Hermione with a smile when her chin started quavering as Bill and Fleur exchanged their vows. He draped his arm around her shoulders and nestled her against his side to finish watching the ceremony. When the officiate announced Bill and Fleur as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley the beach exploded in applause and cheers.

Hermione clapped with the rest of them, finding use for the borrowed handkerchief again at the sight of the light in the newlyweds eyes and how Bill lifted his new bride off her feet during the not so chaste kiss.

Molly was dabbing her red eyes, having cried her heart out during the ceremony. Her firstborn, her baby boy had married, had a wife of his own now. And it was all so beautiful. She sniffled and reached for Arthur's hand, pulling it to her lips and kissing his knuckles.

He leaned close and kissed her forehead with an amused smile. "I love you too my Mollywobbles." He looked at his son with pride then scanned the crowd at the couples his other children made. "So who do you think will be making plans for a wedding next?"

"Charlie, definitely Charlie...If they even do a real wedding that is. His little Blaise turned seventeen in March so I think it's only Bill and Fleur's wedding that has stopped them from going ahead already." Molly kept the hold she had on his hand. "After Charlie it will probably be the twins...Look at them." She pointed to her sons sitting snuggles with Draco Malfoy. "Sooner or later someone in that trio is going to end up the duff."

Arthur coughed in amusement. "I wouldn't bet against you on that. But our three youngest, of them who do you think will go first?" He gave her a grin.

She answered his grin with one of her own as she let her eyes travel over her three youngest babies. "Now that is a tough one. All of them are head over kettle in love with their chosen ones...My bet would be on Gin and Neville but who knows...Ron and Luna could surprise us."

He smiled. "I notice you didn't say Harry and Hermione could surprise us, you think they're going to wait a fair bit too don't you?"

Molly nodded. "I do think they'll wait. Not because they don't love each other, anyone with eyes can see that they do but I think they'll wait. Hermione is muggle born, it's not usual with the muggles to marry as early on as we do and I think they'll want to get studies and beginnings of careers settled before they take that step. Who knows, I could be completely wrong though."

"I don't think you are." He kissed her cheek as everyone stood up after Bill and Fleur and the wedding party had gone back down the aisle so they could get the receiving line over with and then the official pictures. "I think you're spot on about Harry and Hermione. Not only for those reasons but also, I think they'll both want to settle into each other in peace for a bit after Voldemort is gone
rather than the constant worry over him in the back of their heads."

"I believe you are absolutely right." Molly nodded. "Constant worry is a strain on even the most solid and loving relationship. They will need that time to fuse together completely." She stood in line to hug and kiss her son and new daughter before asking Arthur to cast a light glamour on her to hide her red rimmed eyes and splotchy cheeks from the wedding photographer.

Fleur was absolutely on cloud nine, even through the receiving line and fuss of photographs, because she was bonded in every possible way to her man now. She half wanted to be utterly childish when she saw one of her less liked cousins eyeing her new husband interestingly and stick her tongue out and go 'na na na na na na' but she managed to refrain. She snuggled closer to Bill's side as they went back into the tent for the cutting of the cake. "Eef my cousine continues to eye you, my very taken man like zat, I will sic 'Arry on 'er."

"No need for that, you and I both know that I will never see anyone but you. If we were to attack everyone who makes eyes at you then you wouldn't be able to step a foot outside." His arm was firmly wrapped around her waist and Bill felt like he was floating. He was sure there was a huge silly grin on his face but nothing would be able to wipe it off now. He was a married man, bonded to the most incredible woman on earth. The luckiest sodding bastard in the universe, that was him. "I love you Mrs. Weasley, you and only you for always and forever."

She beamed and kissed his scarred cheek. She had an inordinate fondness for those scars. They were proof of her husband's bravery, reminders of his mortality, and to always hold him precious because who knew when she might lose him. "Je t'aime mon cher. Por le eternitie."

"Let's cut some cake then, Mum has been fretting over this thing for ages so it should be tasty." Bill didn't mention that he had been too nervous for breakfast before the ceremony and that his stomach was growling and cramping in hunger protests now. He bent his head down and kissed her again, just because he couldn't help himself before leading his wife...his wife toward the cake.

Charlie grinned at the look on his older brother's face, "If that smile gets any wider one of those scars is going to open back up."

"Right now I doubt I would notice little brother, it certainly wouldn't keep me from smiling." Bill placed his hand over Fleur's on the knife handle as they cut the first piece of the lemon and vanilla cake. It did look and smell delicious and Bill had no doubt it would taste just as delicious. "So when are you and your boy taking the plunge?"

Charlie blinked innocently and sipped at his champagne. "June, so almost a year from now and you are to keep that to your own sweet selves."

Fleur blinked then smiled. "Runaway marriage?"

"You bet your pretty feathers," he indicated the embroidered birds on her dress. "Neither Blaise nor I want all this...fuss."

"I would have thought your incubus would love to have a day when everything was focused on him. He is a bit of exhibitionist don't you think?" Bill picked up a fork to feed his wife the first piece of the cake.

"Think? I don't think, I know." Charlie grinned and met Blaise's eyes across the room where he was speaking to Draco.

Blaise met his gaze and raised a brow at his mate but he continued his conversation with Draco for
now. What was happening up there at the end of the room was for the newlyweds and their closest ones.

Charlie's eyes roved over Blaise with a practiced, knowing gaze "Believe me big brother I know."

He looked over at Bill and Fleur. "Keep him in line Fleur, you know how wild he can get."

"Oui but zat wildness eez all mine now. Dance wiz your man when ze music starts mon frere."
Fleur's own eyes danced with humor.

"Yes, go dance with your exhibitionist incubus and I will dance with my wife." Bill's grin didn't waver as he leaned down for another kiss. Fleur tasted like wedding cake and heaven and Bill knew with full certainty that it was a flavor he would always remember and always crave.

Charlie just left them to their kisses and made his way through the crowd to Blaise's side, ghosting his fingers down his mate's arm. "Whatever's being plotted here is for a later date yes? No ruining of the wedding allowed."

"I wouldn't do that, there are ladies here that scare me much too much to even contemplate plotting." Blaise instantly turned and buried both hands into red hair, pulling Charlie in for a kiss.

Draco gave a discreet eye roll and leaned back against a wall casually, crossing one foot in front of the other while he waited for Blaise to get his snog urges out of his system. He might have to wait forever for that to happen though.

A voice murmured in Draco's ear, "Think he meant my mother or yours?"

Fred was horrible for enjoying the little jump Draco made but he couldn't help it. Draco was simply too damned cute when he was startled.

Swallowing his heart that had lodged in his throat for a moment there, Draco glared at Fred before forcing himself to calm down. At least on the outside. "I think he meant both actually, plus Madame Delacour of course." The French name rolled off Draco's tongue effortlessly. "Not to mentioned the bride herself. One of them are scary enough on their own, put them together and an army would cower."

The way Draco pronounced the French name sent shivers though Fred and he lifted a hand to trace his finger over a blond brow. "Mmm that's true, very true. We could lock them in a room with Voldemort and just relax as they turn him into mincemeat if Harry wouldn't freak out over the endangerment of the ladies." His mouth curled in an amused smile. "Paranoid little bloke. So~o, how well do you speak French?"

"Parfaitement bien sûr, pourquoi demandez-vous?" Draco's chin rose just a fraction as he answered Fred's question. "You should know by now that everything I do...I do it perfectly or there is no reason to do it in the first place."

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Fred's smile slipped into sensual territory and he leaned closer to Draco to whisper. "Think I can convince you to talk dirty in French next time we find ourselves in bed?"

"That depends of course." Draco was highly pleased that he had mostly learned to fight down the flush that wanted to rise on his cheeks every time either Fred or George spoke like that. "What will you do to convince me cher?"

"Keep dropping teases and I'm likely to promise anything you want that I'm capable of giving." His tracing finger trailed down to brush over Draco's pulse. "But if it's actual convincing," he
whispered everything he'd do if they were alone, everything he could think of to coax the smooth, romantic toned language from his dragon's lips.

Draco couldn't keep his pulse from jumping and racing underneath Fred's fingers, no matter how he tried as his lover whispered those things in his ear. Dear Merlin, even a corpse would sit up straight and take notice if it had those words whispered to it. "We'll see." Was all he said though, it wouldn't do to give in too easily and if there was anything Draco knew well, it was how to tease and be stubborn.

Fred wasn't stupid. He knew he'd won and further pushing would just schupper it so he just pressed a kiss under Draco's ear. "Shall we go join George and leave the snogging sots to themselves?"

"Please, snogging my own gingers is more than enough. I don't need to see other gingers get their tonsils licked." The pointy chin rose higher as he reached for Fred to pull him along to George.

On the way to bring more punch to Luna, Ron found Hermione standing by a pillar on her own and tilted his head in question. "Alright where's our Captain?"

"We are not actually attached at the hip you know. One of us can be seen without the other at occasions." Hermione looked at Ron in amusement. "But to answer your question...He's out bringing in a present for your little sister. Wouldn't surprise me too much if it came giftwrapped and all."

"He actually got the oak to come?" Ron knew his best mate well. "Gin'll do back flips. I can see him now, poking Neville in a big red bow on his head." He chuckled. "And I know you and Harry aren't attached at the hip but when you have the chance you stick with the one you love as much as you can. On that note, I have punch to deliver."

"Go, deliver, stick with the one you love." Hermione smiled and stood on her toes, even though she was wearing heels damn it, to kiss Ron on the cheek, mindful of his punch cups. "I love you too, you big lug. Now go and have fun. Take Luna for a spin around the floor. Or point out all the different critters that could live in that rat nest of a wig, your aunt is wearing."

"It would take forever," he said solemnly before heading over to his girl, passing her the punch and dropping a kiss onto her lips. "Having fun pretty girl?"

"Mmhmm, I am enjoying myself." Luna took a sip of her punch and smiled up at her boyfriend. "One of Fleur's cousins just tripped another on the dance floor and then the clibbies did the polka, it was very amusing."

He grinned and shook his head. "Fleur's cousins better be careful, if they mess anything up she'll skin them. Clibbies, those the ones with the long centipede legs and the big blue eyes?"

"That is them yes, you can't forget the antennae though." Luna beamed at Ron. It still amazed her that he actually listened to her ramblings and that he remembered them.

Before he could say anything, his sister let out a squeal and he saw a redheaded blur launch herself at Neville Longbottom, who did indeed have a red bow stuck on his hair. What really got Ron gawking though was the girl following Harry over to where Orion was exchanging insults with his father. "Oh this is going to be interesting."

"Indeed, watch how the clibbies are taking cover...I can't believe he actually got Parkinson to come." Luna watched with wide eyes, not wanting to miss a second of the show playing out in front of her.
Orion smelled her before he saw her and it cut him off mid insult and had him twirling on his heel to rake his eyes over the floor until they landed on her. "Pansy?"

She walked forward until she was only a few paces away from him, one sharp black brow rose as her pale blue eyes scored over him with expert knowledge then narrowed. "You, Orion Jonathan Black, have lost weight."

He squawked, something he would never admit to. "Not much, I've been surfing." He had been outside after his forced eviction from his room and he had socialized, moved and been generally a good boy. Pansy looked perfect and amazing as always and Orion couldn't take his eyes off of her.

"Have you? Then what, precisely, put you far enough off your feed that you lost weight while extending the effort to surf hmm?" Her stance was nothing but lethal attitude.

Sirius slipped his arm around Remus' waist and watched the she-wolf eye their son like she was about to bite his nose. "Oh Harry is a sneaky, sneaky bastard."

"He really is, more Slytherin than Salazar himself at times, I believe." Remus answered while watching his son squirm and try to come up with an explanation that Pansy Parkinson would accept.

Sirius just hummed when Parkinson shifted and grabbed Orion's chin in fingers tipped blood red.

"You've been wallowing haven't you?" Her eyes were dangerously narrowed. "Pining away like someone stole your favorite chewie."

Orion got a panicked glint in his amber eyes but he stood his ground...Mostly because he was afraid that Pansy would sink those red tipped claws into his chin if he tried to move. "Wallowing is such a strong word, so is pining. Missing maybe...I can own missing."

"Pining," her tone demanded no further argument and she stepped closer, her glare hitting him before her lips curved in a very self-satisfied smirk. "Flattering but don't do it anymore. Understand?"

"Understood." Orion felt a little ashamed that Pansy had thrown one look at him and known but to have her this close overrode any shame. "You are worth missing though." He would not use the word pining, he wouldn't.

"Well I'm here for the weekend so take advantage of it. You can start," she released his chin, "with a dance after the bride and groom open the floor." She angled her head to where Bill was leading Fleur onto the dance floor.

"You know me, I am all about advantages and dancing with you will be my pleasure, all mine." Orion threw her a cocky grin before grabbing her hand before she could pull it completely away, kissing the back of it. "This weekend then, shall be all about you."

"It had better be my little piner." She took the kiss as her due and turned to watch the dancing couple, studying Fleur's dress and wondering what her shoes looked like.

Harry reached Hermione's side once more, an amused gleam in his eyes. "Hello again."

"Hello again my tricky little man." Hermione smiled and leaned against Harry. "So you not only just made Ginny's summer but Orion's too. My private cupid."

"Tricky I'll admit to but little?" He tucked a rogue curl away. "I figured she'd fix him better than we
could and it was fun convincing her to hop on the boat."

"Did she jump in her heels?" Hermione eyed the sharp stiletto heels Pansy was wearing with awe and just a tiny little bit of envy. She would break her ankles after the first step or two if she wore heels like that.

"Yes actually, I think the shafts of those things are steel or something. Merlin knows her ankles are made of some otherworldly unbreakable material for her to be able to walk in them without crying like a baby." He shook his head. "Why are we talking about Parkinson's shoes?"

"Because they are very, very nice shoes." Hermione grinned and leaned in to rub the tip of her nose against his neck before pulling away again. "We could change the subject though. To something more pleasant than Parkinson."

"Please let's, like...oh say a dance?" He grinned at her as the floor started filling with other dancers.

"Dancing, I suppose I can live with that." Hermione's smile stayed in place as she reached for his hand and started to pull him out on the dance floor. "It's not like it's a chore, being pressed close to my insanely handsome and sexy boyfriend."

He kissed the tip of her nose before leading her into the steps of a dance. "I like your bias but you far, far outshine me in terms of good looks and sex appeal."

Hermione gave a quiet snort but didn't say anything more, it seemed stupid to start a discussion about who was hotter. Hermione already knew she had won the jackpot with Harry, if he didn't see her many, many flaws and imperfections then she would certainly not point them out to him.

"Dance with me Harry."

"Happy to." He swept her into a turn, pulling her closer. He knew that she still had a low opinion of herself from time to time. It wasn't that he didn't see what she considered flaws but more that he loved her even more because she had flaws. It proved her to be real and not just an impossible dream he'd thought up when in a dark cupboard and desperate to believe that even someone as lowly as himself could somehow have something so precious and wonderful.

"I love you, you know." Hermione wrapped both arms around his neck loosely and stepped one step closer as they moved to the music. She loved having Harry's arms around her, loved being this close. Since she wore heels, though not as lethal as Parkinson's, she could lean her cheek against Harry's as they danced.

"I do know. And you know that I love you back, just as much." He nuzzled her cheek softly, savoring her closeness.

Smiling, Hermione held him tighter, dancing with her loved one as she watched other couples on the floor, including Ron and Luna as well as Orion and Pansy. This was wonderful, a wedding where there was love and laughter and people celebrating without having to worry and it was all thanks to Harry.

Harry just enjoyed the feeling of peace even with the worry for the future with Voldemort still out there lingering in the back of his mind. He hoped things weren't going to hell in a handbasket back in England.

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Kingsley hissed as the savage slice in his back was treated by the medi-witch. They'd managed to force Voldemort and his minions into a retreat but it hadn't been easy. They'd lost a lot of people.
Tonks was injured, her leg bone broken into so many pieces that it was better to remove them and have her grow them back than it was to mend the bone.

Fortunately the Minister hadn't been killed and was even now handling things with ruthless efficiency, finding the leaks and plugging them, possibly making sure the traitors in the departments found themselves sinking to the bottom of the Atlantic but Kingsley couldn't bring himself to care about that. More power to the Minister on that level.

Tonks was in pain, in pain and pissed at herself for getting hurt like this. A lot of good people had been lost and even though the Minister was cracking the whip throughout the Ministry now it wasn't enough. They had driven Voldemort and his forces back but they hadn't caught or beaten him. It was only a matter of time before he would strike again and Tonks didn't want to lose anymore friends.

Kingsley got up as soon as he was finished being healed and went over to Tonks, patting her hand. "Bad day isn't it." He sat in a rickety chair next to her cot. "I thought it was supposed to be cats who had nine lives, not snakes."

"Bad day is putting lightly, a fucking crap day is more accurate." Tonks growled but shifted so she could pat the Head Auror's hand back. "He doesn't even have any extra lives, thanks to Harry Potter so it just sucks that we couldn't get him."

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the pillow, knowing it would take at least another day for her bones to finish growing back. "I don't want to go to any more funerals Kings, I don't know if I have it in me."

"I know the feeling Dory," he used the rarely spoken nickname he'd given her. Most called her Dora if they used any part of her given name at all, he liked to be a little different. "But we can't give up or that bastard wins. I hate to say it but it's looking like it may very well take Potter himself to end this for good."

"I know...That makes me even more pissed. That boy has had enough as it is. I hate people leaning on him like he's their own personal crutch. I don't want to be one of those people. No matter what it takes, how many more times I have to spend broken and beaten I will get up and continue fighting until that fucking menace is gone forever."

"You won't be alone, we'll all fight against it. I hate the way Potter's treated too. He's almost seventeen, he shouldn't be having to worry about defeating a Dark Lord. His biggest worry should be where to take his girl on a date and passing his NEWTs."

"Should be yes." Tonks agreed. "Too bad that's not the reality of things for Harry. I'll be back in fighting form tomorrow...Right now I am in a doom and gloom mood. Sorry Sir."

"No need to apologize, we're all a little down but the important thing to remember is that we won this battle." He squeezed her hand. "We'll win the war too."

"Of course we will, my only fear is at what price that victory will come." She glared down at her healing leg, knowing she was one of the lucky ones. "As I said, doom and gloom mood."

"Get some rest Tonks, you're going to need it." He pat her hand once more before rising to his feet. "Because I'm going to need you to help us bring the trainees we have up to fighting form." He hated to have to rush trainees but they needed reinforcements. He'd also speak to the Minister about requesting assistance from other Ministries that might have a grudge against Voldemort.
"I'll be there, fit as a fiddle and ready to whip them into shape. Just make sure to get some rest yourself Kings, you know we're just all headless chickens running around, smashing into walls unless you are there to lead us." Tonks gave her boss and friend a smile, looking almost as pale as the bedsheets were. "You need to take care."

He gave her a grin. "You're just terrified that if I'm put out of commission they'll bring Moody back into the game."

"Bloody terrified yes." She agreed without hesitation. "Moody is as cracked as they come. You at least have a smidgen of common sense and intelligence beneath that shiny bald head."

"Just a smidgen? I'll keep that in mind next time I have to make the budget. Pleasant rest Tonks." He walked off to get down to brass tacks in strengthening their forces.

Tonks watched him go, her amused smile slipping once Kingsley was out of sight. Kingsley was a good man, a good leader and a great friend, she hoped he wouldn't work himself to the bone, she worried about him. With a sigh she started to tap out an old song with her fingers against the mattress, trying to focus on anything but the agony of having her bones grow back, splinter by tiny splinter.

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Harry read the letter over again, tickling Hedwig's feathers with his fingers as he thought of what to do. Even though Scrimgeour was only asking for advice and requesting that he not join in on actually fighting with them until he at least graduated, Voldemort would attack again and again and again. He'd just keep hammering away until he got what he wanted or until he was dead and even dead there was the possibility of his minions continuing out of hidebound stubbornness or vengeance.

Harry himself could directly affect the marked forces after he took Voldemort down but the unmarked ones, the vampires, werewolves, and other creatures, could just continue. He looked up when Neptune flapped in and settled on his other shoulder after giving Hedwig a trill of greeting. "I don't know what to tell Scrimgeour Neptune. There's definitely not an easy answer this time, not that there ever really is."

"Then tell him that, that you do not have an answer for him, that you are not all knowing or all powerful and that you don't know what to do." Neptune shifted on Harry's shoulder, his long tail of brilliant blue feathers sweeping down Harry's back. "You don't need to have all the answers or a ready fix for everything. Not every problem needs to be solved by you, even though you think it does."

Hedwig nipped gently at Harry's ear and made a hoo of agreement. He pet both of them. "I know. I just feel like everything to do with Voldemort is my responsibility, even though it isn't. I mean I know it's not my job or my responsibility to handle it all up here," he tapped his temple, "but how I feel...well you get the idea."

Neptune nodded, letting out a comforting trill. "I do understand but listen to me now, really listen. You won't agree and you might think it cold and callous but I have been in this world far, far longer than you or this Voldemort. It is never wrong to care, hold on to that with everything you have, but sometimes you have to let go of some of the smaller battles in order to win the big one. You cannot fix everything Harry Potter, cannot save everyone and you will kill yourself if you continue to try."

Neptune was right about him not agreeing with it but he also recognized that the phoenix was right,
as bitter a pill as it was to swallow. He had no advice for the Minister, there was nothing in his experience that would allow him to give the man advice on this, and more he couldn't allow the man to see him as a possible source of assistance or ideas the way people had tried to rely on Dumbledore. To do that would be to handicap the Minister and worse, it could lead him to become as bad as Dumbledore or worse.

He also needed to start weaning himself away from his habit of jumping in every time he saw a problem and he needed to do it now when things were at some of their worst so that when life grew calmer he wouldn't find it as hard to just step back from others' difficulties and let them deal with them themselves. He ran a finger down Neptune's beak. "You know I really hate that you're right. Stepping back though isn't going to be easy. I can do it, step back from Voldemort's merry minions and the problem they create, it would be a lot easier though if I could also step back from Voldemort himself. That won't happen but what can you do?"

"Take one step at a time, be sure that your footing is solid before you take the next one. Make sure the currents are with you and that you have wind beneath your wings." Neptune nipped at Harry's hair affectionately and stopped talking to start up a song instead, every note filled with comfort and belief in Harry. He would never have bonded himself to this frail little human if he didn't believe in him, if he didn't see the strength and love underneath it all. Neptune continued to sing softly as Hedwig hooed her comfort, both birds trying their best to give their chosen human comfort and care.

Harry smiled and just continued to pet them, grateful that they cared for him. A sound from the door caught his attention after a few minutes and he turned to see Orion there, listening. He gave his brother a smile and motioned him over. "Hey Ry. You're missing Pansy already right?" The lethal girl had left that morning to return to whatever tasks she needed to perform before school started.

Orion slipped into the room on silent feet, sitting down next to Harry. "I do, I already miss her. She's in my blood in a way I can't put words to, in a way I don't think a non wolf or creature can understand." Amber eyes looked at Harry. "Don't worry though, I'm not planning on holing up again. My lady would skin me alive if I did. Not a big fan of the pining that one."

Harry chuckled as Hedwig moved to his lap so that he could give Orion a one-armed hug. "No she doesn't appear to be. I'm not going to pretend to understand how it is for you with Pansy but I do understand it being a physical ache not having the one you love right there with you."

He gently ruffled Orion's hair. "I'm a lucky bastard, Hermione's been able to stay with me this summer and during these last Hols but when she wasn't able to it felt like I wasn't all there. Like a part of me was missing. I'm not going to lie, I wanted to curl up in a miserable little ball like you got to but Molly would have chased me out with a rolling pin."

"She would have, I can definitely picture that happening." Orion grinned at the mental image he got at that. "I think it's all about spending all the time you can with your loved ones no matter what." Orion pulled his legs up on the chair and wrapped his arms around his knees. "Oh and I've been meaning to ask, have you heard from Alek this summer?" Orion missed his wolf tutor. "Any luck claiming that prickly potions professor of his?"

Harry laughed. "Not as far as I know but then Alek tends to stick only to business involving the school and the students in letters. The week before term do you want to visit after we pick up our materials and books?"

Orion's eyes lit up. "Yeah, yeah that'd be brilliant. Would love to see what's happened at the school in the last year and how everyone is doing." He sent Harry a beaming smile, small fangs pointing
out from beneath his upper lip.

"I'll ask Sirius and Remus and then shoot a letter off to Alek. He'll need advance warning since the students who don't have parents stay at the school through summer." That had been a big deal to him, petitioning the Wizengamot for permission to house some students year round should they be orphaned, abandoned, or abused by their parents or guardians. He'd fought tooth and nail for it and won. "And you know, wolves, territory...recipe for disaster if the others aren't prepared for a couple of strange wolves, a big puppy dog, and a lion to appear where they live."

Orion nodded, he knew all about territory, it was part of why he had been so out of sorts at the beginning of the summer. It was difficult not to...claim. He knew full well this was Harry's place but the wolf inside didn't like not to have full control, own and guard. Just popping in uninvited to a castle full of wolves was a very, very bad idea indeed. "Definitely disaster. They all adore you though so I don't think it will be much trouble as long as they know we are coming."

Harry nodded and ran his fingers over the downy soft feathers that covered Hedwig's feet. "Hey Ry, you probably don't know but I figure I'll ask you first since I can see Sirius losing it and laughing himself to death, but do wizards actually have wedding planners? Molly and Apolline and Fleur did all the planning and everything for Fleur's wedding so I don't really know." Ron's comment when he'd poked his head in to check on Bill had stuck with him and he'd realized that he'd actually had fun helping with the wedding chaos.

A black, wing shaped brow rose and a small smile lit up Orion's features. "You're forgetting which lady I am spending my days trying to impress...I know more about wizard society, party planners and the high life than I ever wished to know. Yes, wizards have wedding planners, not many but they do have them and they are often very coveted and very well paid. The reason Fleur didn't hire one is probably because she knew Molly and Apolline would scare them away if not full out throttle the poor soul."

Harry let Hedwig nip his fingers and felt Neptune nuzzle his cheek. "What do you think Ry, how would the world react to Harry Potter: Wedding Planner?" He slid a look over at his brother in every way that mattered, looking for his honest opinion.

"Who gives a fuck how the world would react? I think you'd be brilliant at it judging from how well you handled the crazy here. If you want it, if you had fun and you want it then go for it Harry." Orion wanted nothing more than for Harry to be happy and he really had been the silent force and support behind the wedding here at the island. "Who knows, maybe Pansy and I will be your first official clients...A boy can dream at least."

"Alright, I'm counting on you to assist me in beating Ron to a pulp when he starts teasing about it though." He bumped Orion's shoulder with his, smirking. "And considering that Pansy stayed with you the entire time except for when she went to bed, I think you're a lot closer to that dream being a reality than you might imagine."

Orion's smile widened. "She's it for me Harry, I may be fifteen but I know it in my bones. Pansy Parkinson is the only one I'll ever want." He grew serious as he looked at Harry closely. "You know what...I don't think Ron will tease, not much at least. Take the piss a little but not really tease. The unholy trinity though, they will tease."

"Well for them I expect you to be a cunning, evil potions genius and help me turn their hair and skin into horrifying combinations, maybe give the terror twins scales or something along those lines." He exchanged a mischievous grin with Orion. "But I don't plan on just announcing it. I'm going to quietly speak to Sirius then keep it as far under wraps as I can until I enter university."
"Good man and of course I'll be cunning...It's always a thrill outcunning the Prince of Slytherin. I expect that you'll have your work cut out in your studies though, florist, therapist, chef, fashion...You'll need to know about everything won't you?" Orion was still grinning.

Harry's expression turned thoughtfully pleased. "Yeah I guess I will. It sounds like just the kind of challenge I need actually."

"You'll be brilliant, both you and that girlfriend of yours will be brilliant in Uni, which ever school you choose." Orion was highly pleased to see that expression on his brother's features. The fact that Harry was planning for the future and thinking of what he wanted to be was a cause for celebration in Orion's mind.

He ruffled Orion's hair. "Well Hermione certainly will be. Thanks Ry. I have to get a couple letters written and off but after that you want to go for a run?"

"Wicked, I'd like that a lot." Orion nodded and put his feet down on the floor, getting up from his seat. "I'll leave you to your letter writing then. Just remember no matter how cheesy it might sound that you can be anything you want to be." Orion winked at Harry and slipped out of the room just as quietly as he'd entered.

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Fenrir knelt in front of the sickly looking Dark Lord. He could smell illness pouring off Voldemort like a heavy perfume and it had been that way since the Ministry had announced the intent to destroy what they called Voldemort's Horcruxes. He didn't really know what a Horcrux was, that was wizard business and he didn't give a rat's shite about it. What he cared about was getting his revenge on the little whelp that had dared to fight him.

He wanted to feel the little bastard's blood on his face, his flesh in his mouth, and his innards in his hands and working with Voldemort was the best way to get that, no matter how weak the wizard had grown. Weak or not he was infinitely more mad and that meant he was dangerous enough to be followed...for now. "You summoned me?"

"That I did yes." Voldemort agreed in a wheezing voice, everything was pain now, everything hurt but he was not about to give up on his goal now. He would grow strong again. If the worst was to happen then he would have one of these dirty creatures turn him. Better be a vampire or a werewolf and live to fight than to die. It hadn't come to that yet though thankfully. "I have a list for you, a list of people I want gone...Think you can handle that?"

Red tinted eyes were filled with barely disguised repulsion for the wolf. He didn't like Greyback any more than the wolf liked him but right now they needed each other. "If you handle this well I might let you join the attack I have planned." Voldemort knew that Fenrir wouldn't want to miss that for the world.

Interest lit the yellow eyes. He always liked killing and could use the release it gave him, "Do tell. Who are you wanting dead in gruesome fashion?" Because Voldemort had to want the deaths of the people on the list he spoke about to be gruesome as gruesome, bloody, and messy was all Fenrir did.

Voldemort conjured a scroll from thin air and handed it to Greyback. "You do read I hope. These are the people I want gone, I want it public...I want to make an example of them."

Voldemort was targeting people who could become a threat if they weren't one already. Also he was targeting people that Potter knew, not the ones in his most inner circle, Voldemort knew they
were too well protected but people he knew...Like that barrister he'd hired at the beginning of summer. Oh he had ways of getting to that little brat, whether Potter liked to believe it or not.

Fenrir made a sound of irritated assent at the slur against his intelligence and opened the scroll, "Won't be one after the other quickly but they'll all wind up dead." A good chunk of the ones on the list were former Aurors or other battle honed wizards and for most of them paranoia was their best friend so he'd have to work around heavy wards, stalk them and occasionally ambush them outside of their comfort zone.

"Yes, yes, yes, that's fine, more than fine actually. Take your time and spread out your attacks," Voldemort waved his hand dismissively. "Don't work after any set schedule, use different days each time, different places and different types of your special...skills. Keep them guessing and make sure to leave my presents where they will make the most impact."

The werewolf just made a grunt and got up, walking out to the grumbles of the Death Eaters in the room. They hated him and his disrespect to the walking, rotting corpse that Voldemort was and that was all the more reason to be disrespectful. Now to plan out who he was going to kill first.
Chapter 70

Chapter by trulywicked

Chapter Summary

Back at Hogwarts, the seventh year students get the benefit of career counseling and there is baby fluff.

Harry wiggled his foot around in his boot in slightly excited nerves as he waited outside the greenhouses for his career counselor, supposedly the best party planner in the UK. McGonagall and Sirius had both been shocked at his decision to go for being a wedding planner. The look on Sirius' face alone had been worth the ribbing the twins and Malfoy had started before Orion had helped him shut them up. Malfoy was still sporting the two toned Gryffindor colored afro with is skin flashing through the rainbow and Fred was probably still pink and purple while George was still orange and purple with warts the size of fizzing whizbees.

"Hello Mr. Potter, it is a pleasure to see you again." A smooth rather dark voice sounded at Harry's side. "And I really must apologize for our last meeting, I behaved very badly indeed."

Andromeda Tonks was the perfect image of posture and grace in her dark blue silk robes and her dark hair in an elegant French twist. She smiled at the young man, amazed at much he had grown in the year since she had met him at his masked ball. "Both my daughter and my husband send their highest regards."

Harry blinked for a moment then a grin spread across his face before he laughed a bit and held out his hand. "Merlin the world is small. No wonder Sirius looked like he'd swallowed a toad when I gave my decision on a career. It's good to see you again as well Mrs. Tonks. How are Ted and Nymphadora?"

"They are both well, thank you for asking." Andromeda leaned in and brushed her lips over both of Harry's cheeks. "Nymphadora is completely recovered now and back out there doing her thing and training new recruits. Ted is busy with his practice but they are doing well, I am very proud. I do hope all is well with you to Mr. Potter."

He nodded. "Things are good, best days of my life to date really. The people I love are all healthy and happy for the most part so I'm happy. I'm glad to hear that Tonks is back on her feet, did she get the chocolate?" He'd had Hedwig bring some chocolates and a letter to Tonks while she was bedridden to cheer her up.

"She did get it yes, managed to eat all of it in just under thirty minutes and spend the rest of the week moaning about what a pig she was." Andromeda rolled her eyes but the tone of her voice was filled with absolute affection for her wayward wild child.

Harry laughed again, "I'm glad she enjoyed it though you can tell her that she only needs to worry about being a pig if she inhales chocolate faster than Orion."

"You forget my daughter's abilities, she actually was a pig during her complaint week...Well at least partly pig." She shook her head fondly. "So Mr. Potter, a wedding planner then? Let's find a
quiet spot and sit down so we can have a chat."

“Hagrid set up some benches outside the Thestral paddock.” He offered her his arm. "Since most of the other students steer clear of them that should be quiet enough, if you don't mind the Thestrals that is?"

"No, dear boy, the Thestrals don't bother me in the slightest. They are kind, harmless creatures. I remember them well from my time here, even though that was eons ago." She placed her hand on top of his arm and walked with him to the appointed place.

He waited until she was seated on the bench before sitting himself and watching the colts and fillies from the last birthing play and work out their hierarchy. They weren't quite fully adult yet but they weren't little foals anymore either. He smiled when one made a soft squawk as it was bumped into by one of its fellows then turned his attention to Andromeda. "I did a little research with Hermione's help and I know there's a lot of work and aspects involved in becoming a wedding planner but something about it just...I don't know how to explains but I feel like it will fit."

"If that's how it feels then it will fit you, I got started because it was all I knew...Born and raised to be a pureblood wife, holding parties and standing at my husband's side like a good girl. Then I realized that I liked it and that I was good at it." She snapped her fingers and had a folder emerge in her hands.

"There is a lot of work involved and a millions things that you will need to think of at once but that will come naturally. As long as you have fun the rest will sort itself out. There will of course be clients you want to strangle and clients with such appallingly bad taste that it makes you want to cry but in the end those are often the most rewarding ones. Once you have managed to wrangle them into your way of thinking of course."

He grinned and settled in to learn from a master born and bred to hold parties.

Pansy hummed and paged through the fabricated case file the career counselor had given her to work on in her free time. The woman had a reputation for being utterly ruthless and never having lost a case. Pansy adored her already despite having to share the career coaching in law with an appreciably sized group. She already knew that more than a few would switch to a less demanding profession. Even 'nice' lawyers had to have a spine of steel and a ruthless side because as a barrister or lawyer you were, essentially, ruining someone's life in some way. At least most did.

"You are looking very beautiful, very lethal and very pleased with yourself." Orion grinned and sat down next to Pansy. "So what do you think of Auntie Vi? Dad had almost had a conniption that she was allowed on Hogwarts grounds in the first place. Going on and on about poisoning young minds and such...Amusing to witness."

Her lips twitched and she looked over at him. "I would imagine that your father now has his hands full trying to calm him down." She tucked a rogue hair back into her sleek French twist. "I quite like her but then I myself am, as you say, lethal and ruthless in my own ways."

"All part of your charm." Orion agreed. "And I believe that my father has his hands full but I don't know if I buy the calming part. Dad gets...possessive and Sirius loves it. Let me just say that I am glad to be living at the dorms with what I expect is going on up at the Black-Lupin wing of the castle."

She chuckled and closed the folder to give him her full attention. "Ah but one must wonder if they
stick only to their quarters. As I understand it they were once quite notorious for being caught in creative places."

"Please no...I don't want to think of what sort of places my parents might be getting it on in." Orion gave an exaggerated body shudder. "Hopefully their old age has made them forget most of the secret passages and at least this time around they don't have Harry's cloak to hide under."

She asked, "Oh darling you should know that even without your parents about the school is rife with sexual intrigue. Even amongst those stuffy twats in Ravenclaw. And especially in the Slytherin girls' dorms."

"Really?" Orion leaned forward. "Tell me more about this sexual intrigue going on in the girls dorm...It sounds like a terrible ordeal, talking about it might help." He waggled his brows at her and grinned wolfishly. "You know I am always here to lend a friendly ear and share your troubles."

She lifted a brow. "I sense a distinct air of perversion in that statement." She uncrossed and recrossed her legs. "All I will say is that Tracy and Daphne often forget the silencing charm."

Amber eyes were drawn to those legs like a magnet and then stuck there until Orion managed to rouse himself with a shake of his head. "Naughty, naughty girls and of course there's perversion in the air...I'm a fifteen year old wolfboy, what do you expect? Wait...isn't Tracy engaged to that bloke from Durmstrang?"

Pansy didn't bother to hide the pleasure she got from the way his eyes went to her legs and it stalled his brain. "Engagement arranged by her parents, she is far from thrilled about it. On top of that she much prefers to be on top of Daphne or have Daphne on top of her. Let us just say that wands are not her preference." She felt for Daphne and Tracy as well as having the 'thank Merlin it's not me' syndrome but it wasn't as if she could do anything for it.

"Arranged marriages...Fuck 'em! Even in the wizarding world that is stone age thinking." Orion made a disgusted face. "No one should have to marry someone they don't want."

She lifted her hand to his face, stroking his cheek, a bit intrigued by the slight roughness that signaled an impending beard growth. "True as that is, it happens and there is often nothing that can be done about it. Unless the Durmstrang lad is caught playing catcher to another man Tracy is very much stuck."

"There's always something to be done, you just have to be willing to do it. If that's what it takes, for Tracy's boy to take it up the bum then that is what we'll have to make happen...Or at least make it seem as if it's happened. I have been working on something for ages now...I think I can make fake pensieve memories. That part wasn't planned but apparently certain liquids combined with toilet water makes pensieve liquid, manipulatable pensieve liquid."

She blinked and smiled a bit. "You're sweet, and quite brilliant when you want to be, but there's more to it than that I'm afraid. The contract requires that any who come forward to accuse Mikhail of homosexuality testify under veritaserum." She ran her fingers into his hair.

"Well then we'll just have to think of something else. I can brew Veritaserum but I don't have a clue how to block it." He chewed on his bottom lip as he pondered different plans, leaning into Pansy's touch like a puppy without even thinking about it. "I'll think of something...Who knows, maybe we're lucky and this Mikhail actually is a wand fan."

Her gaze softened and she leaned to brush her lips over his other cheek. "Sweet wolf." She turned her head and dropped her hand, breaking contact, as Draco and Blaise walked in, Draco carping
about his color change.

She rolled her eyes, "Well perhaps if you hadn't gone overboard twitting Potter over his choice of career you might not be so...colorful now."

He threw a rude gesture her way before slouching down in a free couch to sulk. "Please, like you wouldn't have been all over that if you had been there." He glared at Pansy before turning narrowed eyes on Orion. "And you...I know you are the one behind this...hell."

Orion shrugged. "You made fun of my brother, you brought it on yourself."

"Point to the puppy." Blaise sauntered across the floor to sit down on the same couch as his bristling friend.

Pansy opened the folder again, "I might have perhaps teased a bit had I been there, maybe. However I would also have known the limit and made sure not to make myself vulnerable to the inevitable retaliation. I think your foxes may havebuggered the brains right out of you Dray."

"You talk about knowing the limit Pans...Well that was crossing it." Draco stopped his sulking as his eyes grew completely blank, not a sliver of emotion in them as he got up from his seat and walked out of the common room again.

"Bad move fancy pants...You haven't buggered at all lately so your brains should still be intact...Bad, bad move." Blaise shook his head. "You want to talk sex, come to me darling, Draco is still embarrassed by the subject, you know that."

She shook her head. "He wasn't nearly as embarrassed before he started having sex regularly, well semi-regularly." She flipped a page in the folder before meeting Blaise's eyes. "You do recall those late night chats over cocoa yes?"

She'd apologize to Draco later though. He was more sensitive now for some reason, likely the separation from his wild men had something to do with it, but never before had she needed to couch her words when it was just them. And as irritated as Draco was at him, Orion had become a part of their outrageous little group as well.

"Oh I recall those chats with vivid clarity. Something has crawled up his arse or not crawled up it lately as the case might be...I'll try to weasel it out of him in our dorm. I think he's still a bit scared to let himself feel the way he does for his foxes. Lucius raised him to be cold, I don't think you can just shake that. Having a heart scares the shite out of him, this summer brought them closer and awoke his fears again." Blaise lay down on the couch, looking up at the stone ceiling, lit by green, glass lanterns.

She held her tongue, bit it really, to keep from reminding him that her own home life had been just as cold and heartless as Draco's. Truthfully she'd spent so much time at the Malfoy estate and the Zabini home to escape from her own parents.

Narcissa brought warmth and comfort to the otherwise harsh and unfeeling Malfoy Manor, she'd given Draco his heart and taught Pansy that she had one as well. Blaise's mother had been wonderful for allowing utter freedom but Narcissa had proven that one could still be warm and loving while being lethally dangerous.

The difference between her relationship with her own parents and that of Draco's with Lucius is that Draco had once truly loved and looked up to his father, she'd always rather despised her mother and her father. "He'll be alright, or I'll write Narcissa to bring her here for a mother-son chat
to help him feel better."

She looked over at Orion, "And perhaps a cessation of the embarrassing color might help?"

Orion rolled his eyes but nodded all the same. "Fine, fine, I'll remove the Gryffindor afro, I suppose he might have learnt his lesson. Besides it has gone from funny to nearly pathetic with the way he mopes." He got up from his seat. "I'll go down to the Chamber lab and sort it out right now."

Blaise waited until Orion was out of the common room before he turned on his side and looked at Pansy. "Draco has never been as strong as you are Pansy...Come to think of it, neither am I. I know where you come from, how things are for you but I also know the core of strength inside you. Draco talks big but he doesn't have that strength...Just want you to know that I do see you Pansy and I know you."

"You and Draco are both stronger than the two of you like to think my sexy friend." She quirked a brow at him. "Loathing one's parents makes strength of character a less than necessary component to telling them to shove off you know. Love and loving are a much scarier prospect."

"Love is scary, I agree with that. But it is also the greatest thing in the world when it's right. I am a much stronger and better man because of Charlie. I am not a particularly good man but he makes me want to be a better one." There was nothing Blaise wouldn't do for Charlie Weasley, it was frightening, loving someone like that, baring your soul made you vulnerable but it made you strong too. "It's not just the mate thing, I love him, I truly, honestly do and I wouldn't trade what we have for anything." Blaise knew he was a lucky bugger, to be loved by someone like Charlie.

"Oh course you wouldn't, you're not an idiot." She got out a quill and parchment and made a notation. "And again you've always been a better person than you give yourself credit for. I could list things off but I'm lazy."

"Don't worry about it, I am a lazy sod as well and I am not really vain enough to need to have my virtues listed." Blaise stretched his body like a cat as he laid on the sofa. "You are not an idiot either so when are you going to let your wolf pup catch you?"

"Oh soon enough." She gave him a smile. "We're both enjoying the chase at the moment. How did your career counseling session go by the way?"

"Besides from wanting to bend over the nearest flat surface and let the adviser fuck my brains out you mean?" Blaise quirked an eyebrow. "It went well, I am even more sure that I want to work with magical creatures now. Preferably dragons. I might have gotten into it because of said career adviser but it is something I really want to work with. Besides, dragons like me...I think they can sense I am not completely human." It had been difficult concentrating since Charlie was the adviser for those who'd chosen the magical creature route but Blaise knew Charlie was brilliant, they were lucky to have him there to guide them.

"That might be part of it. I do find myself curious however, why are you here, after the classes for the day are over, instead of with your redhead? I find it very hard to believe that Big Red just skittered off after lessons." She tilted her head in question. She valued Blaise's friendship and company as much as a goblin valued gold but if it had been her in his shoes, after a space of time without her heart's choice, she'd have been all over her man so she wondered why he wasn't all over his.

"There's some sort of private dinner, meeting thing for all the career advisors and the Headmistress. Believe me I will be on him the moment he is let out. I am spending the night in the
Chamber tonight... Plenty of surfaces I can bend over in there." Blaise turned his head toward her and grinned wickedly.

She smirked back. "Just make sure Orion isn't lingering then love. He might try to offer advice or special lubricant." Another notation was marked down with her raven feather quill.

"The advice I can do without... the lube... Well that might be well received actually, depending on what it would do." Blaise shrugged. "If the pup wants to watch then he can... Who knows, he might learn something." Blaise wasn't shy in any sense of the word but he knew that Orion would not want to watch two men have sex, especially not when one was a friend and one was family in all but blood.

She snickered. "Pick something you want it to do. He's come up with an impressive variety of effects and flavors and when I asked him why, "her eyes danced with amusement and fondness, "his answer was 'Just because I can.' He really is too adorable sometimes."

Oh his fancy pants had it bad. Blaise was glad for her, she deserved love and it was clear to anyone with eyes that Orion Black adored her to the point of worship. "Too clever for his own good that one. I believe he and I will have a chat though, I would like to hear more what he can do... It's always nice to add some spice to your romantic life. A heating lube that increases sensitivity might be nice."

"Just catch him away from his parents. I doubt they want to know that he devotes braincells to creating lubes." She made another note, a good approach to handling the example case coming together in her mind.

"Oh I don't know, Sirius would probably be proud and order some special lube himself." Blaise chuckled. "How about you then? How did your career consulting go? Still feel confident to wander the law path?"

"Of course. It was quite informative for a first session and I like the advisor, she reminds me of myself except more seasoned." She gave him a smirk.

"Oh darling, there is no one like you. You are absolutely one of a kind. I am glad you like your advisor though and even if she's only the slightest bit like you then she must be awesome." Blaise smiled at her then tensed like a bowstring before jumping up from the couch. "Charlie is out from the dinner now... See you tomorrow Pans, I have a man to snog." He rushed out of the room.

She just chuckled and went back to piecing together a way to handle the case.

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Sirius eyed two of the counselors for the seventh years as he passed them in the corridor. Something about them had the hair on the back of his neck standing on end and made him want to growl them out of the castle. He didn't quite understand why as he'd never seen them before in his life as far as he could recall. It was odd and made him feel tense. He stepped into the quarters he shared with Remus and headed for the shower, stripping his shirt off as he went. In his last class of the day a student had managed to make a poor rabbit blow up, prompting crying and horror from the girls and less misogynistically indoctrinated boys, and he was covered in blood and guts from the thing.

Remus heard the shower run as he entered their quarters, a babbling Aury on his arm. She couldn't speak words yet but she had plenty to say, her happy baby speak making him smile. He stopped in his tracks when his sensitive nose picked up the scent of blood but he relaxed when he noticed that
it wasn't his husband's. It wasn't even human blood.

He put Aury down on the floor and shrugged out of his teaching robes, walking to the kitchen area to put the kettle on. Remus was glad to be home for the day, he knew it was utterly ridiculous but he was still tense with the viper in the castle and he probably would be on edge until she was gone...gone far away from his lover. No matter what Sirius said, Remus knew that the woman wanted him, he could smell it on her when she was close to Sirius.

Sirius managed to scrub clean quickly and wrapped a towel around his waist, rubbing another over his hair as he walked out and toward the kitchen. He paused when he saw his daughter sitting on the floor of the living area, big gray eyes now blinking up at him as she clapped and proceeded to babble at him happily. "Well hi there princess. I guess Daddy's here too isn't he."

"He is." Remus walked across the floor until he reached his half naked, wet and utterly gorgeous husband so he could lean in and kiss him. "Mmm, you smell wonderful." He buried his nose against Sirius neck and sniffed happily, then laughing as Aury had crawled close and yanked on Sirius' towel until it came off.

Sirius just shook his head and bent to pick his daughter up briefly, giving her a kiss on the cheek, "You, little princess, are a mess." He set her back down at Remus' feet and picked up his towel, kissing Remus as he straightened. "I'll go get trousers on since I can't go to dinner in the great Hall starkers."

He started walking to the bedroom then spun around quick as a flash when Remus made a gasp. "Moony? Wha-" his voice died in his throat and he stared at their daughter wobbling a bit on her feet but standing, arms stretched toward him.

"Oh Merlin...Look at that." Remus' voice was thick with emotion as he watched their daughter, take one unsteady step toward Sirius and then one more. "Our baby girl is walking...She's walking."

He drank in the sight of it feeling happy and emotional and so bloody grateful that Sirius was right here with him, sharing this moment. With Orion he'd been completely on his own for every major moment, first word, first step, first ear infection. He was so blessed now, to have his family close. "Bloody hell Pads...She's walking."

He crouched down, holding his arms out to her. "That's it Aury, come to Papa. Just look at you, walking so good." He felt his heart turn over as she gave him a big, baby toothed smile and a squeal and walked faster, just three more steps before she stumbled into his waiting arms and he stood swiftly.

"That's our girl! That was amazing Aury, you walked!" He spun her around in a circle, getting a thrilled squeal, then stopped right next to Remus holding Aury with one arm and the other out to bring his husband close. "She walked Moony!"

"She did! Our brilliant, gorgeous princess." Remus moved so he was embracing both his husband and his daughter, dancing with them around the room to a melody that was only inside his head. Aurora's happy laughter was the most beautiful sound in the world. "I love you, both of you. Love you so much."

He kissed Remus full on the mouth. "I love the both of you too. And you know what? I think this calls for a chocolate ice cream night to celebrate don't you?"

Aury clapped and squealed.
"Yes Aury, chocolate!" Remus laughed and placed smacking kisses on her cheeks and neck, making her giggle and squirm. "You poor sod Siri, looks like you're stuck with another chocolate addict."

"Hey I love my chocolate addicts. Plus it's the perfect way to find any one of you. Just yell out chocolate and there you are."

He tugged them both to the bedroom so he could get some trousers on. "I can't wait to tell everyone that Aury took her first steps!" He was practically bouncing on his toes in excitement.

Remus couldn't stop smiling, Sirius was adorable, absolutely adorable. "Get your trousers on then, so we can go downstairs and you can tell anyone about how brilliant our princess is. I look forward to see their expressions. Ry is going to be upset he missed it." Orion adored his baby sister, loved to spend time with her, telling her outrageous stories or even just holding her as she slept.

"Yeah," Sirius dove into the wardrobe, pulling out clothes and pulling them on, "he'll be all pouty and make some sort of vow to see her next first. Man, walking, just a month and seven days away from being a full year old." He paused and turned hands stalled in the middle of buttoning his shirt. "Bloody hell, almost a year since you had her. It does not feel like it's been a year."

"No it really doesn't. This year has just wooshed by." It seemed like just a moment ago that he had found out he was pregnant again and now their princess was about to turn one, he and Sirius was married, they were both teaching at Hogwarts and Orion was finally free from the curse of Dumbledore. It was incredible how much had happened in such a short amount of time. "We need to hold a party for our girl, chocolate cake of course. What should we get her do you think?"

"A toy wand? She's like you with flying, prefers her feet on the ground so no to the broomstick, but she's definitely tried to snatch my wand a couple of times." He finished buttoning his shirt and pulled his hair back in a low tail.

"That's a brilliant idea, maybe one of those wands that performs a few illusion charms, completely harmless but still fun, she'll be able to throw glittery sparks and such with it." Remus beamed as he admired Sirius, the man only got more beautiful with every passing year. Not like him who only grew grayer and more scarred. Remus would never understand what someone as glorious as Sirius saw in him, it was incomprehensible.

Sirius grinned. "Perfect. And of course we'll get to see what Harry's insanity comes up with. Oh! Hey, why not let him and Rommy plan the party? He can get in some real experience then with Rommy guiding him."

His heart did a few more somersaults as his gaze fixed on the beautiful picture Remus made holding their baby girl there, happiness in his amber eyes, years of strain having seemed to have disappeared in that moment. How that brilliant, amazing man deigned to love him he'd never know but he was one lucky bastard.

"Brilliant, absolutely brilliant. Harry gets some experience and Aury will have the best party a one year old can have." Remus' smile grew even wider. "My smart, gorgeous mate." He stepped closer and kissed Sirius, just because he could and he wanted to. "Now let's go downstairs and brag about our girl until everyone is sick of hearing it and then we'll brag some more."

"Aye, aye captain Moony!" Sirius looped his arm around Remus' waist and headed out of their quarters with his husband and daughter.
Harry sketched the lay out of the classroom McGonagall had arranged for use to hold Aury's birthday party and tapped the pencil against his lips. Sirius and Remus had given him one theme and told him to run with it so long as it didn't become ridiculous or ostentatious and that was a flower garden. He could, technically, get one of the WWW Instant Gardens and set up a table and it would be easy but very very lazy and not really as magical as a first birthday should be. Right now he was trying to come up with ideas for the theme that were more memorable.

Hermione came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing his temple as she was careful not to jostle him as he sketched. "Hello love, how is it going? Coming up with brilliance of course." She moved so she could sit down next to him, pulling her feet up underneath her.

He looked over at her with a crooked smile. "Not just yet really. I'm trying to think of a sort of magical garden, something a little bitty girl would love, but having never been a little bitty girl I'm operating at a bit of a disadvantage. Plus gardens haven't ever been something I've had much experience with either, aside from Aunt Petunia's very boring one, the Instant Gardens from the triple W, and Hogwarts' greenhouses. So my brain is a bit stalled right now. Are there any famous gardens in books or movies or tv shows that you know of?"

"Well, there's the secret garden. A book about this girl who finds this wonderful secret garden when she has to go and live in this old manor away from her family." Hermione bit her lip as she tried to think of more garden books or movies. "I think you should go with fairies though, flower fairies. I bet Luna could find some for you and make them agree. Then you can have edible flowers on the cake or cupcakes with edible flowers on them. Violets are both pretty and doesn't taste bad."

He hummed and marked it down. He'd thought of a flower fairy garden but with the way that fairies were so often found through the castle near Christmas he wasn't sure if he wanted to go that route. It felt a bit like a cop out to him. He looked up in curiosity when Ron came in, covered in leaves. "What happened to you?"

"Orion." Ron flopped onto a chair, yelping then pulling what looked like a fang from under his bum. "I am going to kill Malfoy for hexing him to act out poems."

Hermione chuckled. "Poor baby. I don't think Orion is any happier about it than you are. Also Pansy made him promise not to retaliate this time so he's about to go insane. What surprises me though is that he and Malfoy can still brew potions together. I don't think I'll ever understand Slytherins and their way of thinking."

"So few do," Ron flicked the fang into the fire.

Harry chuckled. "So what poem did Orion act out that has a fang poking into your bum?"

Hermione blinked. "Alice in wonderland? Poor Orion, that poem is crazy enough without having to act it out too." Hermione's lips twitched though, it must have been very amusing to watch that play out. She would have liked to witness it, not getting bit in the bum though.
Harry tilted his head as a thought rippled through his mind and he made a note for himself before closing the sketchbook. Until he could research a little further planning would be pointless. "I wonder why he thinks of that with you. Apparently the hex makes him act out the poems he associates with people. Needless to say Parkinson's getting wooed to excessive degrees."

"Getting wooed is nice and good but to that degree...Well it is only a question of time then before Pansy will take Malfoy by the ear and make him cancel the poetry compulsion on Ry. A girl can only take so much after all." Hermione actually felt for the Slytherin queen. Orion was intense enough without any added hex on him.

"I think she's enjoying it for now but yeah, not long til she makes Malfoy end it." Ron nodded. Harry grinned. "Malfoy's been careful to avoid Ry though cause Merlin only knows what poem he's associated with."

"Something rabbity I would bet." Hermione was chuckling too, enjoying spending time with her two best friends. They were all so busy now, with studies and relationships and this being their last year that time spent with just the three of them were a rare occurrence. She missed their trio a little and treasured every moment they could spend like this.

"Maybe, that or something to do with fox hunting." Ron settled back into the chair, much more comfortable now that he'd gotten rid of the debris that had clung to him. He studied Harry and Hermione for a moment. "Hey, what do you two think about checking out the corridor on the third floor?"

Harry gave him an incredulous look. "Huh?"

"I must echo Harry here, huh? What do you mean Ron?" Hermione gave Ron a questioning look. Check out the third floor corridor, why? She didn't get it.

"Never mind. I guess it's a little stupid," red was creeping up Ron's neck and tipping his ears.

"No, obviously it's important so spill." Harry tossed a pillow that impacted with Ron's knee.

"I was just thinking is all. I mean I know there were a few other things that year but...it's where we had our first big adventure, before everything got all dark and gloomy and we were just ickle firsties."

A smile tugged on Hermione's face as her thoughts drifted back to that time. Fluffy, the hatch and everything that had happened. It had been so scary and so wonderful all at the same time. Big adventure and finding the best friends she could ever wish for. "Yes, I think I would very much like to go and check out the corridor on the third floor with the two of you. See if it is still as large and mysterious now as it was then."

Harry's lips curved up. "Yeah, it'd be good." He got up, charming his sketchbook locked. It would be a good trip to take down memory lane, back to a time when things were easier, simpler, and more innocent for the three of them. He lead the way to it, opening the door to the old class room and looking into the room. It was dusty and empty, only a few scratch marks on the floor that were proof of Fluffy having taken up residence in there. He crouched and ran his hand along one wide mark.

"We were mad, thinking we could get past that big brute eh?" Ron grinned at Hermione.

"Completely mad." Hermione agreed with an answering grin, remembering the three headed, slobbering giant of a dog...If you could even call it that. "It was brilliant though wasn't it? And we
did get past it, by pure luck and by being too stupid to know it shouldn't have been able to be done
but we did it." She shook her head. "Hagrid and his cute little monsters, only Fang is somewhat
normal."

Harry laughed. "And he's terrified of most everything." He moved over to the trap door, lifting it up
and peering into darkness beyond. He cast an illumination spell and saw only charred remains of
what had once been devil's snare. It looked like no one had been here to clean since the end of their
first year. He looked up at Hermione, "Are you a witch or aren't you?"

Ron cackled. "One of the few times Hermione's ever been at a loss!"

"Yes well...Emphasis on few." Hermione's cheeks turned slightly pink, even after all this time. "I
don't think you're in a position to talk Mr. Panicky who squirmed and moved and flailed so that the
devil's snare only held on tighter." It was strange how she remembered that day like it had
happened yesterday, every detail outlined in sharp relief in her mind forever. For some reason she
was absolutely sure that no matter how old or senile she would get, her adventures with Harry and
Ron would always be remembered in perfect clarity.

"Hey I'd never encountered it before while you'd been spitting out blue flames since Christmas," he
stuck his tongue out, eyes laughing at both himself and her.

Harry shook his head. "You both had twit moments with the Devil's Snare." He jumped down,
casting a cushioning charm as he did to land gently, toeing a charred bit of plant with his boot.

Hermione exchanged a look with Ron and with a wide grin they both followed Harry, jumping
down the hatch, landing a bit more gracefully than all those years ago. "But there were brilliant
moments too, like Ron with the chessboard. You really shone then." She reached up and kissed a
freckled cheek.

He blushed a bit and rubbed the nape of his neck. "Should have listened to Harry about the keys
being too easy though." He followed his best friends to that key chamber, empty of keys and broom
and watched Harry open the door, unlocked now.

They all stepped into the disenchanted chessboard room, the black and white pattern still on the
floor, pieces of broken chessmen scattered over the granite tiles and the king's scepter where it had
fallen when Harry had finished the game. He walked over and ran his fingers along the still king's
base. "I just about died seeing you fall. Took everything I had to keep from running over you mad
berk." He exchanged a grin with Ron.

"Yeah well can't let you always have all the hero moments now can I?"

"It was absolutely horrible, standing at the sidelines and not being able to do anything as you got
hurt." Hermione still remembered that feeling. She had felt it lots of times afterwards but that first
time, oh it had made her heart hurt. "And then letting Harry go on through the flames alone...That
nearly killed me too."

He turned and cupped her cheek with a smile. "I survived, that and so much more. A lot of it I
survived because you were there, the brains guiding me and Ron through the crazy."

Ron nodded and walked past the chess pieces opening the next door. "You've saved our arses a lot
of times."

She shook her head. "No, that's not how it is. I might have helped with the research aspect at times
but we've saved each other, all three of us, time and time again."
Harry tugged her along with him, through the door with Ron and past the chamber that the troll
had been passed out in, passed the one Snape's riddle had been set up, and finally into the room
where the mirror had been. He circled that spot. The room looked smaller, still a rather big room as
it was but smaller. This was where Quirrell had died, at his hands in a way but he'd long ago shed
any guilt on that front.

"So here's where you met Mr. Creepy for the first time then?" Ron looked at Harry.

"Yeah, stuck right on the back of Quirrel's head. The great big evil." Harry ran his hand over a
scorch mark on the wall. "So simple back then. Voldemort was irredeemably evil and heartless and
was born that way from all we knew and Dumbledore was the kind grandfather type who fought to
keep us all safe," he snorted, "when in fact he's the one who created Voldemort in the first place. I
pity Riddle," he looked at them, "I really do."

Hermione reached for his hand and held it in his own. "That's precisely why you are going to beat
him, why you are going to win...Why you have already won. The fact that you can pity him, that
you feel...That is more than Voldemort will ever be able to do, more than Dumbledore could do as
well. You feel Harry, you feel everything so much and I love you because of it."

He squeezed her hand. "I love you too."

Ron shook his head at them and roamed the rooms. "You know it's too bad these rooms seem to
have been neglected. I wonder what they were used for before the mad 'Protect the Philosopher's
Stone' scheme?"

Nodding, Hermione looked around. "I wonder that too, that is a really good question Ron. They
have to have had a purpose but I have no idea what that purpose could have been." She looked at
the arch ways and pillars. The rooms were really quite beautiful when you really looked at them.
"Do you think anyone still knows what they were used for? They aren't mentioned in Hogwarts A
History, but then again I'm starting to fear that said book is very much edited and mirrors what
people want it to say instead of the truth."

Ron nodded. "Yeah probably. The hat might know though, at least someone should bring it up
anyway."

Harry hummed. "Yeah, if they don't have a traditional use then they should be used for something."

"We should bring it to the Headmistress' attention, there must be some records somewhere and if
anyone knows where it's Headmistress McGonagall. Also Harry is right, they should be used for
something, it's sad that they just sit here, empty and forgotten." Hermione looked around once
more.

Ron smiled. "Well empty right now maybe but never forgotten, not so long as we're around." He
jumped to Harry's other side and slung his arm around his shoulders. "Right mate? We'll always
remember these rooms."

"Right. Our first big adventure. Who'd have ever thought we'd have come so far from that?" He
looked over and down at Hermione with a soft smile.

Hermione moved so she could wrap her arms around both of them for a moment. "I regret nothing,
not a moment of the three of us together and our adventures. There have been sadness and loss but I
gained the two most wonderful friends imaginable and I can be nothing but grateful for that."

Harry smiled and kissed the top of her head. "Agreed."
"Too bloody right." Ron grinned and gave Hermione a squeeze back. "Plus it's always good to have a brilliant but scary witch on your side so I'm glad that troll brought us together."

"Me too...Even though you were a horrible berk who made me cry before that." Hermione smiled at him and reached up to pull gently on a tress of vivid red hair. "Here's to us, to trolls and adventures and everything in between."

"Here here!" Ron's voice carried through the empty chamber.

Harry saluted. "And here's to our future. Auror Weasley, Master Spellcrafter Granger," under his breath he murmured 'hopefully one day Potter nee Granger' before continuing, "and the great wedding planner Potter."

"A brilliant, glorious future it will be for all three of us. I know it will be great." Hermione's smile was as wide as it could be as she hugged both her boys in turn, her arms lingering a little around her boyfriend though, she couldn't help herself, she always wanted to touch Harry when she had a chance to.

Ron nodded as he watched Harry kiss Hermione's brow. "It will. Now, since our walk down memory lane is over, should we head back?"

Harry chuckled. "I need to pick up a couple of things from the library, Hogwarts' official one that is, first. I'll meet you two back in the common room in a tick."

"Alright then mate." Ron poked Hermione softly in the arm. "So miss spell mistress, you mind explaining something for me? It has to do with Muggle Studies and Burbage just confused the daylights out of me."

Hermione took a hold of Ron's arm as they started to walk back, Harry running on ahead to get what he needed from the library. "Just tell me what has you confuddled and I'll try to clear it up for you if I can."

"Thank you, you're a lifesaver." Ron went over their latest lesson, something about OTMs and PIMs or something like that.

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Harry carefully arranged the little mushrooms around the room that now had a carpet of grass, a small cobblestone path, and flowers of varying sizes growing in charming patches along the wall. Stepping in to the room was like stepping into a more baby friendly version of Wonderland's garden. The flowers' faces smiled and sang cheerful, childhood songs, and now he was about to create the seating for the party. Mushrooms as chairs. He looked over at Andromeda, who'd been a reassuring, guiding presence through his brainstorms and ideas. "What do you think? Before I make them grow into the grass and turn into the giant versions for the chairs I mean."

"I think...I think you have done a wonderful job with this. It is amazing Harry, absolutely amazing. Perfect for a little princess birthday and you've done it all on your own." Andromeda beamed at him. "You will make a great wedding planner. A great planner period." Andromeda was impressed by Harry, he was so young but he had imagination and vision and drive, as soon as he got into business of his own she doubted she would be considered the best for very long. It didn't bother her, instead she felt a strange sense of pride.

He turned red but didn't mumble against the compliment as he would have done normally. One thing Andromeda had pounded into his skull already was that if he didn't accept the praise
someone gave to him on a job he'd lose customers and lose them fast. He had to be confident in his ability to put together a wonderful party and accepting of compliments that told him he'd succeeded if he was to make it as a wedding planner.

"Thank you. I was lucky that the library had a copy of Alice in Wonderland though." He cast the charm that had the mushrooms growing into charming stools and chairs, toadstools specially bred to be non-toxic becoming the tables to set the food and gifts on. "Otherwise I'd have been begging Hermione's Mum to send me a copy. I'd never read it before you see." He'd never seen any of the movies either but that was beside the point.

"I hadn't read it either, until one night I heard Ted reading it out loud to Nymphadora." Andromeda had of course heard of Harry Potter's childhood, Nymphadora had practically been breathing fire about the conditions Harry had had to grow up under. By now she knew Harry Potter did not want pity so she wouldn't give him any. Instead she felt amazed by the man he had grown into. "Of course Nymphadora is convinced that Mr. Carroll was a wizard, she says that only a wizard could have come up with a character as wonderful as the Mad Hatter." She quirked her lips in fond amusement.

Harry laughed. "I pretty much just adore your daughter. You raised a wonderful lady there." He finished the spellwork with a nod, as daisies grew from the wall in a final flourish, spelling out a Happy First Birthday to Aurora.

Andromeda clapped her hands with delight, suddenly looking much younger as she beamed. "The perfect thing to bind things together. It may come from a muggle book but you have created pure magic with this theme. Well done Harry, well done."

He looked around, smiling. "Thanks, I had a brilliant teacher." He gave her a warm look. "You'll have to bring Ted and Tonks and come to the party you know. You're family."

"If Ted and Nymphadora are able to come then we'd be happy to come and celebrate Aurora. If they are busy well then I think I will stay away too. Narcissa and I seem to revert to our least favorable selves during any type of social gathering where we both are." Andromeda looked a little sheepish. "I love my sister and I do understand her but some rivers are too wide to build a bridge over."

He pat her shoulder. "Well that's why they make boats. I'm pretty sure I can figure out a way to tempt Tonks here and hang training the ickle baby Aurors for a few hours."

"I'll make sure to ask her, if she can come then she will. She adores you, you know." Andromeda chuckled a little.

"She can claim me as a sort of brother as I adore her as well," he gave Andromeda a roguish grin, "but strictly familial affection, Hermione owns the non-familial affection."

"Oh I wasn't about to suggest anything else and I know Nymphadora isn't either. Familial affection is nothing to be frowned at though, it's among the most important love in our lives." Andromeda reached out and ruffled his hair in affection.

"I know, believe me I know." His grin faded briefly before he revived it. "Now what do you say we go get Daddy and Papa for their stamp of approval on this?"

"Good idea. I can go gather them and bring them here while you give things that very last brilliant touch." She smiled again and walked out like a queen, to find her cousin and his husband.
Pansy stood, just a shade behind Orion, as they all, even her at the pointed look from bright amber eyes, sang a rousing rendition of Happy Birthday to Aurora Black. She somehow doubted the one year old toddler was at all interested in their hideous singing, the way her gray eyes fixed on the chocolate cake decorated with flapping marzipan flowers and butterflies made it perfectly clear where her attention was. Cake for lunch, as this evening would be the Halloween feast. She'd have to run seven extra laps round Black lake to work this day's calories off. She winced when the singing gained a painful pitch on the final 'you' that actually made the little girl howl. "High notes are obviously not encouraged."

"Not when they don't come from her no. Believe me, Aury can be plenty of loud on her own. Still not even I can say this was pretty, wolves, lions, tigers, bunnies and foxes all belting out happy birthday. I think we should think us lucky that all she chose to do was howl. If Dad tries to keep her away from the cake much longer though, then we might have a real crisis on our hands." Orion looked at her with a crooked smile.

"Yes indeed. Professor Black nee Lupin, never keep a girl away from her chocolate, especially not one who's inherited your love of chocolate." Pansy gave Orion's Dad a smirk and Aurora whined and reached chubby little hands towards the cake.

Remus chuckled, both at Miss. Parkinson's words and Aury's eagerness to reach the cake. "You are right about that Miss. Parkinson. Let's not drag it out even longer." He nodded to Harry to cut Aury a generous slice of cake so that she didn't demolish the whole thing and then he sat her down in her high back chair and placed the plate in front of her, watching Aurora practically dive onto it.

Sirius laughed and ducked a flying chunk of cake and frosting that was flung from an excited hand wave. Aury was already a mess as she squished cake in her fingers and mouth and he couldn't be happier. This was how a childhood should be, happy and not afraid of getting a little messy. He noticed his own smile of wistful happiness echoed on Harry's face and had to wrap his arms around Remus from behind, kissing the tip of his ear. "Did I tell you today that I love you madly?"

"Not today until just now, I think we've both been a little bit busy with her highness here but I love you too." Remus leaned back against Sirius with a happy sigh and watched their daughter make an absolute mess of herself and everyone in her proximity that she could reach. It was wonderful to see, to witness her utter happiness warmed an old wolf heart. "Harry's really done a top notch job with this party hasn't he? It is so perfect and Aury loves the flowers and the mushrooms."

"Mmmmm. He's going to take the wedding world by storm I think." The pride he felt for his godson had a warmth curling through his chest. "James and Lily would both be near to bursting I think."

"Oh definitely, Lily would be flushing lobster red with pride and James would be strutting around like a peacock, puffing his chest out and being unbearably smug." Remus smiled and his voice was warm with fondness and a note of sadness as well. He still missed his friends, always would. He kissed his husband on the nape of his neck, feeling the sorrow as well. He wished so very hard there was a way to bring back the dead, or at least allow for a brief communication to beyond the grave, more for Harry's sake. He just wished so hard that Harry could know from James and Lily themselves how proud his parents would have been and how much they'd loved him. "You and me will have to do the flushing and strutting in their absence and in the very, very far future when we meet them again we'll have to exchange stories."

"There's no hardship being proud of Harry," Remus smiled and watched his oldest cub working the
room and making sure everything was running smoothly. Remus didn't think James and Lily would mind that he saw Harry as his own child, he thought they would be happy that their wonderful son was loved.

"None at all no."

Narcissa tucked a strand of hair back into her coif and shifted where she stood next to her sister watching their offspring interact. It was...interesting. Draco didn't seem to know what to make of Andromeda's daughter. Much like she wasn't sure how to speak to her own sister.

Tonks treated her cousin with the same familiarity as she did everyone, poking, joking and chattering non stop about everything and nothing. Since she didn't have much of a filter she had no qualms about asking Draco about his redheaded lovers.

Draco had no idea how to respond to the barrage of questions fired in his directions. He liked Tonks well enough but he didn't know her and it wasn't in his nature to be open and talkative to people he weren't close to.

Narcissa slid a look over at her sister. "I think your daughter has managed a rare feat."

"Oh? What sort of feat would that be this time?" Andromeda was used to her daughter doing unexpected and not always welcome things. Narcissa didn't sound cross though thank goodness.

"She has rendered my son speechless. Believe me that is rare indeed as he almost always has a rejoinder or some sort of response up his sleeve." She sipped at the intriguing fizzy juice Mr. Potter had provided, wondering what it was in a corner of her mind.

Andromeda couldn't help but chuckle a little. "Ah yes, Nymphadora is known to have that effect on people. Mostly they are rendered speechless because they can't get a word in edgewise. My daughter does like to talk. You only need to tell her to back off if she steps over a line though, she doesn't take offense to that."

"Good, as if she delves too deeply into his personal life, Draco will do just that. He is quite astonishingly prudish since the Weasley twins attached themselves to him like barnacles." She caught Severus' gaze from across the room and quirked a brow in exasperation at his concerned look followed by a sharp glance at a free chair. She replied with a subtle shake of her head and a repositioning that made it clear that she was just fine standing. The nervous irritation that flickered through his eyes was not lost on her though it amused more than anything else.

Andromeda noticed the silent communication between her sister and Severus Snape and wondered about the concern and slight irritation in the potion master's expression. Sadly she wasn't close enough to her little sister to ask what it was all about so she had to push down her curiosity. She saw her husband speaking to Arthur Weasley on the other side of the room and smiled warmly at him. After all these years her heart still beat quicker at the sight of him. She was so lucky to have a man like him and she thanked the fates for him every single day.

Ted gave his wife a wink. He still felt humbled and so insanely grateful that his wife had chosen him, of all people. His beautiful galaxy, so much more than his world, could have had any man crawling over broken glass for a single look from her and she'd chosen to marry him, a muggleborn nobody. He was a lucky bastard and made no bones about it. Beautiful wife, beautiful and quirky daughter with a heart of gold, and good friends. He laughed and set in to better explain a muggle technology to an interested Arthur.

Ron had his arm around Luna's shoulders as they came up beside Hermione. "Harry outdid himself here."
Luna nodded, agreeing completely with her boyfriend. Not only had Harry planned a perfect birthday party for Aurora, he'd made a party completely in her tastes. She loved quirky and different and she felt at home in the company of giant mushrooms and singing flowers. "He's really found his calling, I think it is great."

"It is." Ron chuckled at Hermione's absent hum as she watched Harry. "Why don't you join him on his circuit through the room Hermione? Instead of staying here and watching him like Bill eyes a rare steak." His tone was gently teasing, not wanting to offend her. Especially since he knew he watched Luna the same way.

"I don't want to bother him, this is work even if he's surrounded by family and the party's for his sister." Hermione wasn't offended, she knew she watched Harry like he was tastier than chocolate, she couldn't help herself, she loved him. "I don't to be a burden hanging off his arm if he has work to do."

Ron flicked her on the ear. "Hermione the day you're a bother or a burden to himself there is the day I become a woman and plant one on Malfoy." He watched Harry turn his head and give Hermione an adoring smile before his smile edged back into friendliness for Ron and Luna. "Besides you're brilliant and I'd bet on you being more of an asset than anything else."

"I don't know about that but you won't have to twist my arm to go and join him...There's nothing I want more." Hermione gave Ron a hug before leaving him in Luna's tender care and walked across the floor until she reached Harry. "Hello my absolutely brilliant planner of a boyfriend. Congratulations on a wonderful party."

He beamed and took her hand, bringing it to his lips to kiss the knuckles. "I'm a trainee planner but I like the way it's turned out." He scanned the room, noticing Snape acting a little tense and occasionally shooting concerned glances at Narcissa and made a mental note to see if he could nudge the woman into sitting down shortly. "I'm just glad Aury, Sirius, and Remus like it."

"Of course they like it, you've done an amazing job." Hermione smiled warmly at him before tangling their fingers together. "I think Orion is as excited as his baby sister about the party theme, look at him." She nodded toward the young wolfling who was bouncing up and down on one of the mushrooms with a huge grin on his face. "I am so proud of you Harry, so very proud."

His cheeks went pink and he wrapped his arms around her in a tight, loving hug. "Save most of that for when I eventually graduate from college for party planning." He kissed the tip of her nose. "I've got a ways to go."

"That may be true but I can still be proud of you and I am. I will be proud of you then too and all the time in between. You are amazing Harry, in everything that you do and I am here to remind you of that fact." Hermione hugged him close. "I love you my Harry."

He knew his face had to be flaming red. "I love you too and you know I'm always proud of you as well. You're so incredible Hermione, brilliant in everything you do, you shine."

She looked down at her feet, knowing her cheeks would match Harry's in color. "If I shine then I shine for you, for you and because of you." She moved her arms from his waist to around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss.

He returned the kiss wholeheartedly, keeping it a brief, mostly chaste kiss before breaking it and pressing his brow against hers with a smile. "I've got something I have to take care of tonight in the forest, you'll come with me?"
"Of course." The answer came instantly and without any hesitation. Hermione had no idea what the something in the forest was but then she didn't need to know in order to follow Harry. She would always be by his side as long as he allowed her to be.

His lips ghosted over her's again. "Thank you. Let's make the rounds again for now then?"

"Lead the way love." Smiling, Hermione stepped away and took his hand again as they started to make their way around the room to see to it that everyone had a good time and that the party progressed the way it was supposed to.
Kingsley stood just behind the Minister as the others attending this...meeting filed in to the warded and shielded room. This was going to be groundbreaking and was dangerous, both politically and personally for Rufus, but it was necessary if they were to deal with the 'other' element of Voldemort's forces. The wards on the room were supposed to prevent anyone within from attacking another but you never knew how well wards would work when several different kinds of magical beings got together in one room.

He suppressed a shudder as the bottomless eyes of the man who currently went by the name Drake Alucard lit on him and then Rufus. The vampire king was not a restful person to be in the same room as.

A lightly Romanian accent purred from the vampire's throat. "Minister Scrimgeour, to what do we," he indicated the seven leaders of Europe's largest werewolf packs, the Banshee queen, the Harpy queen, and the three Grand Hags as well as himself, "owe the honor," it was a gentle drawl that didn't hide the sarcasm, "of this meeting?"

Rufus forced himself to stand tall and not be intimidated by the vampire king's bottomless eyes. He was out of options, this was something that he had to do. Now he only hoped that it would work that the shadow council would agree to his proposition. "I wish to form an alliance with you, with all of you. I am sure we could work out an agreement that will be beneficial to all parties."

Scrimgeour was willing to bend, to bow in order to keep his people safe, to break Voldemort's hold and he needed the shadow council's help to do it.

The creature once called Dracula lifted a brow and settled deeper into his chair, just studying the Minister and his guard carefully. They all had one guard with them, it was a precaution should the wards on the room fail, either by design or accident, and accepted.

One of the werewolf leaders, a female spoke next. "Why? Never before in the past, even under the most open minded Ministers, has the wizard and witch populace ever sought a fair alliance with our kind. Why now?"

"Times are changing. I will not lie to you though, we are facing a large threat in the form of Voldemort. I know that the British Ministry has not been kind or fair to your kind and I wish it wasn't so, Voldemort will not be any better though, he will enslave you, eradicate you after using you up. I swear that I have no hidden agenda and I am willing to take a wizard's oath to prove it. I simply suggest that we stand united in the face of a larger threat. A threat that affects all of us."

"Rufus' voice was serious as he spoke to the shadow council, he meant every word.

The harpy queen stepped over to circle Kingsley, putting him on edge. "And does your guard, your Head Auror as I understand, agree with that?"

Kingsley answered for himself, "Voldemort has several vampires, hags, harpies, and banshees that he's convinced to his side though he has more werewolves in his ranks than any other being, led by Greyback." The snarl all the werewolves in the room gave made the hair on the back of his neck rise. "Once Voldemort falls, and he will fall, his forces will need to be dealt with and our men aren't enough to take care of the non-wizard beings on our own. We need your support in the coming fight. I've never had much problem with any of you, every species has individuals who break the rules so any of your kind I've faced, far as I'm concerned, were breaking your rules. So
yes I agree with that but I don't know why you need to know."

The vampire king made a soft hum. "As Head Auror you have a closer hand over the wizard forces who could hunt our people than the Minister does. They'd listen closer to you. So we need to know that you agree to this possibility of an alliance."

"To be honest I would not have come to you with an offer of an alliance if I did not have Mr. Kingsley's support in the matter." Scrimgeour crossed his arms over his chest. "As most of you know I was Head Auror before I became Minister, I have worked side by side with Mr. Kingsley for many, many years and I trust him with my life and more importantly I value his opinion greatly. The offer of an alliance is the real deal, I assure you of that."

"It would have to be," the harpy went back to her perch, "The Invocation of Merlin prevents you from making false treaties."

Dracula nodded. "Do you have a copy of an alliance document or will we be drafting one this evening?" He was not fool enough to turn down a true alliance, not when it could protect his people better than they were protected now.

"I thought we could draft a document this evening yes, make sure all parties have their say." Scrimgeour, bowed his head to the vampire king before looking around the room. "I cannot speak for the Minister's before me but I can tell you that I'd be honored to stand side by side with all of you in a true alliance."

The werewolf woman who'd spoken before folded her arms over her impressive chest. "We'll see after we get down to brass tacks."

Kingsley breathed easier as one by one the leaders of the other races agreed to discuss an alliance and he held high hopes that it would turn out to be exactly what they all needed.

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Harry squeezed Hermione's hand as she jumped when something rustled in the bushes. They had Buckbeak with them so he wasn't as worried about the dangers in the forest as he would have been, the hippogriff would protect them or give them an escape. Plus it was near to the new moon so werewolves wouldn't be a problem. He needed to dispose of the stone deep in the forest, where no one would be able to get to it easily. "You alright Hermione?"

"Yes I am fine, don't mind me. Just a little skittish." She held on to his hand tightly. Skittish was an understatement, the forest was pitch black around them and she could practically feel thousands of hidden eyes locked on them, not all of them with good intent. Hermione wasn't a coward but she knew enough about what sort of things that hid in the forbidden forest to have caution. She was extremely happy that they had Buckbeak with them.

"It's okay. Together we'll keep safe." His thumb rubbed over her knuckles as they reached the center of the forest before letting her hand go so he could dig a deep, narrow hole in the ground using magic. It didn't take too long and then he was pulling the stone out of his pocket, fumbling a bit until he managed to catch it. He was about to drop it into the hole when Hermione gasped and his head whipped up, hand going to his wand only for it to fall limply to his side when he saw the figures of his parents standing there. "W-what?"

Hermione watched the two figures with saucer wide eyes, trembling as the young woman with sleek long hair reached out an almost translucent hand as if to caress Harry's face.
"My beautiful, strong boy. How much you have grown. We are so proud of you Harry, we love you so much." Even in this form, echoes of their beings, Lily's voice was thick with emotion.

Harry felt his throat go dry and his hands shake. "I...how..."

James raised his own hand as if he were to ruffle his son's hair. "The stone and it is Halloween night after all son. You've become such an incredible man already, so very much better than I ever was I'll tell you that." He looked over at Hermione then gave his son a wink, "Got my good taste though, that's quite a girl you've fallen for."

Hermione blushed red at that, still watching Harry's parents with very wide eyes.

"Don't embarrass her James." Lily's tone was both fond and chiding at the same time. She turned to lock eyes with Hermione. "Thank you for loving our son, please be there for him and take care of him as best as you can."

"I promise." Hermione was still blushing. "I really do love him and I would do anything for him, you needn't worry about that." It was such a surreal feeling, standing here, actually talking to her boyfriend's parents, a couple that didn't look much older than her and Harry.

James gave her a roguish grin. "You're already doing a bang up job. You'll make one hell of a Lady Potter when the two of you are ready for that step, you definitely have all the approval of the past heads and their wives." His ghostly hand reached out and pretended to tug on a curl before he sobered, "But like Lily said, thank you for loving my little Prongslet, not that he's a deer any more but he's still my baby boy."

Harry felt tears gather in his eyes and he had to blink rapidly to keep them from blurring his vision, he didn't want to miss one second of seeing his parents. "Thank you," his lips tried to lift into a smile, "for protecting me and loving me. I'm so sorry we got caught up in some stupid old man's plots." He wasn't apologizing so much as he was expressing how badly he wished it had been different.

"You are our baby boy, I loved you from the moment I found out that you were growing inside me. You were made from love, born with love and we've never stopped loving you." Lily took a step closer, wishing so badly that she could reach out and hold her son. "We wish we could have been there for you, watch you grow up into the strong, wonderful man you are now, wish we could have protected you from any harm. Never forget how much you are loved and how proud we are of you. Even when you can't see us, know that we are always here, watching over you, loving you."

Tears were streaming down Hermione's cheeks, her heart clenching for Harry. She was humbled and grateful though, that she'd gotten to witness this and speak to Harry's parents.

James nodded. "Like the idiot mutt says, we never really leave you, we're here," he pointed at Harry's heart, "and we always will be. Do me a couple of favors, tell Snape I'm sorry and that he's got my congratulations, and tell Sirius and Remus that that I miss them too and that they have two beautiful children and Orion's a marauder to the core so watch out. Take good care of your girl, make sure she knows every day that you love her because she's the most precious gift you have, and live a good, long life for us."

Harry trembled and he nodded, his voice rough as he answered, "I will. I love you Dad," he looked at Lily, "Mum."

"We love you too our precious little boy. As James said, live a long and happy life together with your girl. Take care of each other." Once more Lily had to stop herself from reaching out to her
son, she went to stand close to her husband instead. "It is time for you to let us go now but remember that we are always with you, always loving you and watching over you."

Harry's hand tightened briefly on the stone before he nodded and whispered, "Goodbye." Then he let his fingers open, the stone tumbling into the hole and his parents disappearing as silent tears trickled down his face and his heart twisted in his chest with conflicted feelings. He felt Hermione's arms go around him and shuddered, turning to press his face to her shoulder, his own arms clenching tightly to her.

Hermione held on to him tightly and let him cry, her own tears were still running too and she pressed soft kisses to his temple and the top of his head where she could reach. "I love you Harry." She hugged tighter still, let her hands stroke up and down his back.

"Gods if Death didn't create that stone whoever did needs a boot up the arse. It's cruel, to be so close but so far at the same time." He let her soothe him, anchor him until he calmed enough to cast the spell to close and cover the hole, stamping on it for good measure. He had to give a watery laugh as Buckbeak echoed that action, stamping and beating the dirt into submission with extreme prejudice. He lifted his head and kissed the top of Hermione's. "Now I'm doubly glad you're here with me. Thank you."

"Always Harry, if it is in my power I will always be with you wherever you go and it's nothing you ever have to thank me for." Hermione ran her fingers over his cheek in a caress before wrapping both arms around him again now that he was done burying the stone. She looked over his shoulder at Buckbeak and braced herself for what she was about to say. "Hey, want to fly back? I bet Buckbeak wouldn't mind stretching his wings a little."

He pulled back a bit and looked down at her. "Did I just hear you right? Did you really just offer to fly back?"

Hermione looked up at him, a small tiny smile playing at the edge of her mouth. "You did hear right and you better act on the offer now before it's withdrawn."

Buckbeak tossed his feathered head as if telling them to come on, get on his back.

Harry drew her over to the hippogriff and lifted her onto his back then jumped up behind her, one arm banding securely around her waist while the other held to the chain round Buckbeak's neck. He murmured into her ear, "Hold tight then."

"You don't have to tell me twice, I'll try not to rip any of Beaky's feathers out." She buried her fingers in soft feathers, holding on tightly without gripping too hard. It felt safe having Harry pressed behind her though, as scary as it was, she knew that Harry wouldn't let her fall.

He spoke into her ear again, knowing what she was thinking, "Never, I'll never let you fall." He settled more firmly onto Buckbeak's back and the hippogriff took that as his cue to make a galloping leap into the trees until there was enough clear air above them to safely launch into the sky. The feeling of riding Buckbeak was always a thrill, the way the wing beats shifted and could be felt along the creature's body, the air whooshing past, and knowing that he could just enjoy the ride without having to direct it. Buckbeak knew exactly where to go.

At first Hermione kept her eyes firmly closed, concentrated only on the warmth and pressure of Harry behind her. She did open them though, after a brief argument with herself about being a coward and she had to admit that the view was spectacular, even during the cover of night. She didn't think she'd ever be comfortable with flying but she was glad that she had suggested this, that she was experiencing it with Harry.
He had to smile when he noticed her relaxing just enough to look around. He spoke to her, to distract her from the nerves flying always gave her, "When I was little I used to dream of something like this. Not a hippogriff, I didn't know they existed then, but I tended to watch the birds a lot and I'd seen a little clip of Clash of the Titans through the slats in the door and I saw the pegasus and I'd imagine a great winged horse coming and taking me far away from Surrey. Flying to me always seemed to mean freedom."

She scooched back carefully so that she was even more pressed against Harry and she could tilt her head backwards to rest on his shoulder. "I wish it had come to take you away, a huge winged Abraxan. You are made to be free Harry, to spread your wings and fly whenever you wish to." As long as Hermione had breath in her she would always fight to make sure that, that freedom was never taken away from him again, that he could join those birds he'd watched any time he wanted to.

"Flying is still freedom but I realized something more not long ago." He nuzzled her hair. "Flying free doesn't mean anything if you don't have somewhere you want to go back to, if there isn't a safe 'nest' for you to land." He noticed that they were dropping slowly, the paddock Buckbeak's herd was in drawing closer. "My safe place, my home, is you."

"Always Harry, I will be that place for you as long as you want me." Hermione turned her head and pressed a kiss to his neck before her breath caught in her throat as they were losing speed and slowly moving downwards. Just as always, take off and landings were the absolute for her and she did close her eyes again until she felt the soft jolt of Buckbeak taking ground."

Harry just gave her a gentle squeeze as Buckbeak trotted to a stop then he slid off the animal and lifted Hermione off, hands around her waist. "I'll always want you Hermione Granger. One day I am going to ask you to marry me, when we're both grown ups ready for that step."

"When that day comes, you know that I will say yes. Always yes to you Harry...I will always want you too, always need you." She brushed her thumbs over his eyebrows and cheekbones before leaning in to kiss him.

He met her halfway, arms locking around her to hold her close while they kissed and explored each other's mouths.

Buckbeak huffed softly at the strange behavior of humans and walked over to the corner of the paddock to see if Hagrid had left him any treats.

Hermione was completely lost in sensation, running her tongue against Harry's, savoring his taste as she wrapped her arms around him and pressed as close to him as she possibly could. Not a smidgen of air being allowed between them.

In the back of his mind Harry knew that this was definitely not the place to be snogging his girl but Hermione just completely killed his common sense when her mouth was on his. Still it wasn't any real surprise when a throat cleared a couple meters away, forcing him to break the kiss. It was a pisser but not a surprise. He turned his head and felt his cheeks blaze red at the sight of the Headmistress.

Hermione forced the frustration sound to stay inside her. It was getting harder and harder to stop every time she was kissing Harry and somehow they always seemed to get interrupted. She was a hot blooded, teenage girl in love, she had Harry for a boyfriend. Was there any wonder that she wanted to kiss the breath out of him? She didn't think so. Still she stepped away, ducking her head to hide her blushing cheeks and swollen lips from the Headmistress. "Headmistress McGonagall, anything we can do for you?"
"Curfew is two hours past," Minerva's face was a study in amusement, "but as Mr. Potter requested earlier to have an extension there will be no repercussions. However I doubt either of you wanted Professor Snape to see your after flight embrace."

Harry read the amused mischief in her eyes and chose to lace fingers with Hermione and give her a sheepish smile. "No, really not our thing. We'll go now, thank you Headmistress."

"Yes, thank you Professor, we'll head straight for the tower and our dorms." Hermione still couldn't look the Headmistress in the eye as she and Harry started to move toward the castle. Once they'd gotten a bit on their way, Hermione squeezed Harry's hand and turned toward him. "Speaking of Snape, what do you think your father meant when he said to give Snape his congratulations?"

"Mmm I have a couple of theories but it's not for me to say," he brought her fingers to his lips, kissing the tips, "I think it's something private for Snape and Narcissa at the moment." he knew his girl well enough to know she'd pick up on the hints.

"Good for them." Hermione says with a gleam in her eye. "I will definitely add my own congratulations once they are comfortable enough to share their news." She smiled. "Oh it will be wonderful and I can't wait for Malfoy's reaction to learn that he's going to be a big brother."

"Shhh," he put his finger to her lips, "you never know who's snooping about. Let's not give away that game eh?" He looked toward the staircase to Gryffindor Tower then toward the corridor to second floor girl's bathroom before tugging her down the latter on impulse.

She gave him a surprised look but followed without argument. Hermione really didn't want to be separated from Harry, yet, even if it was only to go to sleep. She followed him down to the Chamber and noticed how the lanterns lit up, spreading their soft glow the moment Harry entered the Chamber. There was no doubt about who the master of Slytherin's chamber was these days.

"I discovered something new down here, about a week ago," he led her past the library into a previously unexplored offshoot of the chamber, pausing at a stone door and hissing at it in a different parsleword than the ones used for the rest of the chamber. It unlocked and opened, revealing a beautifully appointed bedroom suite done in black, silver, and blues.

Hermione ducked her head and walked inside the room. It should have been dark, and dreary, being underground as it was but the bedroom was beautiful, the colors soothing and the bed sinful...huge...alluring. "It seems this place never runs out of surprises." Even Hermione could hear that her voice was a little huskier than normal. She walked over and sat down on the bed, giving Harry a look from beneath her lashes.

He closed the door, locking it, and made his way over to her and hit his knees on the floor, his lips slightly curved as his hands stroked up her jean clad thighs, over her hips, and up her sides over the sweater she wore. "Mysteries are what make the castle go round," his own voice had dropped an octave.

"Mmm, you're right about that." She shivered under his touch, suddenly feeling very much over dressed. Hermione ran her fingers through his hair, down over his neck, shoulders and arms before taking his hands and guiding them underneath the hem of her sweater, placing them against her bare skin.

He took her silent direction, running his hands over the smooth, soft skin of her ribs, stomach, and lower back. As his hands explored, he stretched up to press gentle kisses along her jaw and down her neck. He cupped her breasts through her bra, kneading as he knew she liked from all their heavy petting sessions.
Her breathing deepened as it always did when Harry touched her like that. She fell backwards on top of the bed and pulled on Harry so he would follow her. Once she had his weight half on top of her, she worked her hands underneath his shirt. Stroking his skin and scratching up and down his smooth, muscled back. She kissed his cheek and ear before taking his soft earlobe into her mouth and suckled gently on it, her hands still caressing, teasing and touching.

He made a soft murmur of pleasure before he worked Hermione's sweater up further and further until he was pulling it off over her head and dropping it down beside the bed. His lips kissed and nibbled down the column of her throat to her collarbone. A string of kisses traced along the delicate rise of bone to her shoulder as his fingers rubbed her nipples through the fabric of her bra. A smile of self-satisfaction curving his lips as the points hardened at his attention.

If Hermione had known this would happen she would have worn fancier underwear, something with lace and maybe a few bows instead of her plain pale blue bra. Still she didn't want to stop for the world. She arched up into Harry's touch even as she scrambled to pull Harry's shirt over his head, to feel glorious naked skin against her own.

He shifted to help her in stripping his shirt off but went right back to his previous task of kissing her bare skin and teasing her nipples. He had to chuckle when she made a sound that suspiciously resembled a growl and he kissed the spot just above her cleavage. His fingers worked at the front clasp on her bra, trying to flick open the tiny hooks, which he did manage after a little fumbling that made the both of them laugh a bit breathlessly. Laughter fled when he pushed the cups aside and cupped her bare breasts in his hands, thumbs circling her nipples. A smile of self-satisfaction curving his lips as the points hardened at his attention.

Hermione's breath hitched in her throat, her breasts tingling, spearing pleasure throughout the rest of her body. She had never felt this exposed, bare before but she wasn't embarrassed and she wasn't afraid. She wanted this, wanted Harry to see her, to touch her. His mouth on her nipple was like a miracle, like a lightning strike and she couldn't have stopped the ragged moan rising from her throat even if she wanted to. She rubbed her foot up and down Harry's calves as her hand snuck down, stroking his stomach and teasing at his belt buckle.

He sucked in a sharp breath at the promise of her hand at his belt buckle but he didn't divert from lavishing attention on Hermione's breasts, seeing just what made her make the loudest sounds. Each moan and mewl was music to his ears. He shifted so that he was lifting her a bit, his thigh between her legs, pressing against her groin.

"Oh Gods, oh Harry." She rocked against that thigh, all the emotions and sensations almost being too much to take in. She wanted him to unravel too, feel as much as she did. Hurriedly, Hermione unbuckled Harry's belt, unbuttoned the button and pulled the zipper down and reached inside. First she squeezed the hard length through his underwear before finding her way underneath that as well, feeling Harry's hot, hard skin against her fingers.

Now it was his turn to moan and gasp. He couldn't help the shiver any more than he could keep sunrise from coming but he redoubled his efforts to make Hermione feel good, at least to give her as much pleasure as her hand was giving him. His hands went to the snap on her jeans then drew down the zipper so he could teasingly work the denim down her hips.

This was it, Hermione knew that this was the point of no return and she was more than ready for it, wanted it more than anything. Wanted Harry. She lifted her hips to make it easier for Harry to pull her trousers down, not letting go of Harry's hard shaft. Closing her fingers around it and testingly moving her hand up and down, looking for Harry's reactions and what would feel best for him. "I love you Harry."
He lifted his head to look into her eyes, one hand sliding up to cup her cheek, the other finishing the job of tossing her trousers to the floor. He rubbed his thumb along her cheekbone, his voice rough with the incredible sensations that her hand gave him and the indescribable emotions he felt for her. "I love you too Hermione," he shifted so he could brush his lips over hers, "My Hermione."

"Mmm," She hummed in agreement against his lips. "All yours, only yours." Hermione surged up against him to deepen the kiss, her breasts were pressed against his naked chest and she could feel his warmth, his heartbeat against her skin. "I want to touch you Harry, what do you want me to do?"

He felt his cheeks heat even as he nuzzled her jaw. This was new territory and, despite all the petting that had passed between them before and essentially living in a dorm with Shameless Seamus, he never was very good at telling others what he wanted or what he liked. So it wasn't much of a surprise that he stammered, just a bit. "Y-you're doing just fine already." One hand smoothed up and down her thigh and over her hip, taking note of her soft gasp when his fingers ghosted over the back of her knee.

How could the back of her knee be so sensitive, how could such a simple touch to such a simple place feel so good? Hermione still wanted to touch Harry though, still wanted him to feel every sensation she felt, to bring him pleasure until his skin was burning with it. If Harry couldn't tell her what he wanted then she would just have to wing it. She pushed at his shoulders until he pulled back a little, then before he could be alarmed she managed to maneuver him onto his back on the bed. She slung one long leg over him until she was straddling him, trying desperately not to blush at how exposed she felt as she leaned down to kiss across his chest.

He blinked up at her in surprise, blushed, then shivered as her mouth sent simmering heat through him. When her lips brushed over his nipple he stiffened and made a sound somewhere between a groan and a yelp. The surprising shock of pleasure had caught him off guard but he wasn't about to complain. He stroked his hands down Hermione's back to cup her bum, kneading the soft flesh.

Well that reaction was very interesting, apparently Harry's nipples were just about as sensitive as her own. She ran lips and tongue over his chest until she reached his other nipple, wrapped her lips around it and sucked. Hermione's hands were busy running up and down his sides as her mouth was occupied.

Harry groaned again and wiggled his hand down between them to press up against the gusset of her panties, rubbing. His other hand went to her breast again, rolling the nipple in his fingers gently. The sound that she made around his own nipple made his pulse leap and made him feel like he'd just gotten even harder.

Hermione shuddered, she didn't know what to concentrate on, his fingers between her legs or on her nipple. Both touches left her burning and wanting. She barely resisted the urge to rub against Harry's fingers. Letting go of his nipple she worked her way further down his chest, nipping at the soft skin right above his bellybutton.

His stomach muscles jumped and he shivered again though he felt a keen disappointment when the way she wiggled down moved her panties out of his reach. He didn't complain though and just fell to petting and stroking whatever he could reach, needing to keep his hands on her, to keep touching her even as she touched him.

She reached up with one hand and tangled their fingers together even as she moved lower, her hair brushing against his abdomen and thighs. Hermione pulled his trousers down further with her free hand before leaning in and nuzzling the soft fabric of his underpants, feeling the hard flesh underneath against her cheek.
His eyes went a little wide. Of course he'd heard of...but he'd never imagined, not their first time together anyway. Then again Hermione had a talent for surprising him. He tangled the fingers of his free hand through her hair.

"Hermione?" He had to ask, had to make sure she was doing what she wanted, not what she thought he might want. Not that it didn't make him almost painfully hard just thinking of her mouth down there, it did of course but he would always care more for her needs and wants than his own.

"Hmm?" She stopped rubbing her cheek against the cotton to look up at him with dark, hooded eyes. Hermione saw the question on his face and she squeezed his hand. "I want to, I may not be very good at it but I want to. I love every part of you and I want to make you feel good, that makes me feel good too."

He squeezed back, lips curving up again. "Just so long as you want to. I'm completely yours to do with as you wish love."

"Mmm, I like the sound of that." She released his hand so she could hook her fingers in his trousers and pull them completely off, doing the same with his underwear, leaving Harry lovely and naked beneath her. "Tell me if I'm doing something wrong. If it's...not good." Hermione had no idea what she was doing here for once she was working completely without a manual. She kept his gaze as she lowered herself between his legs, pressing a kiss to his inner thigh before running her tongue up his flushed erection.

He sucked in a sharp breath before moaning it back out. From the electric shimmer of pleasure just that one, wicked lick sent through him, he couldn't imagine anything Hermione did not being amazing. Her tongue and lips playing over his shaft certainly was good enough to reduce him to wordless sounds of encouragement and enjoyment.

It was an entirely new experience but it was not bad, far from it. Harry was warm and velvety soft against her tongue and lips and the sounds he made was enough to make her want to go forward, to draw out more of those moans and hisses. Taking hold of his hips she opened her mouth to take him inside, giving a trying suck.

He bit his lip hard and gripped the sheets beneath him as if gripping control, a long, low groan rumbling in his chest. Dear Merlin her mouth felt like heaven and it took everything he had to keep his hips still. Seamus' and Dean's tales of this had made it clear just how bad an idea it would be to just arch up while Hermione had him in her mouth.

Hermione wasn't an idiot, she didn't even attempt to take in all of Harry, knowing that it wouldn't end well for either of them. This was about pleasure after all. She wrapped one hand around the base of him, squeezing and stroking as she concentrated on the part she could handle in her mouth, sucking and swirling her tongue around the flushed head.

"Gods!" He shuddered at the incredible feel of her hand and mouth on him, making his blood pound in his ears. He could feel the tension building in his body but before it could build to a critical level he decided to turn it around for fair play. He sat up briefly, grabbing her hips and pulling her up until her knees were on either side of his head then he whispered a parsle-spell that had her panties disappearing and revealing her pretty pink labia to his gaze. He spread the outer lips with his thumbs, lifted his head, and gave a slow, experimental lick along the folds.

Hermione bit down on her bottom lip as spears of pure white pleasure stabbed through her. She hadn't known anything could feel like this, she trembled at Harry's touch and reached up to grab the bedframe, needing to hold on to something, to ground herself so she wouldn't be completely washed away by the sea of pleasure Harry gave her. "Oh Harry."
He hummed in acknowledgement and set about exploring her most intimate place with his tongue. He found the hard little nub of her clitoris and licked it, circling it with his tongue before closing his lips around it and sucking. He brought his fingers to the entrance of her body and circled it, feeling her juices seep out and coat his fingers.

She felt absolutely wrecked, feeling wide open and exposed in a way she'd never had before. Harry's mouth on her was almost too much but she didn't want it to stop. She couldn't stop trembling and the place between her legs throbbed in time with her heartbeat. "Harry please...you need to stop. I don't want to come until you are inside me...Please."

He eased back, kissing the inside of her thigh, "You sure?" His hands had moved to her hips, thumbs stroking over her skin lovingly.

She nodded, looking down at him and still breathing deeply from the sensations he'd just given her. "It's our first time, I want us to experience it together." It felt silly when she said it out loud and she could feel herself blushing again.

He shifted, scooting up between her legs until he could press another kiss just above her navel. "Okay my pretty girl," he spoke another parseltongue, a summoning, continuing to kiss over and along her belly as he waited. He glanced over as two objects dropped onto the bed. One the box of condoms Hermione's mother had made her pack in the school trunk and the other the contraceptive potion he'd been 'convinced' into keeping in his. He picked up the potion bottle and handed it to her, a soft smile on his lips. "Just about a tablespoon."

She took the bottle with an answering smile, uncorked it and brought it to her lips. "Cheers then." Hermione swallowed her sip down and handed Harry the bottle with a shudder and grimace. "Dear Merlin, why do they have to make potions taste as bad as possible? I think this is one potion they would want you to take." Despite everything, Hermione was a little bit nervous, which caused her to babble.

He chuckled, "We'll have to employ a potions genius to make one not foul." He swallowed his own dose then looked over at the condom box, plucking one out and holding it up. "Shall we be paranoid?" His other hand was petting over her back soothingly, understanding and sharing her nerves. He wanted this to be good for her.

"Better to be paranoid and safe." Hermione nodded. She wanted a family with Harry but not yet, she was in no way ready for that and she knew that Harry wasn't either. She took the thin tin foil square from him and ripped it open, taking the condom and rolling it on him. She had certainly been made to practice it that horrible summer when her Mum had given her the talk. Hermione would never look at a banana the same way again. When she was done she leaned in and kissed him lovingly.

He returned the kiss, melding their mouths together, cupping her face tenderly. It was almost hard to believe that they'd finally reached this point yet it was also the easiest thing in the world to believe. He coaxed her to straddle his hips again, nuzzling her cheek. "I want you to control this."

Hermione kissed him again, knowing her cheeks were bright red when she straightened up and reached behind her to help guiding Harry inside. What if she did something wrong? Hurt him somehow? What if she was bad at sex and it wasn't good for Harry? A million thoughts managed to rush through her brain as she felt his head nudge against her entrance and allowed her to sink down on his erection.

He kept a steadying grip on her hips, helping to support her as he was slowly taken into her body, the heat and tightness that he gradually slipped into making his head swim. He caught her mouth
with his again, seeing the fleeting shadow of worry in her eyes and wanting to erase that.

It was a full stretch a completely unique feeling, it did sting a little but the knowledge that this was Harry, her Harry inside her made her filled with wonder. Hermione nipped at his lips and rocked her hips gently, getting used to the feeling of having him inside of her.

Harry felt her hesitate before she dropped her hips sharply and tensed a bit. He stroked his hands up and down her sides to soothe and calm that tension away and made sure not to shift his hips so she could get used to him. "I love you Hermione."

"I love you too Harry, so much." The sting and stretch was beginning to ease and Hermione felt the first tendrils of pleasure coil in the place where they were joined. She let out a soft gasp and rocked her hips with a little more purpose. "Oh gods."

He just managed to groan, scattering kisses along her jaw and down her throat as her movements sent shocks of pleasure through him.

Her kisses grew feverish as she began to do more than rock, tensing his thighs and lifting and lowering herself on him. Hermione tangled her fingers in Harry's hair and breathed deeply at the feeling of him sliding in and out of her. It was too good for words and it made her brain stall to a screeching halt leaving nothing but Harry, Harry, Harry.

Harry was so beautiful. Hermione couldn't take her eyes of him as she moved quicker and more frantic on top of him. She felt as if she was overflowing with love for this wonderful man and she had to let it spill out, through words and actions. He felt so good inside of her and Hermione could feel herself starting to tense up, she was so close to falling apart completely.

"My gods," Harry panted. He had to get this thought put into words, seeing Hermione driving herself to ecstasy atop him was breathtaking and he had to say something to that effect before the pleasure made him useless verbally, "you're gorgeous." He shivered, feeling his balls draw up, ready to cut his sanity loose, and slipped a hand down to circle her clitoris with his thumb.

Hermione nearly screamed as he touched her like that. Oh Merlin it was all she needed to be pushed right over the edge. A smothered version of Harry's name left her lips as she shook and shuddered above him, completely falling to pieces.

Her tightening around him in pulsing squeezes sent him over the edge as well and he came with a loud, long groan, arching up just a little bit more into her. He reared up, catching her mouth in a desperate, heated kiss as his orgasm rolled through him and blanked his vision out for a few moments, his arms locking around her tightly.

"Oh lord, oh my." Hermione's heart was pounding and she slumped bonelessly in his embrace. She had never felt closer to Harry than she did in this moment. Now they were connected on every plane, in every way. "That was...that was...wow."

He could still hear his heartbeat in his ears and ran a weak hand down her hair. "Wow about covers it yeah." He nuzzled her temple, loving the feel of her draped over him.

She nuzzled his shoulder, still feeling completely boneless and sated. "I really do love you Harry
and we are definitely doing this again, as often as we can get away with it." Hermione licked a stripe up his neck.

"I have absolutely no argument to that," one hand slid lazily up and down her back while the other grabbed a corner of the coverlet and pulled it over them both.

Still basking, Hermione snuggled even closer to Harry and closed her eyes, letting the night's events, her languid muscles and Harry's presence lull her to sleep.

He just smiled and watched her sleep for a little while before following her into dreamland.
A few weeks later found Harry and helping Sirius setup Aury's new playpen under Andromeda's supervision. Now that she was walking and running all over the place they needed a better thing to hem the toddler in with. He was also telling Sirius about Snape's reaction to what his father had asked him to pass on. "I swear he turned three different shades of red."

Sirius chuckled. "Well the last thing Sir Hedgehog would ever expect is an apology from James so that's not surprising. Did he say anything after or did he just boot you out?"

"Booted me out." Harry's brows knit and he eyed the part of the playpen he held. "Okay where does this go?"

"I think it goes right next to that L-shaped part." Andromeda pointed to another part of the playpen. "I hope this is stronger than the way they were back in my days, Nymphadora managed to chew her way out of all of them. Always the impossible one that girl." She hook her head and handed Sirius the next part to be assembled.

His eyes widened as he accepted it. "Nym chewed her way out?"

Andromeda nodded. "Could chew through anything, we tried everything except for spelling her mouth shut...Didn't help."

Sirius paused and thought about how his daughter was certain to have stronger teeth than your average baby. "Oooh boy, I'm getting a bad feeling here."

Harry chuckled and assembled the next part. "Maybe promise her chocolate if she stays in the pen until an adult takes her out of it. That might work, if she-" he blinked as the door swung open, revealing McGonagall with a man in red Auror robes behind her. He felt a chill go through him at the studied neutrality of her expression.

"I'm sorry to disturb you but Auror Savage here needs to speak with Andromeda."

Everything inside her turned to ice, Andromeda noticed the Headmistress' expression too, as well as the one of the Aurors. This wasn't one of the Aurors who worked with her daughter and that only made her feel worse. She knew her daughter lived a very dangerous life but not this...Please, please not this. Andromeda straightened her back and called on every ounce of control she had. "Of course, shall we find somewhere private then?" She prided herself on the fact that her voice wasn't trembling.

Sirius exchanged a look with Harry and got a nod. "Actually you stay here. Harry and I will go down to the kitchens and get some tea." He laid his hand on her shoulder and squeezed before walking out with Harry and glancing back at McGonagall as she closed the door. "What kind of tea should we get?"

Minerva's eyes held a sadness with the edge of painful memory. "Some laced with Calming Draught."

Harry's stomach knotted. "Is it Tonks? I mean Nymphadora?"

"No, from what I gather she's still out in the field with Kingsley on a raid in Devonshire."
His jaw flexed and he looked at his godfather. "I'll go get the Calming Draught from Snape, you get the tea."

Sirius nodded and glanced at the door, worried about what would be happening inside.

Inside the Auror studied the mother of one of his favorite co-workers. Tonks was wild and clumsy and bright and helped keep morale up just by existing, he was grateful that he wasn't the one to tell her about this but he was also dreading telling her mother. There was never any easy way to say this so it was best to just get it out. "Mrs. Tonks, your husband was found dead. I'm sorry."

The frozen ice shattered and something broke inside of her. Her beautiful, normal and completely extraordinary Ted. She had kissed him goodbye this morning, laughed about the silly pattern on his tie and promised him mashed potatoes for dinner. Andromeda swallowed, hoping it would help to keep the agony inside of her, keep the screams from rising from her throat. "Found dead? A senior Auror would not come and give me the news if there wasn't more to it than that. Found dead how?" Her voice still wasn't trembling.

Once more he didn't draw it out. "He was murdered and dumped at the base of the steps of the Ministry office in Diagon Alley."

"I see, thank you for telling me." Andromeda swallowed again. How was she supposed to react? What was proper protocol in situations like these? Ted had been her heart, her humanity. Without him she had no idea what to do, who to be.

"Auror Tonks will be informed upon her return to the main office and will be granted partial leave to assist you however you might need. I am very sorry for your loss Mrs. Tonks." He knew that this woman wouldn't break in front of him like others might so it would be best for him to take his leave as quickly as possible.

She nodded, her mind already being elsewhere. "Thank you again Auror Savage, please do be careful on your return." Andromeda moved to look out the window, no other family or spouse should have to receive a message like this one today.

"Always am ma'am. I'll leave you to your thoughts." He gave her a respectful nod and exited the room, rubbing a hand over his face for a moment. Somehow it felt worse when the next of kin didn't react with tears and screams and that was definitely this case. He snapped back to attention when he heard footsteps approaching and met Sirius Black's gaze over a tea tray. He gave one short shake of his head as Potter appeared, a small bottle in his hand, then walked away to let Lord Black take care of his cousin.

Andromeda still stood by the window as she heard the door open again. Ted had always loved the Hogwarts grounds, said they made him feel free, city boy as he was. She absently wondered if her insides would ever thaw again then decided that it didn't matter. Without Ted nothing really mattered. "I apologize but it seems I will have to leave any playpen building to the two of you. It appears I have a funeral to plan."

"Hang the playpen." Sirius set the tray down and went over to her, taking her arm and turning her to face him better. "Talk to me Rommy."

Harry set the bottle on the tray and stepped back just a bit to give them space just in case.

"What's there to say?" Andromeda held on to the folds of her robes so tightly her knuckles turned white. "My husband is dead, murdered and dumped on the stairs of the Ministry office in Diagon Alley like yesterday's trash." She blinked her eyes furiously, so close to breaking but she couldn't
allow herself to. There was no one to catch her when she fell now, to only person who ever could
was gone.

Sirius immediately pulled her into a tight hug. "Oh gods Rommy I'm so sorry." His heart twisted in
his chest for her. "Did Savage say how he was...or who did it?"

Andromeda shook her head, looking lost. "I...I'm sorry. No, I didn't press for...details."

"Don't apologize." Harry spoke softly and stepped closer to lay his hand on Andromeda's shoulder.

"Harry's right, that's not something you need to say sorry for Rommy but you're not leaving
Hogwarts alone, not to deal with this."

"You're family," Harry kept a gentle tone, "and in this family no one stands alone, ever."

Right now it was clear to Andromeda that she would stand alone for the rest of her life but she was
grateful for the words all the way down to her broken heart. "Thank you." Her tone caught on the
few words and finally it was as if the floodgates opened and she wrapped her arms tightly around
Sirius, sobbing her heart out.

Harry felt helpless as he watched Sirius hold his cousin and murmur soothing words to her in
French. He hated this, hated knowing that a good man was dead, that a good woman he'd come to
respect and admire had lost her husband, that another woman he liked a great deal had lost her
father, and he had a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach that he knew why Ted had been
killed. His head swung around as a fast clack of heels rounded the door frame and brought Narcissa
into the room. Draco's mother's face was creased in worry that soon shifted to a pained
countenance upon seeing her sister crying in such a manner.

Narcissa took a hesitant step forward and asked in a quavering voice. "Andy?"

Andromeda looked up at the sound of Narcissa's voice. Despite all the years of separation and
harsh words she was still her little Cissy and right now Andromeda needed her. She let go of Sirius'
neck to practically throw herself at her baby sister instead. "My Ted is gone."

Narcissa made a soft sound, almost mournful as she sank to the floor with her elder sister, drawing
her close. She'd never really known Ted but she'd known how precious he was to Andromeda and
she knew that her sister was feeling gutted and she hurt and mourned for what her big sister had
now lost. She didn't speak, just held her close and rocked her in much the same way she had
rocked Draco as a child the first time he'd seen a boggart. There were no words that could help or
be of any use, not for this. All she had was her presence to offer comfort.

There were steps storming up the stairs and a grim faced Tonks walked inside, hair black and eyes
swirling almost crimson. She saw that her mother was taken care of and she didn't want to disturb
the slight calm she seemed to have found in her sister's arms. Tonks nodded her head toward Sirius
and Harry, wanting them to follow her where her mother wouldn't hear, not right now anyway.

Harry nodded and slipped out of the room, Sirius following him after setting his communication
mirror on the tea tray and exchanging a look with Narcissa. They followed Tonks to an empty
classroom she warded against eavesdropping and intrusion. Harry moved to lean against a desk,
watching Tonks quietly as she paced and got her temper under control.

"I'm going to kill him, I'm going to rip him apart just the way he tore my Dad apart and then I'm
going after Big Daddy too." Tonks' voice was a growl and the crimson streaks spread both through
her eyes and hair. Right now she despised Kingsley for having her on lock down, not giving her
Sirius shifted. "Nym how about you fill us in the rest of the way? All your Mum was told was that Ted was murdered." He watched her carefully in case he needed to jump to keep her from flying off at the handle.

Tonks ran her hands through her striked hair, pulling on the short ends as she still stalked the room. She was buzzing with energy and hurt and she couldn't imagine to stay still. "Dad was on his way to meet with a client in Diagon when Greyback jumped him, there wasn't much left of him when Greyback had finished his artwork, dragged him all the way to the Ministry's office and dumped him on the steps. Oh and don't forget the charming little note in Dad's blood that explains that this is what happens when you go against the Dark Lord."

"Nym." Sirius' voice was soft and sad and he went over to take her shoulders in his hands. "What does that mean? As far as I know Ted never went directly against Voldemort, your dad usually kept out of the mess of war."

Harry's heart wrenched. "It's me. I hired Ted as my lawyer before summer remember? Helping me in any way made him a target. I should have hired your Viper instead Siri."

"It's not you Harry, don't give yourself too much credit." Tonks knew that the last thing Harry needed was pity, besides she was speaking the truth. "Dad was a muggleborn, that alone is enough for Voldemort to hate him. Not only that but he spent his life helping those down and out, the muggleborns and the creatures. His daughter is a very loud Auror fighting Voldemort at every turn. Yes Dad kept out of the war but he never hid his opinion on Voldemort or his Death Eaters. Harry...He would have taken Dad out no matter what, knowing you had dealings with him was only the icing on the cake, a way to get to you. Don't give him the satisfaction."

Sirius saw the intractable thought in Harry's eyes and knew that his godson wouldn't be able to accept Nymphadora's words at face value. Truthfully he couldn't either. "You're both right." He squeezed his cousin's shoulders. "Ted would have been a target eventually regardless but," he met Harry's eyes, "the association with you brought him more to Voldemort's attention than he would have been otherwise. No lies or platitudes from me Harry. He's after you but since he can't get to you he'll get to who he can that you've been in contact with. He is trying to get to you, to bring you down. Nym's right, don't let him."

Harry's jaw flexed and he looked out the window in silence. He understood the truth in what the both of them said, didn't make it easier to swallow. "I know, in my head I know. I just..." he shook his head. He knew that he wasn't responsible for everything Voldemort did and certainly not for Greyback's actions. "I wish Voldemort marked his creature followers, at least Greyback." His temper, normally the flash fire explosion, was starting a long, slow simmer. "Then I could at least arrange for Greyback to appear in a Ministry silver cell."

Tonks chewed on her thumbnail, holding on to the anger she felt with everything she had because when it disappeared she would shatter and she didn't know if she could ever put herself back together again without her Daddy. "He must mark them somehow, Voldemort is too paranoid to let them have a free reign, let them run where he cannot control them in some way." She continued her pacing. "He is not using the Dark Mark but he is using something. Greyback is doing this for kicks and giggles but I don't think the same is true for all the creatures in his fold."

"He probably does but not with the Slytherin magics, which I can control without dipping into his head."

Sirius jolted a look at Harry, he hadn't known he'd gotten that far in his lessons in controlling
another's magic.

"Harry you are seriously one scary bugger." Tonk's eyes were wide but some of her normal gray color was returning to them. "There has to be another way to find out though, I don't want you to have to suffer the inside of that thing's head."

He didn't blurt out that it wouldn't have been the first time, nor would it be the last, but instead let Tonks have a comforting illusion of sorts. "No plans to dip in for that Tonks. Besides, knowing Voldemort he's worked on his mental barriers by now so it would probably be pointless. He's not stupid unfortunately, just insane."

Sirius gave a soft bark of laughter and let Tonks' shoulders go. "What no letting us have silly illusions of him doing something stupid Scar?"

"Oh he's done plenty of stupid things." The growl was back in Tonks' voice. "I am going to dance on his bones and I am going to turn Greyback into a furry rug, ugly as it will be."

"Talk to Orion." Sirius looked at her. "He'll give you a pointer or two. If it wasn't for outside interference I really do think my son would have killed him."

Harry shook his head and pushed off his desk. "Sirius why don't you go check on Narcissa and Andromeda?"

Sirius gave him a look but nodded before leaving the room as Harry went to stand in front of Tonks.

"It'll burn off shortly," he searched her eyes, understanding and empathy in his, "Do you want me to call Professor McKenzie for you?"

She looked a little lost then, still clinging tightly to her anger but knowing Harry was right, it would burn off she had no idea what to do when it did. "He...He's in session, has his students to care for. I...I don't know."

"He'd come here for you." Alek had been writing about steady Ewan McKenzie's being completely smitten with the ever changing Tonks and with much amusement at that. "And Alek could cover his classes easily. If you don't want him here though you know I'll do anything I can for you."

"You are a sweet, sweet man Harry." Tonks cupped his cheeks and pressed a kiss to his forehead but then she stepped away because feeling anything other than rage hurt too much right now. "If he can come then I would really like for Ewan to come. I think I need him to come Harry. Dad's body needs to be claimed and then there's paperwork and arrangements and I don't want Mum to have to deal with it...She shouldn't see him...It didn't look like Dad anymore."

He nodded and gently took her arm. "Come on then. We'll ask the Headmistress for floo permission and get him over here for you." He could well imagine how Ted Tonks had looked and agreed that Andromeda did not need to see that.

It didn't take long for them to get to McGonagall's office and for him to get mutual agreement from both school leaders to have Ewan come through. Soon enough there was a Scotsman with hair the color of wheaten gold, a warm comfortably handsome face, and a sea blue jumper standing in the office, deep blue eyes all concern for Tonks.

"Dory love? Alek said you needed me." That was all that had mattered to him, that his Dory had needed him. Whatever she needed him for he'd have sprouted wings and flown to her if it would have gotten him here faster.
Tonks bit her bottom lip hard enough to feel her skin split from it before she threw herself at her wonderful werewolf and held on as tightly as she could. "I do, I do need you Ewan, I need you so much and I am sorry for what I am about to put you through." She buried her nose in the warm wool of the jumper and cried.

Just that fast Ewan had her lifted up in his arms, cradling her bridal style and was marching out of the office. McGonagall only murmured a direction and location of a room he could bring Dory to for privacy and then he was gone with his Auror. His legs ate up the distance to the room indicated and soon he was sitting on a squishy couch, Dory in his lap, and was rocking his lass as she sobbed.

His wolf was absolutely going mad hearing her so distraught but the man knew she needed to get the first of the tears out before telling him anything. So he pet her short spiked hair, rocked, and murmured to her in the Highlands Gaelic he'd learned at his mother's knee. Word of love, endearment, and unflinching support.

Her fingers clutched at the knitted jumper and Tonks cried out all her broken heart in Ewan's arms. She felt broken, like a puzzle with a piece missing but still, having Ewan here made it a little better, made her feel like maybe she would live through it no matter how much it hurt right now. "My Daddy's dead." Her voice was low and scratchy and her face was still pressed against his neck. "Murdered by Greyback."

"Oh baby," he held her tighter and continued to rock, "oh my lass. I'm so sorry love." His wolf was growling in the back of his head. Greyback was higher in dominance and strength than he was but when it came to protecting a mate dominance meant nothing between two opposing wolves. For making his Dory cry he'd gladly use Fenrir Greyback's guts for garters.

Tonks cried until her tears seemed to run out. She still felt like crying, still felt hollowed out and bleeding. "Thank you Ewan, thank you for coming." She untangled her fingers from his jumper and wrapped her arms around him instead, holding him close. She never thought she would have found her match while dressed as a flamingo but she loved Ewan, he understood her in a way no one else did and she could be herself with him. She loved everything about the gentle wolf and she hated being so weak now, that he had to deal with her tears.

He pressed his lips to her brow and the bridge of her nose. "I'll always come when you need me lassie. I'd do anything for you, even clock Alek if he upset you."

A chuckle that sounded more like a sob rose from her throat at that. "Please don't. Johann would poison you if you you hurt Alek and I rather like you sound and well thank you."

"Well since you ask my love, I'll not do it. I might could get Johnny-boy's help in punishing Alek though, hypothetically." He pet her hair some more. "You know, if he ever does upset you. Not that he would I don't think."

"What is this hang up about Alek upsetting me? Why would he?" Tonks raised her head and looked at Ewan curiously. "My cousin is Sirius Black, I'm related to Orion Black, upsetting me is a difficult thing to do and if Alek ever did upset me I would be more than capable of clocking him myself."

"I know you are pretty girl." He nuzzled her nose. "It's a beta/alpha comparison. I'm not only lower in hierarchy than Alek but I also respect and like him as a leader. So clocking him would be difficult for me unless he did something to make you sad. Greyback's an alpha as well but one I have nothing but contempt for so, if you didn't want the gutting of him all to yourself, it'd be much easier to take him down and out for hurting you." He cupped her cheek. "He took away your Da, I'd
like to rip his head off for that."

"I love you for that and I might even let you help as I gut him and wear him like a coat...Unless Orion beats me to it, he's been mumbling about unfinished business." Tonks cupped Ewan's cheek in turn and brushed their lips together ever so lightly. "I do you know...Love you. I promise it's not the grief speaking."

He gave her a warm smile. "I know. You say it louder than you might think in your actions." He kissed her as well. "The feeling is very much reciprocated my pretty bird. I love you Dory."

Tonks kept her arms around him and nuzzled her nose against the blue wool of his jumper. Right now it was enough to take comfort in the fact that he was there, that she wasn't alone. Soon enough she would have to face the world, gather her father's body and be a support for her mother but right now, right now she was allowed to take comfort from her wonderful wolf.

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Pansy picked her way down to the shore of the lake, a thick green cloak wrapped around her, and found Orion staring out at the water, moody contemplation in his expression. She stepped up next to him and wrapped her fingers around the wrist of the hand he hand shoved in his pocket.

"Brooding?"

"Not really, just thinking." Orion twisted his hand so he could lace his fingers with hers.

"Yesterday a Ravenclaw girl picked Aury up without thinking about the fact that she wore silver jewelry. It made Aury really sick...I just wish there was something I could do. Some way to make it better. I know Dad blames himself."

She squeezed his hand. "Unfortunately none of you can watch her every second of every day, especially not now that she's walking, well running, everywhere. But you do help you know, you watch her when you can and play with her, keeping the little fuzzy entertained. Your Dad shouldn't blame himself though, it was no one's fault except for the idiot Ravenclaw. Picking up a werewolf's daughter while wearing silver, not very well representative of her house now was that?" Her disdain for the aforementioned Ravenclaw was loud and clear in her voice.

"Buggering idiot is what she is...Sirius almost ripped her head off, I don't think she will repeat her mistake twice." Orion flashed fangs in a smile, he knew Pansy was right and he always felt better when she was around. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it, looking at her perfectly manicured nails. "Purple today, looks good." He smiled again.

"Well of course, everything looks good on me don't you know?" She gave him a brief haughty look before relaxing into a simple smile, a rare expression on her face really. She shifted closer, fitting herself against his side, noting absently that he was still adding bulk, likely without even trying. "I think perhaps a memo needs to go out at the beginning of each year, 'People Who Will Gut You If You Touch Aurora Black While Wearing Silver or Have Silver Residue On Your Hands' it's quite a long list though."

Orion chuckled. "Indeed it is, she will certainly grow up protected." He noticed how very well Pansy fit against his side as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "And yes, as you said before...Everything looks good on you, gorgeous even." Amber eyes softened as he drank in the sight of her.

Her own arm slipped around his waist. She rather liked the way that his body temperature always seemed a little higher than the rest of the plebeian mortals around. "Protected but not stifled, stifling is a bad, bad thing. Remind your Dad of that in case he falls into the over-worrying trap,"
she leaned her head on his shoulder. "Are you looking forward to the Christmas Holiday?"

"Mmm, I would look forward to it more if you were to accept the invitation to spend the Holiday at our house. It's our turn to host the Christmas shindig this year, though I believe Molly will rule with an iron fist." He leaned his head on top of hers, breathing in the sweet and spicy scent of her hair. "I hate the thought of you going back to your house...I always worry that your parents won't let you come back."

She shook her head. "I won't be, going to Parkinson House that is."

"Thank the magic for that." Orion had really worried and he felt himself go slack with relief. "Where will you go then?"

"Not entirely sure, I may not go at all and just stay here. As Professor Snape always stays in favor of being called back every time a Slytherin gets him or herself in trouble so Narcissa and Draco will be here as well and, being a seventeen year old seventh year, I am free to leave the grounds during holidays and weekends to do as I wish so long as I inform a professor and return before classes resume."

"Won't you come with me then? Black Manor is large enough that you'll be able to breathe in peace. Your boys will be there for you to boss around as will Lady Malfoy." Orion didn't want her to spend the Holidays alone.

"I'll think about it." She lifted a hand to smooth the wrinkle that had formed between his brows. "Don't frown. You know I don't make snap decisions." She trailed her fingers over his brow and down to trace the shell of his ear, flicking the lobe in consideration. He'd look good with a piercing.

"Snap decisions? I asked you to come at Halloween, you've had time." Orion almost rolled his eyes even as he shivered from her touch. "I won't push though...For now." He looked down at her precious face, noticing how her cheeks were slightly red from the cold. Watching her he couldn't help himself. Without even thinking about it he lowered his head and covered her chilled lips with his own.

Her eyes went wide then slid closed as she melted against him, her hand going to tunnel the fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck. It was certainly one of the most chaste kisses she'd ever participated in yet the fire it lit in her blood was the strongest she'd ever felt. Dear Merlin if this first, somewhat innocent, kiss did that to her she'd probably immolate on the spot upon further advances.

Orion held her gently and hoped that his cheeks weren't as red as they felt. Kissing her was like feeling something slide into place inside him, fill a void he wasn't aware of having. He didn't try to deepen the kiss or take things further, it was perfect just the way it was...It was Pansy, how could it be anything but perfect?

She felt her heart flutter and turn over to just lay at his feet with that gentleness, not that she'd tell him just yet. Still, she was his now, no matter what. It was just a bit frightening for the independent girl she was. She ended the kiss but didn't step away, choosing to run the queue of his hair through her hand. "Sneak attack," she gave him a smirk, "I approve."

"Slytherin." He raised a brow and smiled back at her, his smile gentler that he intended but he couldn't help it. He felt like howling his joy to the sky. Orion ran his fingertips over a defined cheekbone. "Just think about joining us for Christmas okay, it won't be a proper celebration without you there." He straightened the heavy velvet cloak around her shoulders so she would stay
warm, the urge to protect and care for his mate rising to the surface.

She leaned into the touch once more softening inside at the tender solicitude he showed. "I'll be there on Christmas Eve and Day of course, the rest of the Hols are what's up in the air at the moment and it is being taken under consideration."

"I guess I'll have to settle for that for the moment then." He kept his hands on the soft fabric of her cloak, not wanting to lose contact completely just yet. "So I'm not saying that I don't have a Christmas gift for you yet but is there anything you wish especially for?" He gave her a wry grin.

She rose to her toes, the bloody boy just kept getting taller, and kissed his cheek. "Surprise me." She started to walk back, casting a look over her shoulder at him, one brow delicately crooked, "Coming?"

"Yes, just giving you a head start so I can enjoy the view." Orion's grin was wide as he followed her up toward the castle, a warm glow spreading inside him.

Her responding smile was predatory before she put a little extra swing in her walk, enjoying the sound he made behind her. She was, of course, going to take him up on the offer to spend the holidays at Black Manor but it was more fun to keep him guessing.
Chapter 74

Chapter by trulywicked

It was only a few days left of the term when Luna walked into the Great Hall during lunch. Her nose wrinkled at all the scents in the air but her pale blue eyes locked on a certain redhead sitting at the Gryffindor table and she walked straight over and grabbed Ron by his ear. "You and I need to talk, right now." She pulled on his ear.

Harry's jaw dropped at this as Ron immediately got up and made to follow Luna out of the Hall and his wasn't the only one. All around people from the staff table down, went silent and watched in shock. Neville looked at Ginny. "Did Luna just-?"

"She dragged my brother away by his ear...And she sounded...Not dreamy." Ginny looked as shocked as everyone else. "And Ron got up and followed without protest, it's unheard of. I think today might be the day the sky is falling."

Harry stared at the door of the Great Hall. "Ron's not stupid. If Luna acts that far out of character he'd know better than to make a peep of protest." His brows knit. "Does anyone know what might be wrong?" He looked between Hermione and Ginny as they were Luna's closest female friends.

Both of them shook their heads, still surprised by Luna's near growl as she gathered her boyfriend for a talk. "I know she's been feeling a little off but I don't know what could prompt such a reaction." Hermione looked toward where Luna and Ron had disappeared. "I hope everything is alright."

They weren't the only ones wondering what was going on. Ron was as well, especially when Luna nearly wrenched his ear off. She'd been a little bit sensitive lately, a bit moody, but mostly very very clingy, not that he minded that in the least little bit, and now this? He felt his guts twist and knot in worry. This wasn't like his girl.

Luna pulled him into an empty classroom and put up a privacy bubble around them as well. This was a conversation that she didn't want to be overheard. "I've just been to see Madam Pomfrey, guess what she told me?"

And ice joined those knots in his stomach, his hand went up to touch her wrist, his heart pounding in fear. "What? Are you sick? Is there anything I can do?" Inside his head he set up a chanting prayer. 'Please don't let her be sick.' Just that over and over again.

"You bet there is something you can do, I won't do this on my own. I'm sixteen, Daddy is going to kill me...Wait no, he's going to kill you." Luna started to pace the floor of the empty classroom. "Did we forget? I don't see how. We're both reasonable bright people." She looked up and met Ron's eyes. "You Ronald Bilius Weasley, are going to be a dad."

His mouth opened and closed as if he was trying to say something as he stared at her then his eyes rolled white and his knees gave out and the next thing you knew he was out cold on the floor at Luna's feet.

Luna looked at her fallen boyfriend in disbelief before she let out a heavy sigh and sat down on the floor next to him. She walk half tempted to wake him up only twist his ear again but she decided against it. Ron would have to face the reality of their situation soon enough.

After a little bit he groaned and rolled over. "What hit me?"
"The fact that we're having a baby most likely." Luna answered in a much more calmly than she felt. "If you pass out again I swear I will will hex pig features on you, tie you up and leave you here...naked."

He didn't pass out but he turned so pale his freckles were like sprinkles of cinnamon on milk, "Y-you're p-p-p-pr-pre-pregnant?" His eyes were wide and he felt it most prudent to stay right where he was on the floor to prevent fainting again.

"Yup, harboring a Nargle in the nest, a bun in the oven...Right and properly up the duff, that's me." Luna nodded and ran her fingers through Ron's hair, feeling a bit sorry for him, it was a lot to take in. "Not exactly what we planned, I know."

"Forget your Dad, my Mum will kill me." He reached up with a shaking hand and cupped her cheek. "I don't get how it could have...well yeah I get the process and all but I know we used contraception charms every time and the potion almost every time."

"I know, doesn't change facts though. I made Madam Pomfrey check twice." Luna leaned into Ron's palm. "I...I know what I said before but if you think it's too much I can handle it on my own. I don't want to but I can." Luna knew she would keep the baby, it was already a life growing inside her and there was no way she was going to do anything but carry it, birth it and love it with everything she had.

Now he did sit up and pulled Luna right into his lap. "Luna, just because I don't get how it could have happened when we were careful doesn't mean I don't want our b-b-baby. It's just...wow, whoa, and my head needs to wrap around this." He held her tight. "I love you and it was always going to be you that I have my family with this just... made it happen sooner is all."

Luna nodded and settled in Ron's lap, one hand going to her very flat stomach. "I know, did not plan to get pregnant at sixteen. I will be showing next year, everyone will know and I'll be a Mum before I graduate, if I graduate. The wrackspurts are waltzing at this I bet."

He stroked a hand down her hair, kissing her temple. He didn't like the idea of her being here, heavily pregnant or with their baby, when he wasn't there to protect them from the wankers who even now tried to mess with her. "We'll work it out, promise. You'll graduate and become a brilliant naturalist," he knew that was her dream, "and teach our sprog all about the wrackspurts and Nargles and clibbies and lipshies and the Crumple Horned Snorkack."

She smiled at him but there was tension in her smile. "Yeah, we'll work it out." Luna didn't know if she really believed it but it felt better saying it. "I love you Ron, there's no one else I would want as a father of my child, even though this is much, much earlier than we'd planned." She grew silent for a while. "At least we have one doozy of a Christmas gift to give our parents now."

He gave a soft, breathy laugh. "I think we should tell my sister and the others first so we have a little protective back up." He gave her a gentle squeeze. A dad. Him. Now. Merlin it was wild.

"Yes, I think we can use all the back up we can get. Daddy might seem loopy at times but he has some mean hexes." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "Your brothers are going trip over themselves taking the piss, you know that right?"

Ron sighed, "Yeah probably. Vengeance for all the bunny cracks really but that's fine." His cheek nestled against her head. "It's fine." He realized it was, it was just fine. Maybe he'd have wanted a little longer to grow up, to maybe get his temper a bit better controlled, but this way was just fine. His brothers taking the piss would just be lessons in controlling his temper and not sulking like a child who's had his lolly taken away.
Luna took one of Ron's large, freckled hands and placed it on her stomach. It was slowly sinking in with her that this was happening, they were going to have a baby. "We made a life, strong enough to want to live through potions and charms...I think that is going to be an extraordinary person."

He rubbed his thumb against her shirt where it lay over her belly and thought about it. "I don't see how he or she could be anything but with you as their Mum. They'll be our little star."

She smiled at him and placed her hand over his. "You won't make a too shabby Da either, we can do this, can't we? I believe in us. We'll weather the storm of angry relatives and take it as it comes. The snirklings are twinkling so that's okay."

He kissed her softly. "Yeah things are gonna be okay." He noticed a movement at the door and saw a worried Harry poking his head in and frowning at them. "Do you want to tell our friends now or have a day or two to settle?"

Luna thought about it for a while. "I guess there is no reason to wait, settling or not, it's happening and term is coming to a close. They're our friends, they are going to find out." She lifted the privacy bubble so Harry could hear them.

"You two alright?" Harry looked from Luna to Ron and back again, studying the dreamy girl in deep concern.

Ron gave him a smile. "Yeah, the rest of the pride out there with you?"

"Well the snakes in the pride went to construct some sort of memo I think, at least from what mutters I heard, but the rest are here yeah."

"All you lot inside then. This is important."

Hermione, Ginny and Neville slithered in after Harry, making Luna smile. After being on the outside it really was warming having friends who cared like their pride did.

"Please don't freak out, I'm not sure I can handle that right now." She looked at Hermione especially, knowing the lecture that would be on the tip of the older girl's tongue when she found out.

Ginny was beginning to look truly worried, holding Neville's hand and looking between Luna and Ron. "Just tell us, you're beginning to scare me."

Neville rubbed her back with his other hand, watching Ron shift just a bit and give Hermione a look that was between pleading and warning. "We won't freak out."

Harry nodded, "Course we won't and if you've killed someone we'll help you bury the body." He grimaced when Hermione hit his arm but had to smile when Ron laughed at him.

"Well that's what best friends and family do innit?" Ron took a breath. "Luna's pregnant." He figured it was best to just get it out and let them assimilate the information.

"What?" Hermione's jaw dropped and she knew she was gawping. "Pregnant? Why?"

Ginny gave Hermione a look. "Why? That's your question? Why?" She was shocked too, beyond shocked actually. "I'm going to be an Aunt? You're spawning?" She pointed at Ron. "Oh Merlin...Mum is going to skin you."

Ron grimaced. "I know. And we don't know 'why' Hermione. We used the charms every time and
the potion almost every time so," he shrugged.

Harry shook his head. "That is going to be a stubborn kid no two ways about it. Your Mum's going to skin you, Mr. Lovegood's going to salt it down, and Draco'll roast the rest."

"Oh bugger, I forgot about him."

Luna smiled. "Don't tell me you worry about the bunny rabbit?" The relationship with her cousin had grown considerable warmer over the last few years and she knew Draco would be upset. She hoped he could be happy for them too though.

Hermione was still stunned silent. Her best friend was having a baby, a child. She couldn't wrap her mind around it.

"Don't forget about Remus and Sirius either...Though they are not exactly ones to talk are they?" Ginny made a face, remembering that neither of their children were exactly planned.

Harry snorted. "They didn't even remember the charms so very much no room to talk." He reached around a goosed his girlfriend in the side gently as if to prompt her to say something.

"Uh...Congratulations? Are we happy about this?" Hermione looked at them questioningly.

"Yes, I think we are." Luna replied, still perched on Ron's lap.

"Then we're happy, you know you can count on us, whenever and whatever you need."

Harry nodded. "Even if it's standing between you and Molly."

"Frightening though that prospect is." Neville gave Ron a reassuring smile.

Ron chuckled and rested his chin on Luna's shoulder. "Good, because we are going to need the help. Thanks," he gave them all a smile, "really."

"You know it big brother." Ginny smiled at him. "I wonder if Mr. Lovegood will flay you in his paper."

"Daddy wouldn't do that, he would flay him bodily instead." Luna turned her head and kissed Ron's temple.

"Well it will be an interesting Holiday season. You will be fitted with a chastity belt, you know that right?" Hermione looked at Ginny.

The redhaired girl shrugged. "Eh, I've always been good at picking locks, it will be fine."

"Question is, how good are you and Harry at picking locks?" Ron gave her a knowing look, even as Harry shot him a glare.

"Would you really like to know, really?" Hermione held Ron's gaze, one eyebrow raised. "Because I can tell you...In detail."

"Ugh please no. It was a...what's that word..."

Harry rolled his eyes, "Rhetorical."

"Ah right. It was a rhetorical question."
"Very well then." Hermione sounded satisfied. There was no way she would have ever have aired her sex life with Ron but she knew him pretty well after all these years, knew he would back off. "One word to all lock pickers though. Condoms...Condoms, condoms, condoms."

"What're those?" Neville gave her a curious look.

Harry had to turn round and face the window to keep from laughing at Hermione's expression.

"Oh sometimes the wizarding world are stuck in the dark ages." Hermione's cheeks were red with upset and she almost felt like stomping her feet. "We are having a sex-ed class, muggle style. I learned on a banana and so can you." Her eyes pinned both Neville and Ginny to the wall.

Neville just blinked and shrugged, "Okay?"

Harry's lips twitched and he shook his head again. "And on that note. Chamber library everyone?"

"No question about it, we're all going." Hermione had her hands on her hips, already planning to bring both condoms and fruit down there.

"Sometimes you are scarily like Mum." Ginny eyed her friend apprehensively.

Hermione didn't know what to think about being compared to Molly Weasley so she didn't say anything.

Ron just let Harry help him and Luna to their feet and shrugged. "That's a good thing. No one'll ever cow you Hermione and we like you as is."

"Mrs. Weasley is an extraordinary woman, being in her likeness even a little is a compliment." Luna smiled. "Now let's go and learn about conforms."

Hermione didn't bother to correct her. Just shook her head and reached for Harry's hand.

He gave her hand a squeeze and let her lead them all down stairs. This would be entertaining if nothing else and they'd need all the amusement and entertainment they could get before break and telling the family.

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Arthur stared in utter silence at his youngest son, who was standing calmly before the assembly of parents in Black Manor, holding Luna's hand. He was having a bit of difficulty processing what Ronald had just announced to them though the protective way he stood beside Luna certainly registered.

Everything was completely silent for a while before a redfaced Molly started screeching.

Luna barely resisted flinching as shouts of too young, responsibility and marriage carried through the air. Honestly though, her father's silent gaze was harder to take then Molly's loudness. She was so afraid that he was disappointed in her.

Ron's jaw starts ticking but it's Harry who stands up and essentially silences Mrs. Weasley.

"Mrs. Weasley stop. You're making it sound like Luna got pregnant on purpose." Harry didn't shout or raise his voice in the least, and made sure to keep his tone carefully neutral, free of censure. "They don't know how it could have happened you know. Not with the precautions they were taking."
Arthur took Molly's arm gently and guided her back into a seat. "You were taking precautions then Ronald?"

Ron nodded, pulling Luna closer, shielding her out of instinct. "Both the charms and the potion. We were very, very careful."

Sirius blew out a breath, exchanging a wry look with Remus. "Every time?"

"Yes." Ron rubbed Luna's back soothingly. "Look we know that it's earlier than wisdom dictates, and we know things are going to be rough but we can't reverse it. We can only move forward and right now Luna and I don't need recriminations or to be yelled at. We're going to need your support, all of you."

He met Xenophilius' eyes unflinchingly. "I love Luna, and I was always going to ask her to marry me and make a family with me when we were old enough and ready for that step. I still love Luna and I already love the baby and I'll do my bloody best to take care of both of them and to help Luna still accomplish her dreams. She's the most important person in the world to me Mr. Lovegood and I know she's the most important person in your world too so I hope, even if you hate me, that you won't be angry at or disappointed in Luna."

"Dear child, why on earth would I hate you?" Xenophilius looked truly baffled as he looked at his daughter's boyfriend. "A baby can never be a bad thing as long as it created with love and wanted. I am not disappointed in either of you. I am going to be a Grandfather and I am going to be a splendid one. As I recall you Molly weren't more than eighteen either when you had your first boy." He watched Molly blush. "I am going to have to insist that you make an honest girl of my moonbeam though, before the wee one arrives. Some traditions are difficult to shake."

"Luna couldn't get more honest if she was made a saint sir." Ron gave him a grin. "But I'd marry her tomorrow if that's what she wants." He felt nothing but utter relief knowing that Luna's Dad wasn't taking this nearly as badly as they'd imagined.

Luna smiled at her Dad in relief but she stayed by Ron's side. She honestly didn't care about marriage, in her eyes she and Ron were already bonded in all the ways that mattered but she would still be proud to be Ron's wife and since she knew it was important to both his parents and her Dad she would happily do it. She didn't want a big wedding though, absolutely not. "Likewise, any day I'd marry you Ron."

Fleur looked over at Molly, as one of the married couples she and Bill had been brought in on this discussion. "Christmas wedding?" She looked at Luna in question. "Oui?"

"Ah bien sûr." Luna nodded with a smile.

"B-but that only gives us a few days?" Molly looked troubled, very troubled.

"We don't need more, as long as Ron is there and someone's there to wed us then that's all that's needed."

"And we 'ave ze best man to plan ze affaire right 'ere." Fleur gestured at Harry. Harry shrugged and looked at Sirius. "Andromeda and Tonks are coming here tomorrow right?"

Sirius nodded, lips twitching. "Yeah."

"Not a problem so long as Luna and Ron want me, Andromeda, and Molly planning it."
"Wouldn't have anyone else mate." Ron gave Harry a grin.

"Of course we want you planning it, it might even give you a challenge." Luna's grin matched Ron's.

Remus thought this might actually be a good thing, it would give Andromeda something to focus on other than the first Christmas spent without Ted. Harry was very, very smart to include both her and Molly in his plans.

Harry chuckled and shook his head. "An amazing small family wedding in a few days. I think Molly, Andromeda, and I can knock it down."

Ron looked at his mother. "Mum, it's good with you right?" He really didn't want his mother to be upset or feel left out in any way.

"Yes, yes that is good with me." Molly walked across the floor to hug both Ron and her newest daughter in law. "Should have known, you've always been in a hurry Ron, getting your first tooth at four months, couldn't wait to get out of the diaper, pulled it off every chance you got and tinkled all over the house like a puppy you did."

Ron sighed. "Yes thank you Mum for that embarrassing look back at my infancy." He hugged her back, not as badly embarrassed as he probably should have been. "But can we please make a pact? No giving Fred or George extra ammunition by reminding them of things like that?"

"I am not making any promises." Molly stroked Ron's hair away from his forehead and stood on her toes to press a kiss against it. "I think they will have ammunition enough though, without my aid."

"That's why I'm asking not to give them any more because no matter how much they have, they'll still take the extra and run with it."

Arthur chuckled. "That's certainly true. Now is that all the life changing news needed to be shared today?"

"I hope so, I think a Grandchild is earth shattering news enough." Molly made her way back to her husband's side. "Unless there are more babies in the making of course?" She gave Fleur and Bill a curious look.

Remus hid his smile against Sirius' shoulder. First she was upset and yelling and then she wanted more babies in the family. Molly truly was one of a kind.

Sirius just fiddled with Remus' hair and watched Fleur turn a pretty shade of pink. "You see little brother, that's how it's done, wedding first baby later."

"Sod off." Ron's insult held no heat as he wrapped his arms around Luna.

Fleur elbowed her husband sharply and hissed out a reprimand in French as well as a threat involving a couch and a number of months.
"Ow!" Bill rubbed the sore spot where his wife's pointy little elbow had struck. "What blossom? You know I worship the ground you walk on. I would carry you on my hands if you'd let me. No need for threats about the couch. I cannot sleep without you and you know it."

"Be nice to your brozzer. Magic made ze decision zere." She kissed the corner of his mouth.

Sirius chuckled. "I think we should disband now before Harry, Molly, and Luna sit down and start making the dreaded lists."

"Mmm." Remus nodded. "Anyway it's about time to wake our little troll up from her nap." Aurora was certainly making sure their hands were full and Remus loved every moment of it.

He chuckled and helped to shoo the rest of the assembled people out of the room, leaving the wedding planners with the bride.

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Pansy filed at her nails and watched her blond idiot exercise himself. "Darling really, you're starting to repeat yourself."

Draco stopped mid pace and sent her a sharp look. "Really? And I thought wearing his intestines as braces new and imaginative. Have I already said that? How about teeth as cufflinks, have I done that too?"

"Twice." She tested the edge of her nails, decided they weren't sharp enough. "You do realize that you can't really fuss about them having sex without being a massive hypocrite. So it's just the up the duff bit that's got you so snippy and really, they played by the rules, used prevention."

"Not enough protection obviously." Draco rolled his eyes. "Magic or no magic choosing, no sausage should ever enter any cavity without its roll firmly attached. Ronald is a Weasley so I suppose I can't fault him for his brain deficiency, my idiots are the same but Luna really should know better. She's a Ravenclaw and my cousin to boot."

"Condoms break." She nodded in satisfaction after testing her nails again then set to painting them, a bright shining chrome. "And Luna may be intelligent but she is also a daughter of an old wizarding family. The only reason you or I know about condoms is because Livia insisted upon instructing us about muggle prevention methods as well as magical. I somehow doubt that Luna received the same education considering the prudishness of the lions and birdies."

"Well, I suppose that's true. I don't think anyone got the same instructions as we did with Livia though." Draco had to smirk. "I especially liked the visuals, we were nine." He started pacing again. "Luna is my cousin, she's having the baby of my lovers brother...I suppose she is my sister in law in a sense. This is starting to feel a little inbred for me and my great uncle married his half sister...Needless to say we don't speak of those cousins, they all live in wales anyway. Married to their sheep I think."

"Hmm." She glanced up at him. "Have your idiots proposed then?"

"Oh aren't you just a comedian, no matter how talented those two are I am not becoming a Weasley. Not happening." Draco sent her a dirty glare.

"Just because they might propose doesn't mean you must become a Weasley darling." She gave him a sweet smile. "They could always become Malfoys."

"We'll see what the future holds. I am no hurry to enter the marriage fold. Good company and
really, really hot sex is enough right now." He knew that Fred and George were the ones for him but he still felt no urgent need to marry.

"Well I know that darling, just a little something to turn over round in your head besides Luna's situation as, rather than applying your brains to ways to ensure she remains safe and can still achieve her dreams, you're quite fixated on punishing the dhole." She blew on her nails to speed the drying.

"I always want to punish the dhole, he's an arse." Draco's right eyebrow went up. "I already know how this will play out. My sibling and my cousin's weasel child will be yearmates, and then they'll fall in love and get married because they won't be blood related but then I will become the weird inbred, brother slash uncle and it will all be a nightmare full of sheep babies and lazy eyes."

Pansy stared at him for several moments. "You have given this entirely too much thought Draco." She tapped her nail to test the dryness. "So Narcissa is expecting then?"

Draco nodded. "I don't think they are quite ready to spread the word yet but yes, there is a little Snape in the making." Telling Pansy didn't count, he told her everything, always had and he couldn't imagine it being any different in the future.

"Merlin I hope it gets your mother's nose." Satisfied with her nails she tilted her head at him in vague amusement. "Now you will not be the odd inbred brother-uncle you silly thing because your sibling and Luna's baby will not marry each other. The reasoning for this is simple, they will grow up together in much the same way you, Blaise, and I did and I know you've never been interested in boffing me or Blaise."

The pointed nose wrinkled in distaste at the mere thought of anything even remotely like buggering either Pansy or Blaise. "No, just no, not even at my most desperate would I have considered you. Blaise, mostly because who knows where that's been and you because well...You're you. You'd strap me to the bed, peg me and leave me traumatized for life."

She laughed, absolutely couldn't help it. "And you had the nerve to wonder why you wound up a bunny. Darling I love you and you are indeed lethal but at heart you prefer being hunted as opposed to hunting."

"But of course, it's so much more fun to decide if I will let myself get caught then it is to put down all that hard work hunting someone else." Draco walked to the couch and flopped down on it dramatically, sprawling out on top of it.

She pat his ankle. "There you are. You should, however, bury any thoughts of punishing Ronald Weasley though. Consider it a survival necessity."

"I know." Draco's tone was desolate. "Luna might look frail and barmy but she's got a hidden stinger." He sighed. "Can't I at least give him a scrotum rash? A little one?"

"Considering that Luna probably has plans for that particular part of his anatomy, no." She grabbed one of his hands, tsked lightly, then began filing his nails straighter. "When was the last time you bothered with your nails?"

"I don't know, last month some time?" Draco left his hand in her grip, knowing much better than to try and pull it away. "I've had other things on my mind, and the idiots enjoy scratch marks."

"Hmm, well then." She changed the angle just a bit so that the straightened edge would be sharp rather than the blunt he normally preferred. "Careful not to scratch yourself after I'm done." It
didn't take long really, some filing, a little buffing, and a final rubbing of vanilla scented oil into
his cuticles and he had a perfect manicure. "There."

"Thank you darling." Draco admired his hands and now perfect nails. "So even though I am very
much irresistible and exciting, how are things going with you and the pup?" He studied her with a
curious look.

Her smile shifted into warmer territory as she put her nail gear away. "Well. Things are going well.
I told you about the kiss, there's been quite a few more of those, melts my bones every time too."

"That's good. Every kiss worth its stuff should do that. I'm glad he's up to par." Draco wanted
Pansy to be happy and he knew Orion absolutely adored her, that was as it should be since his
Pansy deserved only the best.

"Oh indeed he is, in all ways we're free to explore currently. You remember that moment a couple
years back? I was whining about how no one had the right balance of intelligence and play?"

"I remember it vividly yes." Draco nodded, he had to admit that Orion was smart, he wouldn't brew
a single potion with him if he wasn't. "Orion Black fits you then, in both brain and fun?"

"Exactly so yes. Brain, fun, and a complete lack of stifling me." She smiled. "While still being
adorably protective. He strikes just the right balance all over."

"No one with brains would even try to stifle you Pans, but I am glad he's your balance...Though the
inbreeding net tightens there too. Don't get any sheep in your future, though you and Orion would
most likely eat them."

"Hardly, I'd hate having wool in my teeth." She gave him a smirk. "I can't stand the woolly buggers
in any case. Bleating all hours of the night, blocking the roads and all sorts of other hideous
actions. If you recall my parents already have a sheep farm." She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"They have shifty eyes. Never trust a sheep, they will lead you to ruin." Draco nodded sagely
before his mask cracked and he couldn't keep the smile from his face. "Come on darling. I feel the
need for ice cream and chocolate syrup."

"Oh you know I'd never say no to that." She slid off the couch. "Speaking of pastoral creatures, I
understand that your elder Black cousin has approached you about horses?"

"Yes, no wonder really since we do have the best horses on the British Isles. Both the winged and
unwinged ones." Draco made his way off the couch as well as they started to make their way to the
kitchen. "I was a little surprised that he spoke to me and not mother though."

She looped her arm through his. "Draco you're seventeen now, your mother is still holding the
proxy for you until you graduate but you are, essentially Lord Malfoy. The horses are now your
mileu and any sale or trade requires discussion with you." She pat his arm. "I would imagine it's
Lord Black's way of helping you to begin taking the reins, as well as getting his stables full."

"Right, of course you're right." His mother had managed things very well and with her guiding he
wasn't afraid to step up as the head of the Malfoy family, well not as afraid as he had been earlier
with the prospect of the mess his dear departed father had left behind. "If the big Black thinks he's
going to get a deal he's sadly mistaken though, he's going to pay exactly what my horses are worth,
which is a lot clearly."

"Oh I doubt he'd try to cheat you, he likes you too much for that, and fears your mother as well but
that goes without saying." They entered the kitchens just as she finished that remark.
"You're bloody right I do." Sirius looked up from where he sat eating some peach pie. "Because I'm not an idiot."

"That's debatable." Draco smirked at him and walked over to take out the ice cream, feeling very much at home in the older man's kitchen. "Still I am required to at least like you somewhat so I do."

"Sweet of you," Sirius nibbled on a peach slice, "Out of curiosity Draco, do you know what the twins wanted with bog slime and tree sap?"

"I might know something or I might not." Draco adopted his most angelic expression which only looked very much wrong on his sly features. "Don't worry though, it's nothing that will affect you or your closest brood."

"I'm not worried really. Of course if it does something to negatively affect the wedding you might want to hide the two terrors." Sirius lifted another bite to his mouth. "Because if they do something like that Harry will turn them inside out, literally."

"They wouldn't do that." Draco placed the ice cream on the table and walked to dig out the chocolate syrup too. "They have a very strong code, and family always come first. Neither George nor Fred would do anything to affect the wedding in a bad way. They like Luna."

Pansy dished up a serving of ice cream for herself. "Quite a bit if memory serves. Though they are taking the piss out of their brother at unimaginable levels and, loathe though I am to admit it, Ronald is handling it very well."

"Hasn't blown up once I know. I think he's looking at it as training of a sort." Sirius' lips twitched. "Good for him, he's going to get a lot of training before this child is born." Draco carried the syrup to the table before sitting down across from Sirius. His voice carried a grim satisfaction, if he wasn't allowed to even give Ronald a tiny little rash then at least he could take comfort in the fact that Fred and George were positively gleeful at getting this sort of fodder to tease their little brother with.

Sirius chuckled. "True enough. I'd say I feel sorry for him but I don't. Can't really, might be a little early but he's starting on a journey he'll treasure more than anything."

Draco scoffed silently but he didn't say anything. Despite all his grumblings and threats he knew that Weasley would become a good father, certainly miles and miles better than his own. And the idiot really loved Luna, Draco had to give him credit for that.

"Can we change the subject, all this talk of a Weasley is putting me off my chocolate." Pansy swirled her spoon around in the ice cream.

"Oh dear, we can't have that now can we? A Pansy put off her chocolate, it's a sure sign of doom." Draco smirked at her. "What do you want to talk about then darling?"

"Shopping."

Sirius grimaced. "Oh listen to that, I think I hear my husband calling. Ta!" He disappeared so fast he almost left vapor.

Draco smirked. "If I had known my cousin would be that easy to get rid of I would have brought up shopping much earlier. Now was the conversation subject a ruse or do you really want to talk about shopping because if you do then I'll have to tell you about these divine leather boots I bought last
“Not a ruse and you know how I love shoes but actually, I’m referring to shopping for wedding gifts my twitchy nosed friend.” She licked a dribble off her spoon. “What should one get the happy couple do you think?”

“Quite honestly? If I didn’t think it would be taken the wrong way I would suggest we get together and give them a house.” Draco scooped more ice cream onto his spoon. “They are starting a family of their own and even if Luna will have one more year of school left they should have a place to call their own. I have plenty of unused cottages on my properties but I am afraid Ronald would have a conniption living on Malfoy land.”

“Oh he would indeed pop a blood vessel.” She also rather thought that both Ronald and Luna’s pride wouldn’t allow them to accept a gift of such magnitude, even from friends. “Though even if he could pay for it himself, it’s not precisely easy to find available home properties so who knows.”

Draco sucked the ice cream off of his spoon and then tapped it against the rim of his bowl. “Hmm, what if his brothers provided them with a place...Say a flat in Hogsmeade on top of the WWW? I am sure I get tweedle dee and tweedle dum to move to the manor with me.”

“Oh darling, if you so much as crooked your finger they’d fall all over themselves to sit prettily at your feet.” She didn’t say whatever else they might do at Draco’s feet but she figured she didn’t need to. “But as nice as that would be, it’s not particularly gift material. Most people will be getting them baby stuff,” she rolled her eyes, “I would prefer to be less predictable.”

“Indeed.” Draco made a face, he hated being predictable just as much as Pansy did. He folded away the flat idea for later though. “The baby stuff will come later anyway. This is about their marriage.” He paused as he thought about what they could give the happy couple. “How about a honeymoon? Send them somewhere where they can be alone and sickeningly in love. I am sure the Headmistress would let them go even if term started if it is just a short trip.”

“Hmm.” She tapped her lips, the crimson painted curves of it tilting up. “Oh I do so adore your mind. Send them off the day after Christmas so they’re safe and tucked for two weeks. I’d suggest longer except that a week gone during term is all they can afford so as to maintain their grades.”

“A honeymoon it is then.” Draco felt very pleased with himself. “Where should we send them? Not Potter’s magical island adventure...somewhere new.” He continued to tap his spoon against the bowl.

“Somewhere currently temperate but not hot and with ah, I know. The States, more specifically Florida, even more specifically Orlando. I think Luna and Ronald both would enjoy the Animal Kingdom don’t you? Appealing to Luna’s naturalist and Ronald’s sense of fun.”

“Brilliant.” Draco beamed at Pansy. “I believe that will be a perfect holiday spot for the two of them. I will make sure portkey and hotel is booked before the day is over.” He ran a hand through silky blond hair as he mentally cataloged what he would need to do to make sure Luna and the weasel’s trip would be great without any worries for them.

She smiled at him. “And I will grab everyone’s favorite Auror and arrange for unobtrusive security detail.” She was not about to let members of their pride be hurt or hunted overseas.

Draco smiled, once someone had wormed their way into Pansy Parkinson’s heart they would be fiercely protected for eternity. He felt a wave of utter affection for his Pansy rise inside him. “It
will be a magnificent gift and something they can truly enjoy despite being given by Slytherins.” He stood and leaned over the table to kiss her brow. “I do love you princess Parkinson.”

“Of course you do, you’re smart.” Her hand ghosted over his cheek in an affectionate touch. “And because I’m smart, it’s reciprocated.”

“We’re more than smart darling, we’re bloody geniuses and don’t let anyone else tell you differently.” He kissed her again, making sure to rub his cheek against her only to drive the pup a little jealous before he sat back down.

She shook her head and went to fetch Nymphadora Tonks. She wouldn’t mind a little jealousy from Orion, so long as it wasn’t unreasonable. It boosted her ego and he looked good riled up.
Harry was guiding a tangle of white and gold roses to grow into one of the arbors that followed along the aisle Luna would be escorted down by Xenophilius and listening to Molly and Andromeda bickering goodnaturedly over the place settings, something about two opposing uncles and their societal status.

“Oh for Merlin’s sake, they are both unwed right? Put them at the same table and watch sparks fly.” Tonks leaned her head on her Mum’s shoulder and rolled her eyes. She was happy Andromeda had this wedding to help plan. First Christmas without Ted was difficult enough as it was. “Oi, Harry-boy, anything I can do to help?” She took a step toward Harry and tripped over some ribbons, landing flat on her face.

“All things considered, I don’t think that’s a wise idea no matter how much I adore you Tonks.” He gave her an apologetic smile.

“Your loss sweetheart. Here you had a willing slave and threw it away for a tiny bit of clumsiness.” Tonks made it up from the floor, seeing her mother try to hide her grin. “Oh I saw that Mum, you’re supposed to be on my side.” Inside though she was happy to see her mother smiling, that was a rare sight these days.

“It’s supposed to be her job to keep you humble too.” Harry ignored the raspberry tossed his way.

“As for the uncles, put the Weasley uncle next to Muriel and the Prewitt uncle next to Luna’s eighth cousin, the one with the cat ears.”

Molly shook her head. “Those Lovegood’s no sense at all when it comes to experiments and keeping yourself safe while you conduct them.” She listened to Harry though and rearranged the seating chart to his suggestions.

“Discovery’s always messy.” Ron appeared from down the aisle and watched Harry finish the arbor. “Mum the last of the invitation replies just came back.” He schooled his expression away from humor at the sight of the panic and frustration flickering over her face. “No worries, they all declined. Unless someone party crashes the guest list you’ve got is the one that’s going to stay.”

“Oh thank magic for that.” Molly breathed a deep breath of relief. Sometimes having a large family was nothing but trouble. She walked over and pressed a kiss to Ron’s cheek, he might be having a baby of his own but he was still her baby boy. “How are you?”

“Imitating rubber.” He gave his mother a hug. “Fred’s having an unholy blast taking the mickey, George got it out of his system though so I can take it.”

Harry chuckled and hopped down from the ladder he was on. “What’s had you sequestered with the terrors by the way?”
“Working on a surprise for Luna.”

“Ooooh I like surprises.” Tonks attached herself to the tall redhead like a limpet. “What sort of surprise are we talking about?” She had the whole Christmas off unless an emergency arose and as nice as it was to spend time with family she was getting bored.

“One I kinda need to borrow your Mum for.” He looked at Andromeda. “You knew Luna’s Mum right?”

Andromeda blinked. “Yes I did, we grew up together. She was a few years younger than me but I adored her. She was very sweet for a Malfoy and after our marriages we could commiserate on being shut out on account of who we fell in love with.”

He gave her a winning smile. “Would you mind coming and putting a couple of memories into the projection pensieve my brothers have set up then please? It shouldn’t take long for them to get what they need and give the memories back.”

“Of course not.” Andromeda turned to make sure Molly was okay with her leaving for a while and at the other woman’s nod she looped her arm through Ron’s. “Lead the way Ronald and I’ll give you all the memories I have of a truly wonderful woman, one I was proud to call a friend.

“Thanks.” He led her out of the pavilion that was being decorated and began explaining what he and his brothers were up to in an undertone only she could hear.

Harry though, didn’t need to hear Ron outline what he was doing for Luna, he could guess. “I wonder how they’re copying the memories.” He shook his head and set about making ribbons coil around columns and along the rows of chairs.

“You have no idea what the Ministry offered those two to come work for it. They said no of course.” Tonks sat down where she couldn’t make a nuisance of herself or be in Harry’s way. “They are completely barmy of course but quite brilliant...Just my type of people.”

“Everyone in this family is at least a little barmy,” he gave her a grin, “and we like it that way.” He made a delicate bow form at the top of a column. “Speaking of family, how’s Ewan?”

A delicate flush spread over Tonks’ cheeks, clashing horribly with her bright pink hair. “He is fine as well as I am aware. Visiting his family over the holidays but he will be here for the wedding as my plus one. Speaking of significant others, how’s Hermione?”

“Brilliant and gorgeous as always.” He practically glowed. “Right now she’s helping Luna pick out a wedding dress.”

She heaved a sigh. Tonks might be independent and a little bit crazy but she was still a woman and something about the mere mentioning of wedding dresses made her all soft inside. “Luna is going to look like a moonlit fairy isn’t she? All pale and delicate. Will you be planning your own wedding anytime soon?”

“One day I will but soon...probably not. Hermione and I want to finish growing up first, finish University and get started on our careers before we marry.”

Tonks nodded. “Smart thinking. You two have your whole lives ahead of you, no need to rush things. If I’ve ever seen a couple destined to be together it is the two of you, marriage or not you belong together.”

He smiled. “I’m certainly better with her than I’d have ever been without her.” He shuddered to
think of a world without Hermione, it just wouldn’t be worth living in.

Not caring that Harry was busy, Tonks got on her feet and wrapped the younger man in a tight embrace. “You are a wonderful man Harry Potter and Hermione is a very, very lucky young woman. Another place and time and I would have gone after you with everything I have...Luckily I have my wolf to keep me warm.”

He pat her on the back with a chuckle. “Ewan’s a lucky bloke and he’d better know it and do his job of keeping you warm right.”

Tonks let out a deep throated purr. “Mmm, he is particularly skilled in keeping me warm just the right way...even hot I might say.”

“I don’t know what it says about me and the company I keep,” in other words the Twins, “that I don’t get embarrassed about those sorts of innuendos anymore.” He let her go and blinked when he noticed that his magic had continued the decorating without his direction and even gone an extra leap to add fountaining pale sparkles. “Well that wasn’t expected. What do you think about those Molly?”

Molly was positively beaming. “I think it is absolutely wonderful Harry, the crowning glory in fact.” Molly had her hands under her chin as she twirled and watched the sparkles and decorations. “It is like a Yuletide fairy tale.”

He grinned. “Good, because that’s exactly what we’re going for. Tomorrow’s dragging Ron to his robe fitting, Merlin help me.”

“Rather you than me.” Molly chuckled. “He’ll behave, tell him that Luna will be disappointed if he doesn’t.”

He didn’t mention that Luna had considered just waiting until Beltane and jumping the broom, he doubted Molly would appreciate that. “Let’s hope he’ll behave without any sort of reminders.” He crouched to lay a rune at the base of a column. With the decorations up he was laying a base for a climate dome, it’d be like being in a reversed snowglobe if the weather cooperated.

“The boy is head over heels in love, he’s about to marry the girl he loves...of course he will behave.” Tonks bounced around Harry and Molly, shooting rainbow colored sparks off with her wand just because she could and she was happy. “If he doesn’t I have this wicked curse that will tie his happy hose into a knot...No honeymoon fun for him then.”

“All the ladies I love are all so terrifying.” Harry marked another column with a rune. “Lock Voldemort in a room with you lot and he’d be begging for mercy in mere moments.” His tone rang with pride and approval.

Molly wrapped her arms around Tonks, stilling the younger woman’s mad bouncing. “Yes, dangerous and lethal, that is us. Hush though, it is a secret.” She smiled brightly at her son.

“Says who?” He shot her a grin. “There is not a single person in the Wizarding World that doesn’t know just how very, very bad an idea it is to make you angry, Tonks is infamous among the Auror Corp in the very best ways, and if people don’t shudder when thinking about angering any of our Slytherin ladies they have no brain.”

“I consider that a great compliment Mr. Potter.” Narcissa’s voice preceded her around the corner.

“That’s what it was meant as.”
Tonks bounced over to her aunt, brushing her lips against Narcissa’s cheek in greeting. Pregnancy suited Narcissa, she was glowing, more beautiful than ever. “Where do you have that hulking shadow of yours? I’m surprised he is letting you out of your sight.” Protective was putting it lightly when it came to Snape.

“Interestingly enough, Severus saw clear to avoiding my wrath when I grew too frustrated with his hovering.”

Harry stood and stretched after laying the final rune. “Is he limping?”

“No, he’s merely a bit...tied up.”

“Oh Auntie, I didn’t know you had it in you.” Tonks looked intrigued. “Did you use a spell or actual ropes. I’ve always preferred ropes to spells, it looks so good when they struggle against them don’t you think? A nice soft silk rope is nearly unbeatable in my opinion.”

Harry just looked away, pretending to concentrate on something in the distance so as to keep from laughing.

“Oh sweetheart.” Narcissa pat her cheek. “Silk is for fun, Severus is getting punished. Hemp, no magic aside from a rune to prevent him from using magic to escape.”

“I have so much left to learn.” Tonks soaked every sliver of information up like it was the holy scripture. “I wonder if I can get Ewan to misbehave, just to try hemp out...The wolf strength might be a problem though.” She bit the inside of her cheek in thought.

Harry lost it, breaking out into laughter. “I’ll leave you ladies to discuss your bondage troubles. I want to go for a run before I deal with the food situation.”

“Oh you’re no fun.” Tonks pouted, “Just imagine all the things you could learn if you stayed. I am sure Hermione would look good all stretched out and tied up. Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it sweetheart.”

He gave her a slow, sly smile. “Not knocking anything. A gentleman just doesn’t kiss and tell.” He shifted after finishing that sentence and loped out of the pavilion.

Tonks cackled happily. “No worries darling, I’ll just ask Hermione then, she’s not a gentleman.” She watched Harry go before turning her attention back to Narcissa. “Now then, please tell me more.”

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Ron took the music box from his brothers. “You’re geniuses, I’ll grovel later but I want to give this to Luna before the ‘no seeing the bride’ rule goes into effect.”

“No need to grovel little brother, the knowledge that we now own your soul is more than enough.” George planted a smooching kiss on Ron’s cheek. “Go now, surprise your bride to be while me and Freddie here will go see if we can find the elusive silver dragon somewhere.”

“Try the pavilion Harry set up. I think the snakes like looking at the snow while getting to be all warm and cozy.”

“How do you know where our dragon spends his time?”

“Orion.” With that he headed off to find his girl. He wasn’t surprised to see her in the conservatory,
apparently trying to coax a shy creature out of a bush. He hated to disturb her but he didn’t really have much time to give her his gift before his Mum hunted him down and separated them for the required twenty-four hours. “Luna.”

“Hm?” Luna threw the snibblebeak one more fond look before letting it slink back into the foliage as she rose. She pushed her pale blond hair away from her face and turned to Ron, her eyes lighting up when they landed on her husband to be. “Not getting cold feet I hope.” Luna smiled softly up at him.

He tuckeda strand of pale hair behind her ear in a loving touch. “Never. I wanted to give you my wedding present before the ceremony though.” He passed her the music box, it was wood, carved of maple with charming, good luck creatures gamboling over curling vines.

Luna took the music box and studied it closely, a small smile playing on her lips at the sight of all the creatures carved into it. It was solid and beautiful at the same time. She gently lifted the lid and nearly fell backwards when an image rose from the box. It was her mother, her mother laughing a full, bright belly-laugh as she watched Xenophilius being chased by something that looked a lot like bees.

She watched the scene play out, tears running down her cheeks before closing the lid softly and throwing herself into Ron’s arms. “Thank you, thank you so much. I had forgotten what her laugh sounded like.”

He ran his hand over her hair, arms holding her secure and close. “I’m glad you like it. I wanted you to have a little of your Mum here with us that you could hear and see. Fred and George helped me work it out and lots of people donated memories to be copied into the box.”

She sniffed into his neck, holding onto him tightly. “It is the most thoughtful and wonderful gift anyone has ever thought of. Thank you for being the man that you are Ronald Weasley. I love you so much and our baby could not have a better father.” Luna pressed a kiss against the skin on Ron’s neck. She loved Ron’s skin, it looked like someone had grabbed a fistful of cinnamon powder and tossed it over vanilla ice cream. He was so beautiful and he was hers. It was a bafflement to her.

He turned a frightening shade of pink but didn’t demure, since he knew she’d probably smack him if he did, and kissed the top of her head. “You deserve the best I can give you, my amazing, incredible lady.”

Luna looked around the conservatory before slowly leading Ron toward a covered, private corner. She smiled a smile full of mischief up at him. “Come on then and let’s give each other some of the very best before your Mum finds us.” She pulled his head down for a much more serious kiss.

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Harry snuck up behind his girlfriend and wrapped his arms around her. “Boo.”

Chuckling, Hermione placed her hands on top of Harry’s and leaned back against her boyfriend. “You have to do better than that if you wish to scare me. Nearly seven years running around with a certain someone has left me a little more thick-skinned.”

“Nah, not trying to scare you. I like my nose just how it is.” He kissed the back of her neck. “You ready for the trip back to Hogwarts tomorrow?”

“Yes, already packed up except for a few essentials.” Hermione had mixed feelings about returning to school, she loved the castle itself and of course she loved the studying, the smell of parchment
and ink and all the knowledge held within those stone walls. Still, it would be sad leaving too, they were all such a tight knit group, and separation always hurt a little. As long as she had Harry at her side though she would be alright. “How about you?”

“Yeah. It’s a little weird though. This is going to be the last return to Hogwarts from Christmas break. Next year we’ll be in University and who knows what else.” He felt the pull of separating from the family members whose lives weren’t in Hogwarts too of course but he was more focused on the changes this final year of Hogwarts held.

“I can’t start noticing all the lasts just yet. If I start counting them I will spend the next six months in tears.” Hermione turned around in the strong circle of Harry’s arms so that she could wrap her own arms around him in return. “Hogwarts is home and the thought that we will be leaving soon, to know that if we come back it will only be as guests, it’s heartbreaking.”

He kissed the bridge of her nose. “I know.” It was a different kind of growing up from what he’d had to experience so far, one that they all went through and that everyone could relate to. It was a normal bit of growing up and for that reason it felt good as well as sad. “Of course Ron isn’t getting that usual train ride back.” He grinned. “I thought his eyes were going to pop out of his head when Malfoy and Parkinson revealed their surprise.”

“It was a sight to see, that’s for sure.” Hermione chuckled warmly again. “Although it was almost more fun watching Malfoy looking all smug at the same time as he tried to glare at Ron.” She shook her head in amusement. “Can you believe it Harry...Our Ron is married, married with a child on the way.” It was another change, it would no longer be just the three of them on adventures. Ron had more important people to think about now.

“Mind boggling. Utterly mind boggling. He’s looking for a house too, wants to find one near a wood where Luna can look for her creatures and do studies on them. It’s just a bit scary seeing him be all responsible and serious.”

Hermione nodded. “I know, it almost feels like an alternate universe. Gods...We’re growing up, how on earth did that happen when I was not noticing?”

“Well we have been a little busy helping Ron with the wedding, planning ways to bring Voldemort down, schoolwork, and career planning and all that. I think we can be forgiven for not noticing something so trivial.” He looked into the fireplace, watching the shift of the flames. “I want it over before next year, the fight with Voldemort. By summer’s end I’m going to take him out. I want to get on with the next steps of my life without his shadow hanging over us.”

She tightened her arms around Harry, her throat closing in fear. She understood him though, of course she did. In some ways, living with the shadow of that mad man hanging over them could be worse than just dealing with him once and for all. Hermione just didn’t want the man she loved to be the one forced to deal with Voldemort though she knew it had to be that way. “I will be right next to you, every step of the way Harry.”

He kissed her brow. “I know.” He’d like to tuck her away safe but he couldn’t and she’d hex him to the moon and back if he did. “Thank you...for everything.”

“One thing you never ever have to thank me for is loving you Harry, it is as easy and vital for me as breathing. It is not loving you that would kill me.” Hermione rubbed her brow against Harry’s jawline, feeling a hint of stubble against her skin.

“I know I don’t have to but I do anyway. Because I’m so grateful to have you with me, for everything you do, and I need to express it.” His fingers carded through her hair, loving the springy
“I am grateful for you too Harry Potter, all that you do and everything you are.” She stood on her
toes and pressed her lips against his in a gentle, short kiss. Words couldn’t possibly express what
she felt for her Harry but she hoped that he knew just how much she adored him.

“Hey...oops.” Sirius grinned at them. “Sorry to interrupt. I just came to see if you two wanted to
have a final snow run here.”

Hermione pressed another kiss to the corner of Harry’s mouth and stepped away from him, smiling
at Sirius. “Of course I want a final snow run, it never stops amusing me to feel the snow beneath
my paws.”

Harry grinned. “You know I’m in.”

“Great. Back garden, ten minutes while I go find my son and his she-wolf. The two terrors and
their hopping honey won’t be joining us, something about bunnies around a bunch of predators.”
Sirius pulled his head back in and loped away.

Hermione snorted softly. “Predators my bum, they just want to molest him undisturbed for as long
as they have him. Besides, I don’t think Draco would be tasty even in bunny form. He’d probably
get stuck in my teeth.”

“Ew bunny fluff in between the fangs.” Harry wrinkled his nose and took her hand to pull her with
him out to the back garden.

Smiling she followed him out in the back garden, breathing in the cool air and feeling the snow
crunch beneath their feet. She was a little bit in love with Black Manor. The house and the grounds
were gorgeous, large but still very homey. Hermione adored the privacy, the fact that they could
change and run without worry about detection.

Harry spotted Orion running towards them, a big grin on his face and an indulgent Pansy trailing
after, Remus was handing Aurora to Narcissa, obviously about to join them for their run, and Sirius
was practically bouncing on his toes eagerly. Harry went ahead and shifted, shaking out his mane
and flexing his claws, more than ready for the run.

Orion whooped, and bounced in place. No matter how many times he’d seen it now it still was a
sight to watch Harry shift to his lion form. He turned to Pansy so he wouldn’t miss her change. If
watching Harry was a joy, watching Pansy shift into her wolf form made him shiver all over.

Remus shook his head at his son but couldn’t keep the smile off of his face. He longed to run too,
side by side with Sirius even though he didn’t change, keeping up was no hardship for a werewolf.

Sirius laughed and shifted, pressing against Remus’ legs as Padfoot before stretching a bit.

Pansy, being the clever femme fatale that she was, raised her arms over her head in a stretch of her
own then shifted into elegant she-wolf, feeling very self-satisfied at the look that came over
Orion’s face.

Harry made a chuffing noise and butt his head against Hermione’s thigh gently, nudging at her to
change as well.

Grinning broadly, Hermione shifted in a no nonsense way. She was not a teasing or seductive
woman, not in the way Pansy was anyway. As a tiger she romped around in the snow, lying down
and rolling in it before jumping up to play wrestle with Harry.
Harry made a happy growl and rolled over with her in a wild tumble, nipping and licking affectionately at her fur until Sirius gave a sort howl to bring everyone to order and he and Remus set off, leading the direction of the run.
Chapter 76

Chapter by trulywicked

Chapter Notes

Quick trigger warning. Blaise has some very NOT appropriate thoughts regarding people committing suicide in the 8th paragraph. It's not in any way a good thought to have nor does it reflect the beliefs or feelings of the writers of this fic.

“Now remember the incantation is Praeteritum Amicus,” Flitwick squeaked at the double class of Gryffindor and Slytherin seventh years, “And a blue thread will connect the caster to a past life connection.”

As always Hermione looked nearly enthralled at the prospect of casting a new spell, she had read all about it of course but reading and doing were two different things. She gripped her wand steadily and prepared to cast Praeteritum amicus.

Blaise was just bored, he needed to pay attention, to get good grades if he wanted to join Charlie working with dragons as he wanted to but dear Merlin everything was so boring.

Harry and Ron exchanged glances and rolled their eyes at the Italian.

“Master of ennui innit he?”

“Many times over mate.” Ron snickered at the evil look that gained them.

Pansy snuck her hand over and pinched the back of Blaise’s neck. “They’re right Lord of the Sighs.” She heard Longbottom choke and clearly struggle not to laugh at that. “If it will make you feel more interested I’ve heard horrible things about what happens when this particular spell is wrongly cast. From suicides to boils on the genitalia.”

That little tidbit of information did perk Blaise up. Suicides weren’t really amusing unless there were points for originality but boils were always funny, especially in the groin area. “Oh sweetheart, you always know the right thing to say.” He placed a smooching kiss on her cheek and set out to watch the first students cast the spell before he did it himself.

Unfortunately one of them was Millicent, who’d wound up with wand problems after a rather large fifth year had sat on her wand in the common room, and they all knew she was not the sharpest knife in the kitchen. So when she flicked her wand a little too hard, shouting “Praeteritum Amoris!” and the bloody thing exploded, anyone with any brains tried to take cover, especially as Flitwick squeaked out a worried ‘Oh dear.’

“Wrong incantation and the wand exploded.” Hermione was wide eyed from where she had taken cover behind a desk. “That can’t be good.” She frowned at Blaise’s insane cackling, good lord, Charlie should get a medal for putting up with incubus boy.

Harry blew out a breath, he’d instinctively moved to cover Hermione’s back when they’d dove
behind the desk, and peered over at the cackling Slytherin. “I’d stuff it Blaise and take a real good look at your chest if I were you.”

Pansy swallowed the panic that was creeping up her spine because she could see a glowing red line trailing from Blaise’s heart out of the room and worse, she had one too.

Blaise looked down and saw the red line emerging from his chest. “Well that sort of takes the fun out of everything doesn’t it?” He looked around the room and noticed that lines were trailing from everyone's chests. “You have one too though wonderboy, connecting you to Granger.”

Hermione looked down and saw that it was correct, the glowing red line from her chest did lead her to Harry.

Harry was very tempted to poke at the line, his brows furrowed in curiosity, eyes meeting Hermione’s in concern. The line didn’t hurt or anything but that was on his end, he had no idea if it was hurting her.

Ron made a low whistle as a few people in the room started to panic. “Er, Amoris is Latin for love or lover right?”

Flitwick moved to stand on his stack of books, firing off a couple of bangs from his wand to get everyone’s attention. “Correct Mr. Weasley. There’s no need to be alarmed everyone. Miss Bulstrode simply cast the spell to identify soulmates as opposed to a past life’s friend.”

Harry’s lips immediately curved and his eyes warmed on Hermione’s. He was aware of Dean and Seamus poking each other in the chests a little bit away and grinning like idiots. Bloody hell Dean was almost dancing in place like someone had just handed him an ever filling bag of gold. “Is that cute do you think or just a little ridiculous?” He nodded at the two.

Hermione looked up from the thread binding her and Harry together to watch her fellow Gryffindors. “Considering the little jig I feel like doing I’ll go with cute.” She smiled as Seamus threw his arms around Dean and swung him around.

Excited chatter had replaced the budding panic in the room and those whose threads lead out of the room were eager to see where and more importantly to whom the threads lead.

Draco though felt rather sick to his stomach as he watched the single glowing line trail out the door. He had been so sure of his own heart and his feelings for Fred and George but what did it mean if he only had one soulmate?

Pansy noticed and laid her hand on his shoulder. “It means nothing,” it was a low murmur and she wasn’t only trying to convince him but herself as well. She didn’t know where her line led and she felt cold and ill to think that it might not lead to Orion, “love doesn’t happen only between soulmates Dray.” Her voice was soft and comforting, and the sentiment was being echoed more loudly by Professor Flitwick.

“Simply because you now know your soulmate is out there does not mean you need to go find them and/or bond with them. Who you love now is not in any way less valid than if you were to find and love a soulmate. Lady Ravenclaw herself chose not to bond with her soulmate and instead wed her childhood friend and long-time suitor.”

It was some comfort to hear that Draco supposed since he wouldn’t be giving his ginger idiots up for anything but he still had a feeling of unease deep in the pit of his belly. He had an inkling that it wouldn’t ease until he could touch and talk to Fred and George.
Blaise had no worries whatsoever where his line lead. Mates of the creature blooded were soulmates, perfect matches in every way and Charlie was his. That was just the way it was, the same as the sky was blue and rain was wet. “Chill dragon, Fred and George were one organism once, in some ways they still are. One thread is all that’s needed. Don’t worry about it.”

Pansy shifted so that her heel pressed down, a bit painfully, on his arch and gave him a sweet, lethal smile. “Not helping darling.” She let up before actually causing any damage.

Ron sort of plucked at the line sprouting from him and jumped at the funny little feeling it brought and a returning pluck made him smile and somehow he just knew it was Luna’s fingers that had done it. He looked over at Neville. “Alright there Nev?”

The quiet Gryffindor nodded, “Yeah I’m good.” He was content and confident in his relationship with Ginny and felt no need to go looking for where his line led. Of course if it led to Ginny he’d probably wind up acting like a loon in happiness. A clap caught his attention and he looked up to the professor.

“Class is dismissed, the lines will disappear in a day. Remember not to place too much importance on them.”

Even as the students nodded at the tiny professor, most of them were still running out the door to see where their lines lead. Teenage curiosity driving them forward.

Draco didn’t have any hurry. Most of all he wanted to retreat to his bed, pull the covers over his head and wait until the soulmate lines disappeared. He didn’t want to know where it lead.

Just as they were about to leave, Orion showed up in the doorway, following the red line hooked to his chest. When it appeared he just had to follow it of course.

“Curious little furball isn’t he?” Ron looked at Zabini and said in an undertone, while Pansy was frozen and staring at the line connecting her to Orion. “Go pounce on Charlie, have him get the Twins here will you?”

“Pouncing on my man will be no hardship brother mine.” Blaise grinned at Ron. “I’ll try to remember him getting moron one and two here before any pouncing takes place though...Later on we might be somewhat preoccupied. You go find your moonbeam.” He gave Ron a salute and took off in a run.

Pansy almost began chewing on her bottom lip, part of her wanted to go right to Orion and pull him into some little dark corner to talk, maybe snog a bit, but she didn’t want to rub Draco’s nose in her luck. She looked over at him. “Do you want to retreat Dray? I could be persuaded to share my stash of Belgian chocolates.”

“I wish to retreat yes but you shouldn’t.” Draco managed to smile at her. “Go play with your puppy...I’ll raid Severus’ chocolate stash instead.” He walked over and kissed her, chuckling a little when that made Orion’s eyes narrow. “I’ll be fine darling, promise.”

She pat his cheek. “Remember you’ve got your mirror. If you need anything, whatever it is, call.” It was no less than an order.

“Yes Ma’am.” He kissed her again and grinned when he managed to get a growl out of Orion. He swept out of the classroom like royalty and firmly ignored the line as he hurried down to his dorm room.

“What’s this then?” Orion plucked at the thread between him and Pansy, relaxed once more now
that Draco and his smooches were gone.

She looped her arm through his and pulled him with her to an empty room. “There was an accident of sorts in class. Bulstrode used an incorrect incantation and her wand exploded, the result being that those in the room wound up with red lines that apparently lead to their soulmates.” She perched on the corner of a desk and crossed her legs.

“Wicked.” Orion’s grin was so wide that he flashed plenty of fang as he plucked at the line again, shivering a little at the sensations going through him as he did. “Soulmates, has a nice ring to it doesn’t it? Of course I would go after you soulmate or not.”

She tangled the line around her fingers, wondering a bit at its odd corporeal nature, and tugged gently, a brow raised imperiously in summons to him. “A rather nice ring yes.”

“No need to tug Pansy, I’ll fall at your feet at the crook of your finger if you wish me to.” Orion raised a brow of his own in return and leaned in to brush his lips over hers.

She nipped gently at his bottom lip in play and not-quite-reprimand before letting her mouth soften to his. She lifted a hand to play in the tail of dark hair he had tied back at the base of his skull. “Charmer.”

“But of course, I am a Black after all.” He smiled against her lips. “Only for you though, only ever for you.” In Orion’s eyes, Pansy Parkinson was absolute perfection and no one would ever be able to compare.

She bumped her nose on his chin with a soft smile. “Good, saves me from having to possibly chip my nail polish removing competition.” She was just as possessive as he was, he was simply more animalistic and vocal about it.

“Well...When you put it that way I might just have to spread my charm around a little. I wouldn’t mind seeing you protecting my honor.” Orion fluttered his rather ridiculously long lashes her way. He would never do it but it was fun to tease, he was a Slytherin after all, just as the girl of his heart.

She nipped at his chin. “Take me for a walk round the castle so I can show you off to all the insipid idiots who might try to chance a play for you.”

“Oh please, I will be the one showing off, every eye is on you when we’re out walking, male and female alike.” He stood up though and offered her his arm, his daddy had taught him some manners. “They can eat their hearts out though because I’m not planning on letting you go.”

“Always nice to be on the same page.” She slid off the desk and took his arm.

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Fred eyed the lethal woman drumming her fingers on the portrait with an almost amused tilt to her lips, “Are you letting us in or not?”

Pansy settled on smirking. “Oh yes, the dorm’s been cleared out so he is all yours.” She met the other pair of wicked blue eyes. “But remember, I know where you live and can very happily castrate you if you upset him.”

“Yes, yes, you’re very scary and threatening, we’re practically shaking in our boots.” George gave a very exaggerated shudder. “I rather think that you would upset Draco more by castrating us though, he’s somewhat fond of our bollocks you know.”
“Then for everyone’s sake, don’t make me carry out the threat.” She moved aside and waved them in. “I am going to do some reading, do please let yourselves out when you’re ready to leave.”

Fred made an acknowledging hum and moved in, already heading for the entrance to Draco’s dorm.

George sent Pansy a cheeky wave before following his brother into their dragon’s dorm where there was a lump resting under the covers in one of the large four poster bed. “Silk sheets even here...my, my, my is that proper school regulations?”

The lump moved and a disheveled head of blond hair emerged from beneath the sheets. “What the bloody hell are you doing here?” Silvery gray eyes blinked at them.

“Well a funny thing happened a little while ago while we were working on a new product.” Fred parked his bum on the bed next to the rise of Draco’s body. “Then a little while later our big brother came by and said that our little dragon might just need us.” He reached out and trailed his fingers through the messy blond hair before tugging the sheet down so that the line showed strong and bright in the dim light of the room. It stretched from Draco in a single solid line but just before he and his brother it split in two then each filament disappeared into him and George.

“See, silly little dragon? Of course we belong to each other this way as well. Soulmates, all three of us in equal measure. You can’t really believe we’d let anyone else have as much as a piece of you now can you?” George toed his shoes off and quite resolutely lifted the covers and crawled into bed next to Draco on the opposite side from where his brother was sitting. “You should have mirror called us straight away Draco, you don’t have to deal with things like this on your own anymore and it could have saved you a lot of worry.” He wrapped an arm around Draco’s shoulders.

“I didn’t want to acknowledge it, if it didn’t lead to you I didn’t want to know where it lead.” Draco looked at the two of them, hesitantly reaching out to touch the line leading to Fred.

Fred took his hand half way and brought it up to brush the line where it entered his chest. “It leads to us. We’re yours Draco.”

The unease inside Draco settled, leaving a soft glow behind instead. Faith was not a Malfoy strong suit but these two might just be stubborn enough to make Draco have faith in them and in their relationship. “Of course you’re mine, only someone with my kindness and patience could put up with you.” He raised his pointy nose in the air and bit down on the grin that wanted to escape.

A warm chuckle bubbled up from Fred’s throat and he leaned down to brush his lips over Draco’s. “Oh indeed you are a paragon of virtue little dragon. Isn’t he George?”

“A downright saint you are Dragon. We bask at the glory you bestow us with.” George leaned in to mouth at Draco’s neck, very pleased with the almost purring sound they could coax out of their bunny-dragon.

Fred slipped under the sheet with his two lovers, his lips never leaving Draco’s as a hand smoothed down a long, lean side to rest on a slim hip. “Worth more than all the gold in the world.”

“Absolutely, our greatest treasure by far.” George kept his mouth on Draco’s neck, sucking a vivid purple bruise onto the white skin there, something Draco would no doubt bitch about later on but to see Draco marked a little bitching would be more than worth it. He brushed against his brother’s hand as he moved to unbutton Draco’s shirt.
Draco tilted his head to the side, exposing more of his neck as he deepened his kiss with Fred.

Fred’s tongue lazily slid against Draco’s as he shifted to let George get at the buttons on Draco’s shirt better. They were going to take complete advantage of the time Parkinson had bought them and leave behind marks that made it plain that Draco was very much taken.

Harry leaned his forehead on Hermione’s shoulder, his own shoulders shaking as Parvati Patil finished her horrified, high pitched rant and ran up to the girls’ dorms. He shouldn’t find it so funny, he really shouldn’t, but seeing Parvati’s line lead right to Colin had been like some horrible farcical joke.

Colin had looked rather terrified himself, both at the line that had sprouted from his chest and the girl that looked at him as if he was some sort of especially slimy bug. He’d had a crush on Parvati Patil since third year but he knew just how out of his league she was so he was content to admire her from afar. He had no idea what was happening now though.

“Poor Colin, he looks like he’s about to keel over.” Hermione tried her best to be sympathetic but she couldn’t stop her amusement from shining through.

Neville played with Ginny’s hair and nodded. “I feel for him. He’s been so over the moon for her for so long and she’s acting like she thinks he somehow schemed for Bulstrode’s wand to explode. I think he might actually cry soon.”

That put a stop to Ginny's amusement, someone's honest tears and heartbreak was nothing to giggle about. "Colin is a sweetheart and Parvati would be lucky to have him." She turned and nuzzled her nose against Neville's. "If Colin's going to cry I'm not going to let him do it here where everyone can gloat about it." She got up from her seat and walked over to invite Colin for a walk.

Harry sobered. He’d been laughing at Parvati, not Colin because she was always so insistent that the ‘one’ for her would be astonishingly handsome, incredibly intelligent, and embarrassingly rich and Colin, well Colin was average in all of those categories. Instead Colin was kind, humble, eager about new adventures, sensitive, and of an artistic bent. Since approaching him about making a yearbook for Hogwarts he’d learned a lot about the photographer and Colin, having been recognized for something, had calmed down a bit. That was probably exactly why he and Parvati would fit, they would balance each other out.

Harry kissed Hermione’s cheek. “I’m going to join Ginny and Colin. Think you can go talk to Parvati?” He knew Parvati Patil wasn’t cruel by nature, she didn’t like hurting people, but sometimes she didn’t notice that she had.

Hermione nodded and gathered her things to go up to the dorm to speak to Parvati. “Go join Colin and Ginny and I’ll see you later.” She smiled at him and slung her bag over her shoulder as she stood up.

He nodded, giving a wiggle wave to Neville and getting to his feet to go join Ginny and Colin for their walk.

Parvati was face down in her pillow, embarrassed beyond all reason. Colin! Of all people to be her soulmate it was Colin Creevy!

Hermione tossed her bag onto her bed and then walked over to stand next to Parvati’s four poster. “For goodness sake get a grip, do you have any idea what you have done? How you made that poor
boy feel?” She could feel her temper rise. “He didn’t ask to be tied to you but you had to scream at
him in front of the entire common room. How he could ever have fancied you is beyond me but I
don’t think you have to worry about that anymore, I’d be surprised if he ever as much as looks at
you again.” Hermione bit back the fact that it would probably be out of embarrassment than any
lessening of his feelings toward Parvati, in her mind the other girl needed a bit of a wake up call.

She lifted her face up and frowned. “I wasn’t screaming at him, I was screaming about this...this
thing.” She gestured at the line she sported.

“Yes because that wouldn’t be upsetting to the other person it is attached to at all.” Hermione’s
tone was quite near Severus’ on a good day. “What has Colin ever done to deserve that treatment
from you? Has he ever been mean? Bothering you or harassing you some way? Did you even
notice that some people in that classroom didn’t have any lines at all, no soulmates? You are one of
the lucky ones and all you managed to do is to make another person feel
worthless...Congratulations.”

Parvati blinked, thought of how she’d reacted, then turned violent red before paling. “I didn’t mean
to. I just.....” She ducked her head, burying it back in her pillow. “I’ve always gone on and on about
the person I’m destined for and Professor Trelawney always said I’m right and Colin...he’s not any
of it and I was embarrassed.” She’d always felt special because Trelawney said she had a touch of
sight but this was a big flashing sign that she really, really didn’t.

Hermione sat down on the edge of Parvati’s bed. She knew the other girl wasn’t mean spirited, not
really and she’d made her point. There was no reason to continue to rub it in. “I know you didn’t
mean it but you did. Colin was about to cry down there, Ginny and Harry took him outside so he
wouldn’t fall apart in front of everyone. Trelawney is a hack, you shouldn’t base your feelings and
destiny on what someone else says.”

“Just wanted to be special. Padma’s so smart and witty, Lavender’s absolutely gorgeous, blond
and delicate and sweet and so cheerful, and you,” she turned over to look up at Hermione, “You’re
just amazing, there’s no spell you can’t do, you’re really powerful, especially since you didn’t
have magical parents to draw your inheritance from, you’re loads more mature than any of us and
you’re so brave. And me I’m just...I’m the hot tempered airhead. Trelawney saying I had sight
gave me something special to be, people came to me for advice, palm readings and stuff.” She
fingered one of the bed curtains. “But I don’t have sight, Colin’s definitely not tall, dark, and
brooding like I kept saying I ‘saw’ in visions.”

“Believe me Parvati, you are just as special than any of us. I just think we can’t see the good things
about ourselves. I certainly don’t recognize the way you describe me, I’m really scared most of the
times we have to face something dangerous and I am not as mature as you might think. Lavender is
so unhappy with how petite she is and you kick Padma’s bum in both transfiguration and potions.”
Hermione sent the other girl a smile. “Who wants brooding anyway? Brooding is just another word
for sulky. Colin might not at all be what you envisioned but he looks at you as if you hung the stars
in the sky. This...” She motioned to the lines glowing dimly. “This doesn’t have to mean anything
more than you want it to, not all soulmates need to be romantic in nature you know. It can just be
someone you can be yourself completely around. If it is so important to you, then I’m sure you can
still have your tall, dark and surly.”

Parvati laughed, “See, you’re super mature to think that way. I’m all caught up on little girl dreams
and what have you.” She sighed, “I really didn’t mean to hurt Colin’s feelings. He’s a sweetheart
really. Do you think he’ll let me apologize?”

“Of course he will. Have you really not noticed how he adores you?” Hermione smiled. “Don’t
push yourself to feel something you don’t just because a line ties you together but just watch him for a while, see all the small things he does for you without ever expecting even a thank you.”

“I noticed that he watched me a lot, even when I’m around Lav and it was a tremendous ego boost,” she blushed in embarrassment, “but not much beyond that. I’m terribly immature.”

“You’re not, if you were you wouldn’t even recognize it. Everyone wants to feel wanted and desired, I don’t think that is something you outgrow.” Hermione pulled on a springy curl as she spoke. “You are a good, kind person Parvati, never loose sight of that. Apologize and move on. I screamed Harry in the face once, accused him of all sort of things when he had done absolutely nothing wrong. I felt like the lowest of the low afterwards of course but he forgave me for it. Colin will forgive you too, without question.”

“No way you? Screamed at Harry?” She gaped at Hermione. “When was this? I mean I can see you two arguing now and again but not screaming arguments. I didn’t even know it was possible for you to get that mad at him.”

Hermione turned pink, it wasn’t exactly her proudest moment but if telling Parvati would make the other girl feel better then she could do it. “It was a few years ago and it was horrible, I can still wake up and feel so utterly wretched for how I treated him. Harry had done something very kind and I basically accused him of trying to buy and control me. I was so, so wrong and I am so lucky that Harry even spoke to me again after that.”

“Lucky doesn’t quite cover it, he’d crawl over broken glass and hot coals for you. Padma is madly jealous of that just so you know. The most powerful wizard of our age, one of the most gorgeous and loaded too as well as super sweet and smart and kind of cutely humble about all he’s got. Lucky is an understatement you cow.” The last word was spoken in a soft tease, clearly not meant to cause offense.

“Believe me, I know exactly how lucky I am.” Hermione grinned at Parvati. “The thing is though...I’ve never cared about his power and wealth, from the first day he’s just been Harry to me. I didn’t grow up with stories about him the way you did and I am glad for it. He’s simply my Harry, he fits me and he’s such a huge part of me now that I am fully confident that I wouldn’t be able to function the same without him.”

“By Merlin you two are sickeningly cute. Good. The world needs that.” She rolled out of the bed. “I’m going to wait outside the portrait for Colin so I can apologize.”

“You do that and don’t worry so much, you’re not nearly as immature as you think you are and you’re a wonderful person.” Hermione got off the bed to walk over to her own and put her books away and pick up new ones before she walked back downstairs to the common room.

Parvati paced around in front of the portrait, jolting when she heard Ginny and Harry’s voices occasionally joined by Colin’s. She steadied herself, hoped Ginny wouldn’t hex her on sight, and waited for the three of them to come into sight, chewing on her bottom lip.

Ginny didn’t hex her but if looks could curse than Parvati would be in deep trouble as the redhead glared death and destruction at her. She squeezed Colin’s shoulder and breezed past Parvati without a word.

Colin looked as if he didn’t know what to do, his gaze traveling between Parvati and Harry as he shuffled his feet.

Harry studied Parvati then nodded, squeezing Colin’s shoulder and murmuring that it would be
alright before walking into the common room.

Parvati took a deep breath then blurted out. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t you really, that I was mad at I mean. I was mad at myself and I was just venting and I shouldn’t have done that the way I did and made you feel bad. I really didn’t mean to and I’m really very sorry.” She twisted her hands together because she felt absolutely awful for the kicked puppy look Colin had sported as soon as he’d seen her.

Colin blinked in surprise, he had been ready for another tongue-lashing, not this. “Um...It’s okay...I mean I am sorry too. I didn’t want this for you. I know...I know I’m not what you’d hoped.” Inside Colin felt like stomping on himself, he was such a loser. For once Parvati was speaking to him and he could hardly get a normal word out.

“It’s not that,” she shook her head, “I...you know how I’m always talking about ‘visions of my future’ and stuff? I was mad because...well I thought they were real, that I had sight and well,” she shrugged, “I guess maybe I...don’t after all. Having sight’s part of who I’ve always thought I am, you know?”

“Who says you don’t have the sight?” Colin forgot all about himself faced with Parvati doubting herself. “You know that the true seers almost never have visions about themselves, it is other people’s future they can read or get visions about.” Since Colin watched and listened he could name a handful of dreams that Parvati had talked about that had come true, small things for sure but they had come true. He told her all of this.

She blinked. “But I...oh. Oh I’m an idiot.” She smacked herself in her forehead. “I am a self absorbed moron. It’s Padma’s future I’ve been seeing.” She turned a bright red. “This is why she’s in Ravenclaw and I’m in Gryffindor.” Padma would never have made that sort of mistake.

“We’re talking about the same Padma who couldn’t tell the front from the back on those Hestia-huffies professor Hagrid had for our classes and tried to feed its behind?” Colin raised his brows. “Padma is nowhere near as wonderful as you are, you surpass her in every way.” He turned bright red when he realized what he’d said.

She chuckled. “She’s just not really a fan of animals. It’s nice of you to say but I was really horrible today.” She held a hand out. “I hope you can forgive me. Friends?”

“Always.” He took her hand and shook it. “We were never not friends Parvati, I just wish you could see yourself as I see you.” He blushed again and before he made an even bigger arse of himself he found it easier to run. “Well...I need to get studying...But have a great evening and I’ll see you around...I suppose.”

“Um okay. Good luck, with your studies then. I’m going to go visit my sister.”

Colin nodded and waved before ducking inside the portrait. He knew it was all in his head but he imagined that he could still feel his skin tingle from where he’d touched her hand. Friends...yeah he could do that.

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Fenrir Greyback was bored out of his skull listening to the witch and wizard reporting on how well their recruitment of Hogwarts students was going. He didn’t give a shit, all he cared about was getting to attack fresh meat but since killing Ted Tonks he’d not had any orders to that effect.

Voldemort tapped his fingers against the armrest of his throne like chair. “It is going well you say,
any visible proof of that?” His voice was completely devoid of emotion. “I need my army and I need it now.” Once Potter graduated he would become an even bigger threat, Voldemort wanted the brat gone before that could happen.

The wizard drew out a sheaf of parchment. “A list of those who wish to take your mark and fight with us my Lord.” He held out the parchment, head respectfully bowed. There were not as many in Slytherin house who wished to join as they’d hoped but surprisingly there were a number from Ravenclaw and even a pair of students from Gryffindor who wished to join their cause.

Voldemort perused the list with disinterest. He really did not care all that much who had been recruited as long as he had bodies to send into battle. He would build his perfect army once Potter and his followers were gone. “Greyback! Have you mapped out the security of that little puppy school?”

“Bit hard to do that since I can’t get past the first defenses,” it was gruff and irritable, he hated that he was being kept out of that area. “There’s a barrier, smells like three different layers to it, that keeps anyone not invited in out but enough pressure on it and it should crack.”

Red eyes turned on the werewolf and Voldemort slowly tilted his head to the side as he regarded Greyback. “Cracking it will be no problem when the time comes but I would prefer to know what other little tricks they have up their sleeve. If you cannot get even such a simple job done then I think it is time to send in someone who can be invited.”

He stifled the growl. “Yeah? Who’s that?” He wasn’t a sycophant. He worked for the half dead wizard because he could bleed people. If Voldemort started treating him like a dog, he’d turn without any qualms.

“One of the new recruits of course.” Voldemort was well aware of Greyback’s lack of loyalty. He tolerated it because no matter how much he hated it the two of them still had use for each other. “Who will be better to send in than one of boy wonder’s schoolmates? Wanting to learn about another school, maybe in preparation for going into teaching? They will do the recon, you will lead the actual attack.”

“Works for me.”

The recruiter witch spoke, “My Lord, which recruit would you like to infiltrate the werewolf school?”

Voldemort looked down at the list again, reading through it more carefully before pointing at the name of a Ravenclaw girl. “This one.”

“It shall be done my Lord.” She bowed low. “I will speak with her immediately upon my return to Hogwarts.”

“Good.” That was the only praise the witch would get, she hadn’t done anything to deserve more. Voldemort still lamented the loss of his Bella, she had been spectacular and so loyal.

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Harry hummed but nodded. “If you think it’s a good idea Alec then I’m fine with it. You’re the Headmaster after all.”

Johann sat in a chair and listened to Alec and Harry speak. No matter what issues he had with the golden wolf he could not question the man’s skill as Headmaster.
“I just wanted to consult with you first Harry, get your opinion of Miss Lister.”

“Um I don’t really have one. I mean I’ve probably seen her around but she’s not a member of the DA or related to any one of my friends so I can’t really say.” Harry scratched the back of his neck and smiled sheepishly at the head of the werewolf in the fire.

“Ah. Sometimes I forget that you don’t know everyone in your school, sometimes I forget that you’re just seventeen too.”

“Most of the time you would forget your head if it wasn’t attached.” Johann’s tone was still sharp but the venom was no longer there when he spoke to Alec. “What Alec really wants to know is if you know if this Miss. Lister is a moron or not.” He looked down at his long fingers and the ink stains that covered them absentmindedly.

“I’ve neither said nor implied anything of the sort,” it was growled out and had Harry chuckling.

“Well she’s in Ravenclaw so odds are low for her being a moron though occasionally one or two will sneak in but those draw a lot of attention to themselves so she’s probably your average ‘claw, studious and quiet and observant, probably. Don’t hold me to any of this.”

“Why would anyone hold you to that?” Johann scribbled down another part of the potion recipe he was working on. “You are not responsible for any of your schoolmates. Send the girl over, if she doesn’t please the Headmaster over there, he can always eat her.”

“Your wit is, as always, utterly charming. But yes Harry, send her through. We’ll give her a tour and see how she reacts to the pups.”

Harry looked up over his shoulder at McGonagall, who nodded.

“I’ll send an elf to get her and send her through myself Mr. Potter, I believe that you have a club meeting to attend in five minutes.”

“Yeah. Sorry Alec, I’ve got to get to the Defense Club.”

“Go on then. I’ll talk with you later.”

“Did you get the answers you were looking for?” Johann shifted and crossed one boot-clad foot over the other as he rested them on top of Alec’s desk. Why spend time in the teachers lounge when this office was so much more comfortable and had the bonus of Alec in it where Johann could work on getting under his skin.

“Not really. If Harry does not know her then he can’t say if she is or is not trustworthy. We’ll keep the tour very, very basic and short.” He eyed the boots like they were covered in hippogriff dung. “Comfortable?”

“Very, though you should think about getting some more comfortable chairs.” He wiggled his behind in the leather one he was sitting in and sent Alek a cheeky look.

One large, tanned hand gripped a boot covered ankle and yanked Johann towards him, the wheeled leather chair moving easily so he could hover over him. “You like poking a sleeping wolf a little too much I think.”

“Maybe I don’t like my wolves sleeping.” Johann looked up into Alec’s face. “Not when I have so much fun poking.”
“Well if you want to poke that badly-”

“Gentlemen I would like to remind you that the floo is still open and you’ve a seventeen year old young woman who will be stepping through upon her arrival in my office,” McGonagall’s voice was dry and vaguely amused.

“That is my cue to go to class.” Johann rose all stretching grace and teasing looks. “I will see you later Headmaster. Don’t eat your guest.” He nodded toward the fireplace, not knowing if the Headmistress of Hogwarts could see it or not but he didn’t want to be disrespectful as he left. He saved being disrespectful for Alec.

Who apparently had no qualms about showing a bit of rudeness himself. “The only person I’m interested in eating presently is you.”

Minerva shook her head, “Alec you are not too old nor too intimidating for me to take over my knee young man.”

“Don’t tempt him Headmistress, he would probably like it.” Johann waved over his shoulder and sauntered out the door just as there was a knock on McGonagall’s door.

Minerva bid the door open, “Miss Lister, do come in. I understand you would like to have a tour of Marauder’s School?”

“Yes Headmistress.” Paula Lister sent McGonagall a sweet smile. “As you know I have applied to a teaching education after Hogwarts and I would really like to work at a school like Marauders. Getting to tour it would be a great opportunity for me.”

“Well the Headmaster spoke with Harry and they’ve agreed to give you a tour today. I don’t believe you’ve any clubs or classes to attend today do you?”

“No Headmistress, I’m done with classes for the day and none of my clubs have a meeting today. A visit would be perfectly timed today.” She beamed at the older woman.

“Well the floo is open and the Marauder’s Headmaster is on the other end.”

Alec spoke up. “Miss Lister. If you’d like you may come on through.”

“Yes please Headmaster, I would like that very much.” Paula nodded and stepped through the fire. She had no qualms whatsoever about deceiving this fleabag or McGonagall. There were casualties in any war, she planned to be on the winning side, the just side.
Ron poked his head around the door frame and smiled at Luna curled up in the window, a butterfly perched on one hand, her other rubbing softly over the small swelling of her stomach. “Hello Moonbeam. You about ready to go and see about our little star?”

“I am yes.” She got up from the window after opening it to let the butterfly out. She smiled at her husband and took his hand as she reached him. “Everything alright husband mine?”

“Brilliant. NEWTs are over and we’re just waiting on the results, my very very pretty wife is healthy and our little star’s active and healthy, my best friends are happy, and it looks like this year might actually end...peacefully.” He kissed her cheek. “So yeah, everything’s alright.”

She hummed and reached up for another kiss. Luna wasn’t quite as convinced that the year would end in peace but she would not voice that. Ron deserved to be happy and calm for as long as he could. “I hope Starshine will behave for the exam, we’ve been having a spot of hiccups you see.” She placed Ron’s hand over her belly.

He felt the little jolts under his hand and, as always, his expression turned to one of wonder and awe. “Poor mite, hiccups aren’t any fun at all.” He gave Luna another kiss. “I’m sure our little one’ll show off wonderfully for us.”

“I hope so.” She hadn’t had any dreams about the gender of their baby so she was very curious. Orion looked at her stomach with a somewhat smug look so he probably knew but if he spilled the beans she would hex him and he knew it. “Come on then, let’s go find out if the sprackle bugs or snoodles are appropriate.”

He chuckled and they made their way down to the medical wing, he rolled his eyes at the pride gathered outside the entrance to the wing. “Really you lot? Don’t you have things to do?”

“This is more important.” Sirius grinned, bouncing his daughter on his hip, “So go on and find out if you’re having an Astrid or a Stellos and then come and tell us.”

Orion just winked at them and shuffled closer to Pansy, making Remus roll his eyes at his son. “We are all very curious, Aury can’t wait to see what sort of playmate she will have.” He tickled his daughter’s belly making her laugh where she was with Sirius.

Luna smiled, she had withdrawn from most of the student body during the year but she loved their pride. They were family. “As long as you are up for a bit of a wait we’ll be happy to tell you as soon as we know.”

Harry chuckled, “We can wait no problem. Besides, we waited with Draco when his Mum was bringing the new little Snape into the world.” That had been scary yet hilarious, Severus Snape had been chased out by Madam Pomfrey then Narcissa had actually gotten up and dragged him back, making threats against anyone who dared try to take him away again.

“Mother’s features and Severus’ coloring.” Draco beamed a little. He was already wrapped firmly around his baby sister’s fingers, tiny as they were. “Let us hope Luna’s genes are dominant regardless of the gender.” He blew Ron a raspberry but followed it up with a wry grin.

“Fat chance I say. Ginger and freckly that babe will be...And gorgeous enough to charm us all.”
Blaise leaned against the wall.

Charlie chuckled. “Don’t be too sure about the coloring. Funny things tend to happen when Weasleys reproduce with blondes.”

Ron grinned. “Yeah like Uncle Hubert, people used to call him Snow White cause of his coloring and not a freckle was to be found.”

“Used to?” Neville tilted his head in question.

“Yes, they stopped when he started hexing noses onto backsides for comparing him to a princess.” Charlie snickered.

“Oh I have to remember that one.” Blaise lit up and left the wall to wind himself around his mate instead. “I can think of few more unpleasant things than having to smell your own or others arses like that.”

“If you are not careful Mr. Zabini and don’t keep your voice down you may just find out first hand.” Madam Pomfrey stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips. “If you are going to wait out here then I do not want any sort of shenanigans.” She turned toward Ron and Luna and was suddenly as sweet as honey. “Come on in dearies, everything is set up inside.”

Ron grinned and walked with Luna into the infirmary. “How’s this scanning spell thingy work? All I know is that it tells you if your baby is a girl or a boy.”

“I will cast a spell on little Mrs. Weasley’s belly here and an image will appear of your child. Also a golden ball of light will show, steady glow for boy and sparkling blinking for girl.” Poppy directed Luna up on a cot.

“Glowing or sparkling, fitting for a little star.” He brushed a kiss over Luna’s knuckles.

“Very fitting.” Luna smiled and shuffled into a comfortable position. It still startled her a little to be called Mrs. Weasley but she didn’t mind it.

Poppy pulled out her wand and wielded it with flourish over the small bump over Luna’s stomach as she spoke the incantation. It wasn’t something she got to do very often which was good since this was a school for children and all but she loved this. Loved to see how a new life was doing and what gender it would be.

“Look at that!” Ron’s voice was awed as he stared at the image that appeared of their child. yeah it looked a little weird, kind of like a garden gnome, but he was pretty sure that was just because it was only halfway through development.

Luna watched the image too, amazed that this little person was growing inside her, that she and Ron had made said little person. As she watched the little sea creature, buggle-bug bounced on the image. “See, hiccups.” She smiled at Ron.

He laughed. “Yup, poor babe.” He looked at the golden ball that was emitting a steady glow. “We’re having a little Weasley or Lovegood boy it looks like.”

“A wee Weasley weiner.” Luna couldn’t tear her eyes away from the golden light. A boy, a son. Everything suddenly became more real. “Seems as if the family name is secured.”

“Blimey, I wonder what he’ll look like once he’s done cooking and all out.” he pressed his lips to her temple.
“I don’t care, I don’t care at all.” Luna nuzzled against Ron. “He will be beautiful, perfect.” She watched the golden ball and the image of their boy slowly beginning to fade.

“He will yeah.” He breathed out a thrilled laugh, “He can’t be anything but considering that you’re his Mum.”

“And you’re his Dad.” Luna couldn’t stop grinning like a loon. She would love it if their son had Ron’s wonderful speckled skin. Anyway he came out they would love him.

“Everything is perfect health wise as well.” Madam Pomfrey smiled at the parents to be. “Healthy baby boy in there.”

Ron’s hand smoothed over Luna’s stomach. “Good. That’s what’s most important to me.” He hoped their son got Luna’s moonlight hair.

Poppy patted Ron on the shoulder and decided to give the parents to be some privacy. “Remember that wild brood waiting outside when you are done.” She walked off to her small office to file the new information into Luna’s chart.

He grinned. “Brood, yeah that’s about right.” He helped Luna sit up. “So we’ll be picking over boy names, any special names that immediately pop into your head?”

“Not instantly, I would like it to be some sort of celestial name if possible but it isn’t necessary. Any traditions in your family that you want to follow?” Luna ran her hand over her belly gently.

“Nope. Most of our family names are ones like Bilius.” He wrinkled his nose, “and no child of mine shall be saddled with such a thing. And since he’s our little star, I think a celestial name is a brilliant idea.”

“I like Bilius you know, it’s original.” Luna pulled him close so she could kiss him. “But then again I have a Dad named Xenophilius, I may not be the best judge of normal names…How much do you think he would hate us if we simply named him Star?” She had grown fond of the name as they had called their baby their star for such a long time now.

“Hmm, not sure but we can give him a middle name that’s astonishingly average so he can choose which he wants to answer to when he’s old enough,” he brushed his lips over hers softly. “But yeah I like Star.”

“For now he’s Star, who knows, when he’s finally here he might be a Bjorn or Stephen or Krectovar. I don’t think we’ll know for sure until we meet him.” She pressed another kiss to Ron’s lips. “Let’s go tell our pride and watch Orion rake in the money from people who are still stupid enough to bet against him.”

He laughed and helped her hop off the cot. “Which is a surprisingly large number.”

“Mmm, people are surprisingly stupid.” Luna agreed softly and held on to Ron’s hand as they left the infirmary to face their family and friends.

Harry looked at them and pursed his lips. “So obviously all is well.”

Ron nodded, “Yup.”

“Going to keep us in suspense or are you willing to spill the beans?”

Luna just smiled enigmatically before bursting out in laughter. “We’re having a boy.”
Orion hooted with triumph and lifted Pansy off her feet in joy. “I knew it, I so knew it.”

She chuckled and booped him on the nose, “So you did and hosed a great many lesser gifted students.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s astonishing that people still bet against him.”

“Nothing astonishing about it, it is all about charm and no one can resist mine.” Orion preened where he stood. “So lady Parkinson, may I escort you to Hogsmeade next weekend? Wine and dine you? Well...dine you in any case.”

“I think I could be persuaded,” she looped her arm through his and began walking him down the hall.

Sirius grinned. “Congratulations you two.”

Charlie nodded. “And be prepared to have a ton of blue knitwear arriving very soon.”

“Blue, pink or anything in between, we are grateful for it all since I can’t knit to save my life.” Luna was great at many things but knitting and sewing was not things she excelled at, quite far from it in fact.

Hermione walked over to hug both of them, hugging Ron a little extra. “Congratulations Daddy...A son.”

He gave her a little squeeze. “Thanks. I’d be just as happy and proud for a daughter, though maybe a little more panicked too.”

Harry chuckled and clapped Ron on the shoulder. “Just a little?”

“Well I’ve got all these amazing ladies around for advice so yeah, just a little you berk.” He grinned at his best friend.

“Shall I resent the fact that you left me out or that you called me a lady?” Remus raised a brow at Ron. “Not much difference having a daughter actually, different plumbing but that’s about it, right Aury?”

“Da!” She gurgled and cooed and smooshed her Daddy’s cheeks.

Sirius grinned. “I don’t think he was talking so much about raising kids Moony as he was about looking for advice from people who have been little girls on how best to avoid being an arse.”

“What he said.” Ron flicked a thumb at Sirius. “No one in their right mind would call you a bird Remus.”

“Too right, my Dad is badass.” Orion had spent a little too much time with muggle literature and television when he’d had a chance to.

“Chaos as always, no way to ever stay on topic.” Draco rolled his eyes and walked forward to kiss Luna’s cheek. “Congratulations cousin, you as well...Ronald.”

Ron blinked then grinned and held out a hand. “Thanks Draco. Where are the two terrors by the way?” The Twins were the only members of the ‘pride’ who weren’t present.

Draco’s expression turned a bit disgruntled. “Apparently coming and going as you please on Hogwarts grounds after you have graduated is a bit frowned upon.” The Headmistress had called
him into her office for a rather stern talk. “Expect floo or mirror calls though, maybe a surprise or two as well.”

“So long as nothing gross explodes all over me or Luna they’re welcome to surprise us all they like. And hey two and a half weeks and you get to spend as much time with them as you can stomach all day every day.” Ron gave him an understanding smile.

“I doubt you have to worry about anything gross this time. They may be idiots but they do like children and you for some reason.” Draco couldn’t play too nice, if he did the world might end. He did look forward to getting to move in with his terrors though. With his mother and sister having moved to live with Severus, the three of them would have the manor to themselves.

“Yeah, weird that.” Ron was in too good of a mood to snipe back at Malfoy. “So, how about we all head down to the Chamber? Relax and lay around all lazy-like?”

Harry rubbed his chin on Hermione’s shoulder. “Sounds good to me.”

“I’d like that.” Hermione nodded and watched as Luna nodded as well. “Better let Dobby know where we are though, I know he and the rest of the house elves have planned a cake.” Every elf and creature in the castle loved Luna on a near worship level and Dobby loved every excuse to make sure Harry and friends had something to celebrate.

Sirius grinned. “I’ll go tell the elves, you lot go ahead on down.”

Harry saluted. “Aye, aye Cap’n.” The he pulled Hermione in the direction of the Chamber.

She wrapped her arm around him as they walked. As happy as she was for Ron and Luna she was also happy that it wasn’t her and Harry. She wanted to have a family with Harry but not yet. She was not ready for that yet. “I’m going to love being an aunt, you and I will spoil this child absolutely rotten.”

“So very very rotten yeah.” He grinned. “Which reminds me, I bullied a list of properties for sale out of some very close mouthed people. I need to remember to give that list to Ron.”

“I’ll remind you later.” She sent him an intimate smile. “Speaking of, we need to find some sort of housing in London as well before fall.” When so many extraordinary things happened, it was difficult remembering the plain necessities.

He tugged on a curl of her hair, “You don’t like the renovated Grimmauld Place then?”

“I do, I really do. It’s just a bit...imposing. I can’t help but feel as if it is too grand for me.”

Grimmauld Place was lovely now, modern and classic all at once and Hermione could spend all time in the library and not want to move at all. She loved the house, it was just that old insecurities about her self worth were hard to overcome completely.

He held the door to the bathroom open for her and stepped in after she did, going to the sink and hissing it open. “If it really bothers you we can look for a flat near the university.”

Hermione waited until they had slid down the slide and were in the chamber until she replied. “No, don’t do that, I’m just being silly...Could we, could we just decorate one room ourselves? With our things? I think I need something solidly ours.” She wasn’t sure she could explain it properly but that was how she felt.

He brushed his lips over her brow. “Narcissa left what she called the Master Suite blank after stripping it down so that’s a big yes love.”
“Thank you.” She let out a breath she wasn’t even aware she had been holding and kissed him quickly before the rest of the pride came rambling into the chamber.

Everyone slowly found their seats, most of those who were with their significant others having them sit in their lap, aside from Orion and Pansy, who were snuggled side to side, and Sirius and Remus who sat and played with their cooing daughter.

Harry had to smile at everyone. “I’m going to miss this, a lot.”

“Me too, this has been our refuge, our place to be together.” Hermione was very comfortable in Harry’s lap.

“Oh don’t go and get me all depressed when we’re supposed to be celebrating.” Orion pouted. “I know we we’ll all meet again but it will never be just the same.”

Ron nodded. “It’ll be different alright, but everyone who goes to Hogwarts has to face it at some point.”

Harry chuckled and nodded. “Yeah and at least we had the refuge. So I can’t be depressed.”

“Sure you can be all chipper...I’m here for two more years.” Orion hated to be left behind, absolutely hated it. Most of all he hated that Pansy would be leaving. She was so extraordinary and once she saw the big bright world he was scared she would find someone better than him. If he didn’t have his parents and sister staying he would have gone crazy.

“Yeah but you’ll be with Luna for one of them and Dennis is still around for you to finish the last year with. As a matter of fact I expect you to be looking out for my moonbeam when I can’t next year,” Ron jabbed his finger in Orion’s direction.

“Of course mate, as if I would let anyone mistreat our Luna in anyway?” Orion looked positively shocked. “I may even revert to biting if it comes to that.”

“Yeah, that’ll teach them. I’m still scarred after my run in with those teeth.” Blaise lounged on Charlie’s lap.

Pansy rolled her eyes. “This from a man about to go into creature care, focusing on big, scaley and winged fire-breathing menaces?”

The insulted ‘hey’ came from three different directions.

“Dragons like me unlike teething pups.” Blaise did stop himself from sticking his tongue out at Pansy but only just.

“There will be no biting of any kind so it’s a moot discussion.” Remus’s amber eyes pierced his son.

Sirius had to grin at the way Orion shrunk down just a bit. “Plus Luna can handle herself pretty well and, if my math isn’t too far off, she’ll have the baby just before term starts. So no need for extreme protectiveness kiddo.”

“No, even more need I say. Two people to protect.” Orion piped up, he wouldn’t go against his Dad but he still had to voice his opinion.

“They will be protected, of course they will.” Remus replied and Luna sighed.
“Oh for Merlin’s sake. I am not a damsel, the only one who has it right here is Sirius.”

“Well there’s a rare event,” Harry’s tone was dry as dust, “but yeah. You don’t need to be protected like fine china, just supported when necessary by good friends. Between Ri and Ginny,” he saw the redhead girl salute snappily from Neville’s lap, “Ron won’t be worrying too much, or at least he shouldn’t.”

“No he shouldn’t.” Luna leaned in and kissed Ron’s neck, right on top of the burst of freckles that reminded her of a crescent moon. One of her favorite places to kiss her husband.

There was a pop and Dobby as well as three other elves appeared, carrying an enormous bright blue cake.

“Oh hey cake!” Sirius grinned happily. “I vote we dig in people!”

Ron chuckled and murmured into Luna’s ear. “Sorry. You just mean the world to me and I worry sometimes.”

“It’s okay, I understand and I feel the same about you. Let’s just save our worrying for when there’s need for it.” She kissed him again before sliding off of Ron’s lap so they could go get cake before Orion had managed to eat all of it.

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Harry sipped at his morning tea and nibbled absently on a slice of toast, looking up when a veritable flood of owls came swooping in and dropping thick letters in front of the seventh years. He picked his own up and opened it.

Mr. Potter, we of the Wizarding Examinations Authority Board would like to congratulate you on passing your Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests. Your grades are below.

- Study of Ancient Runes - O
- Care of Magical Creatures - O+
- Charms - O
- Crystal Theory - O+
- Defense Against the Dark Arts - O++
- Herbology - EE
- History of Magic - EE
- Potions - O
- Transfiguration - O+

Congratulations and have a pleasant day Mr. Potter.

He was goggling at his potions grade, absolutely unable to believe he’d even passed much less scored an O.

Hermione peeked over his shoulder after having finished reading her own letter and turned his head toward her to kiss him very heatedly right there in the Great Hall. “Brilliant Harry! I always knew you were brilliant.”

He was a charming shade of pink from the kiss and the praise but didn’t pull away. “I don’t know about brilliant. I’m not really sure how I even managed to pass them all.”
Before anyone could say anything about that, Ron released a loud whoop and actually jumped out of his seat and up and down in unrestrained glee, holding a letter bearing the Auror Corps symbol.

“Congratulations!” Hermione beamed at him and rushed out of her seat to hug him. She knew that it was his biggest dream to become an Auror and she was so happy for him that it was coming true.

Harry got up as well to make it a three way hug. “Good on you mate!”

“I can’t believe I got in! Well I can you know but this is just...wow.” Ron was grinning wide and excitedly.

Up at the Head table Sirius smiled at the three of them. “Look at them Moony. All three so happy and carefree. Gods that’s good to see.”

Remus nodded, feeling nearly choked up. “It is, it’s wonderful, so bright and with their whole futures ahead of them.” Remus just wanted the best for them, wanted them to always be that happy and excited. “Remember when we left?”

“Full of ourselves and certain we could take on all the world’s ills.” Sirius shook his head. “Yeah I remember. Took me a week to convince you to move in with me too.”

"Only a week?" Remus grinned fondly. "Yeah sounds about right, I've always been pisspoor when it comes to saying no to you." It was both lovely and painful to remember that time, before everything went to hell.

“Evil man. I was close to tearing out my hair trying to figure out how to get you to agree to move in with me.” He reached over and took Remus’ wrist in affection and understanding. “Maybe you should have held me off longer, forced me to grow up.”

“Hindsight is always perfect.” Remus shifted so he could tangle their fingers together. “I was young back then too, just like you so I’m not sure I could have forced anyone to grow up.” He looked over at Orion and Aury sitting next to them in her high chair and despite the hardships he didn’t want to change things. If things were different then they might not have their children. “We’ve managed pretty well though haven’t we?”

Sirius smiled. “We’ve managed wonderfully.” He noted other expressions of joy and a few, compared to previous years astonishingly few, of despair echoing throughout the hall until McGonagall stood, tapping her glass for attention and telling everyone to settle down.

Harry slid back into his seat to open the rest of his mail, grinning at his acceptance letter to Oxford. He didn’t bother to ask if Hermione made it in, he knew she would have. He looked up over at the head table, gaze going to Hagrid. “Ron, Hermione? What do you say we visit Hagrid later today?”

Hermione followed Harry’s gaze and nodded. “Of course, I’m in, it’s been too long since we visited him last.” Hermione felt all bubbly inside, like she was made of champagne and about to pop with happiness. She couldn’t have asked for better grades and now Oxford was waiting for her and Harry. If she wasn’t still deathly afraid of it, she had a feeling she could almost fly without aid.

Ron nodded. “Yeah. I’m absolutely all for it.” He was thrilled beyond measure about getting accepted to the Auror Academy. This was just an all around good day, one of their last in Hogwarts and what better way to commemorate it than by stopping by Hagrid’s, one of the first places he’d gone with Harry after that first day of classes seven years ago.

“Good deal then.” Harry beamed.
Harry had to laugh at the ferocious barking of Fang through the door, knowing that as soon as Hagrid opened it, the dog would go scampering back into the house, tail between his legs and whimpering.

“Oh shush you silly thing.” Hagrid’s voice boomed through the door as he went to open it, his whole face, well what could be seen from beneath the beard, lit up when he laid eyes on his visitors. “Well, what do we have here? Fancy visitors eh or what do you say Fang? Come in, come in? I just baked earlier today so there’s plenty of rock cakes, I’ll just put the kettle on.”

Harry grinned wider and immediately gave Hagrid a hug that, even as he’d grown up, still didn’t go even halfway round the man. “How are you Hagrid?”

“I’m just fine ‘Arry.” Hagrid hugged Harry back tightly before beckoning them inside where Fang attacked them with very wet and enthusiastic kisses. “The Headmistress will let me have a floo connection here...I can visit Olympe when I want to then.” Hagrid blushed even as he said that and it made Hermione want to hug him as well so she did.

Ron scruffed up Fang’s fur and grinned. “That’s going well then? Happy and all?”

“Aye, Olympe is just brilliant.” It wasn’t a traditional relationship perhaps but both Hagrid and Olympe needed their space and time alone so it worked just perfectly for them.

“I’m glad for you.” Harry’s eyes gleamed happily. He looked around the hut. “Did I ever thank you Hagrid?”

Hagrid’s eyebrows disappeared behind his wild hair. “Thank me, what for ‘Arry?” The gentle half giant couldn’t think of a single thing Harry had to thank him for.

He smiled wider. “You were the first person to ever show me kindness that I can remember Hagrid, and you’ve stood by me and continued to look after me ever since. If not for you, I’d probably have turned out pretty untrusting.”

Big, fat tears welled up in Hagrid eyes and rolled down his cheeks, causing him to dig through his pockets for his polka dotted handkerchief. “That is just wrong.” He sniffled and pulled Harry in for another bone crushing hug. “You were just a wee little thing, who could be unkind to you? You’re my ‘Arry.”

Harry’s own eyes went damp and he returned the hug with as much strength as he had. “Wrong things happen, thanks to you I know that they aren’t even what happens most. You gave me so much to build on and have always been there for me ever since I entered the wizarding world. You taught me kindness and tolerance, gave me some of the best advice I’ve ever gotten, and you’ve been one of the best friends and teachers any of us could ever ask for. So just thank you, for being you.”

Hagrid sobbed harder. “Oh laddie, thank you for being you as well. I will always be your friend.” He patted Harry on his back with strength that made Hermione wince before releasing him and walking over to the fire where the water was boiling so he could make them their tea. He needed a moment to compose himself.

Harry rolled his shoulders to settle them after the thump and didn’t mind letting Hermione and Ron see him wipe his eyes.

Ron scratched the side of his freckly neck and smiled nervously. “You know, some of our best
adventures are tied up with you Hagrid. Norberta, Fluffy, Aragog,” he grimaced, “the slug bit though that wasn’t really an adventure.” He exchanged a look with Harry and got a nod. “And uh you know it was Harry and Hermione who freed Buckbeak, whole wonky mess with a time turner that was.”

“I know.” Hagrid answered as he carried a huge tray to the table, setting mugs and rock cakes in front of his guests. He wasn’t nearly as dense as he could seem and before Dolder had managed to get him expelled he’d actually had decent grades. “Buckbeak told me what happened, just because someone doesn’t have words, it doesn’t mean that they can’t speak.” He walked over to his small icebox to get the milk before sitting down at the table. “Hogwarts won’t be the same without all of you, I think the castle itself will miss you.”

Harry smiled, “We’re going to miss her too. She’s always looked out for us.”

“Troublemakers that we are.” Ron grinned softly.

“Aye but where would the world be without troublemakers? Without people who asks questions instead of blindly following?” Hagrid spread jam over a rock cake and bit into it. “Hogwarts was built for people like you, clever and curious.”

Hermione eyed the cakes warily, but took a sip of her tea as she let the comfort and warmth of Hagrid’s hut soak through her.

Harry grinned. “Well we definitely had curious covered, clever...well me and Ron sometimes goofed that part up.”

Ron lifted his tea cup in salute. “That we did. Hermione though, there’s the brains.”

“You have brains, as your final grades show without a doubt. At times you’ve just been too much boys to use them.” Hermione smiled at them though. “As a team we’re unbeatable, I will always think so.”

“You bring the logic, I bring the strategy, and Harry brings the all out balls,” Ron grinned, “Yeah, unbeatable sums it up right.”

Harry laughed and they all fell into conversation, passing the time with Hagrid in a happy mood. Until a frantic knock sounded on the door and McGonagall’s voice cut in with rare panic.

“Hagrid is Harry there!”

Green eyes went wide and he was barely a step behind Hagrid as the half giant opened the door.

“Aye, he’s here.” Hagrid threw the door open and looked at the witch on the other side. “What’s the matter Headmistress?” Something was very obviously wrong.

Hermione exchanged a look with Ron and got up from her seat, worry spreading throughout her.

Harry felt a chill wash over him at the look on her face.

“Mr. Potter, Johann Spath and Auror Tonks are here. It appears that Voldemort is attacking Marauders. They’re waiting for you in my office.”

His face hardened and eyes lit with fury and if you paid attention you’d have felt the temperature around him dropping.
“That bloody waste of space.” Hermione growled and her jaw set. “That coward, going after
Marauders!” As they all moved toward the castle she pulled out her mirror from her bag to call on
the rest of the pride, she knew all of them would want to fight.

Harry’s fingers twitched in irritation but he kept a lid on himself, no need to go flying off at the
handle before knowing the entire story. “Tell Orion to grab the moleskin bags from my trunk near
the lab please Hermione?”

She nodded and relayed the information to an Orion that was nearly howling with outrage. Then
she hurried her steps and pulled on Ron’s sleeve. “Better run and tie your moonbeam down before
she goes to battle.”

He nodded. “I won’t need to tie her down. I know she wants to help but she won’t risk Star.” He
pat Hermione on the shoulder and dashed off. “I’ll meet you in the office Harry!”

He nodded sharply and looked over at McGonagall. “How much do you know so far
Headmistress?”

“At the moment half the staff are employing an evacuation plan for the children, calling it plan
Moony.” She gave him a look of worried amusement.

Harry nodded. Plan Moony was to go to ground, using the tunnels only the currently employed
staff knew and were sworn to secrecy about. The tunnels went under the mountain and let out the
other side, well away from the school. Several passworded doorways were along the tunnels,
blocking pursuers, and the tunnels themselves had been modeled after egyptian tombs, with off
shoots and traps along wrong tunnels, you needed to have memorized the route to make it through
without a guide.

They dashed up to the Headmistress’ office and he nodded to Tonks and Spath. “What’s
happening?”

“Voldemort himself along with Greyback is leading the attack.” Tonks’ hair was violently crimson
with anger as she spoke. “The barrier is still standing but only barely, at the moment Voldemort’s
rifffraff is bombarding it with all they’ve got. Most of the human staff have taken the kids into
hiding and the wolves are preparing for battle.” Tonks knew that Ewan would be at the front lines
fighting and she wanted to be there right beside him.

Johann was stony faced but otherwise seemed completely calm. “Alec is about to go berserk,
Greyback being his main target.”

Harry nodded. “As soon as those who are here and of age that want to fight join us we’ll head over.
Tonks is Kingsley mustering the Aurors and the Underground enforcers?”

She nodded. “Yes, they should be ready at the same time as we are.”

The fire flared green and the twins stepped out followed by Bill, Molly and Arthur. Molly going
over to Harry instantly to give him a quick hug.

He curled his arm around her and hugged back. He wasn’t about to argue about them being there
or joining the fight. They’d been a part of this fight since before he’d been in nappies and they had
a right to see it finished. He looked up as Sirius and Remus came in and offered an encouraging
smile.

Sirius smiled back though it was strained and a bit nervous. “We’ve left Aury with Luna, who
looks about ready to skewer something by the way.”
“We’ve also left our son in our rooms looking as if we’ve personally ripped his heart out and stomped on it.” Remus winced when he thought about the expression on Orion’s face but he wasn’t of age yet and Remus would do anything to keep him safe.

Tonks looked very doubtful when she heard that. She shared blood with Orion and she knew she would have crawled through glass and fire to fight. If Remus wanted to live in delusion than that was his business but she would not be surprised at all if she spotted Orion on the battlefield.

Harry just exchanged a knowing look with Hermione and left it as the rest of the pride came in, Pansy tossing the moleskin bags to Harry.

“What exactly is in those things may I ask?”

He smirked and pulled out a set of dark green dragonhide armor, obviously made for a woman, tossing it to Pansy, “Just some little somethings I arranged for a little extra peace of mind. Davis picked those out since she claims to know your size.”

“Ooooh.” She immediately began sliding into the armor, grinning as it fit just right. “She does.”

Harry handed Hermione a set of dusky red, and passed armor to the others of the pride he knew didn’t have any as Charlie arrived in bright Fireball red and scarred armor.

“Oh good, the hides you bargained out of Yuri did get sent.”

“I even made sure that the single black is all for your Italian there.” Harry began putting his own armor on, it was new and had been a gift from the Horntail.

“Just don’t mistake me for one of the bad guys in this one.” Blaise pulled on his black armor with glee, running his hands over the perfect fit and he couldn’t help but put on a bit of a show for his very own dragon handler.

Hermione shook her head and donned her own armor. Only Blaise would think of seduction when they were about to go to war. She did feel a wave of a powerful love for Harry though, for having thought of this, put thought into keeping his people safe.

Ron came in and took the armor Harry handed him, looking at his parents arguing with Ginny about her coming along. “Mum would you stay behind when Dad went into this fight?” He knew the answer was a resounding no. “You can’t expect Gin to stay behind while Neville’s there fighting, she won’t do it and arguing about it isn’t going to do anything but waste breath and leave bitter words hanging in the air when they shouldn’t be.” He was all too aware that they could lose people they loved in the coming battle so he didn’t want the last words between his parents and his sister to be angry ones.

Molly opened her mouth to say something but closed it again as she watched all of her children there with glistening eyes. She slowly nodded at kissed Ginny on the forehead, watching as she went to put on armor. She walked the few steps over to her youngest son and stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "When did you grow up to be such a fine man? I'm proud of you Ron." Merlin she was proud of all her babies and she couldn't bare the thought of losing any of them.

Ron hugged her tightly. “Thanks Mum. I learned from you and Dad you know.” He stuck this hard into his memory, just in case, “We’ve all been training for this as hard as we can since we found out the truth of Dumbledore, Ginny too. I’m not gonna say that it guarantees us anything but we’re as best prepared as we can be, maybe even a little better prepared than most Aurors who’ll be there. We’ll be looking out for ourselves and for each other, promise.”
Arthur, having given his daughter a tight hug and praise of his own, came over hearing that and brought his arms around both his wife and his son. “We just wish we could keep you all wrapped up and safe all the time is all son.”

Ron grinned. “Yeah I know, just how I feel about Luna and the little Star she’s carrying. You can bet I’m going do my dead level best to get back so I can see my son come screaming into the world.” He wiggled a hand loose to pat his father’s arm. “Mum, Dad I love you.”

Molly’s breath hitched and she smothered a sob. “We love you too.” And Molly would do anything to make sure all her children were back safe and sound. She had half a mind to run around the room hugging them all but she recognized that this was neither the time or place. Molly would save the hugs and kisses for when they had won.

Arthur nodded and released Ron, knowing that they needed to get to Marauders before Voldemort’s forces broke through the barrier.

Harry looked around at them all, “Everyone ready?” Getting nods and determined expressions, he turned to Johann, “You’ll have to go through and keep the floo open for us.” It was a security measure, only when there was a staff member on the Marauders’ side keeping the floo open would it let someone through.

Johann nodded and moved to the fireplace. He was glad they were finally getting going. He had come to love the school he worked at and even more scarily a certain fleabag of a Headmaster. He stepped through the floo and kept it open so that everyone could come through. It felt a little strange having people from the Ministry other than Auror Tonks coming through even though they were Aurors as well. Johann was glad for all the help they could get though, he had a feeling they would need it.

Draco gripped his idiots before stepping through the fireplace. “Let anything happen to you and I will make you suffer eternally.”

Fred ran his fingers over Draco’s cheek. “Same goes for you dragon, look after yourself.” He wasn’t going to promise that they wouldn’t get hurt, they probably would, but Mab willing they’d survive mostly intact.

George leaned in for a quick kiss. “We’re just about to get to have you to ourselves full time. Not even Voldie is going to mess that up.” He winked at both his lovers and stepped through the flames.

Draco gripped the silver sword the twins had given him tightly and followed.

Harry stood with Tonks watching as the last ones slipped through, running his fingers over Hermione’s back in a gentle stroke as she stepped into the fireplace. He gave the Headmistress a salute and stepped in after his girlfriend, knowing Tonks would be behind him.
Chapter 78

Chapter by trulywicked

For once Harry landed on his feet, rolling out of the floo in a smooth crouch and raising. He looked out the window at the cracking barrier, nodded a hello at Kingsley, and rolled his shoulders before issuing orders. “Fred, George I want you two on the high hill there,” he pointed at the map behind Alek’s desk that detailed the landscape of Marauders, “with the most devious and creatively destructive of the Aurors and enforcers, I want you lot making and employing long distance attacks that neutralize Voldemort’s forces. Ginny I want you and Charlie in the air, you’re two of the best on a broom,” he tossed them both a Firebolt taken from another moleskin bag, “and you’ll be on the best broom there is so give them hell.”

Sirius watched Harry giving out orders, Kingsley and the head enforcers automatically deferring to him as the mantle of command settled like a second skin on his godson’s shoulders. He was being smart and pairing the younger and lesser experienced with the older and more seasoned.

“Pansy work with the hag enforcers and use that absolutely scary talent you have for turning things to bits to rip through whoever manages to get past the front lines. Ron I want you with Moody and Sirius here,” he tapped a rise that would give them a full view of the battlefield and make them the last stand for the school. “You and Sirius are the chess masters and Moody’s got the most experience. I want you using those brains to help with strategies.”

Pansy smirked. “It’ll be my pleasure.”

Ron nodded. “You got it mate.”

“Tonks,” he tossed her a smile over his shoulder, “you’re with me and Hermione, I want us taking out the dementors that’ll be out there before we do anything else.”

“You got it. I’ll be happy to give those creepies such an overdose of happiness that they choke on it.” She twirled her wand in her hand and was just about to say something more when the flames turned green once more and Orion rolled out before the floo connection was closed off completely.

He was stood up quickly and looked around the room defiantly. “My family is here, my mate is here. I need to fight.”

Pansy turned a lovely red that she knew Draco would tease her about endlessly once this was over. She’d suspected of course but there was a difference between suspicion and confirmation.

“How did I know you’d show up?” Harry tossed Orion a moleskin bag. “Armor, blades with silver lined edges, and some nasty little potion bombs.”

He caught Remus’ look and raised his hands and spoke softly. “He’s not going to stay out of this. I always knew that especially after what happened after the Department of Mysteries, so I came up with a kit for him. He’s an alpha, Moony.”

Sirius mouth flattened. “Harry’s right,” he ran his hand down Remus’ back and murmured into his ear, “I hate it more than I can say but he’s right. If we make Orion stay out of this, it’ll hurt him more than there’s a way to fix.” Even saying that his voice was tormented knowing just how hard this was going to be for Remus and at the thought of his son being in such blatant danger.

Remus clenched his jaw so tightly that his teeth actually groaned in protest. He knew Harry and
Sirius were right but that didn’t make him like it anymore. Remus had seen war, he had witnessed it firsthand and he knew exactly what kind of horrors the other side had. He’d seen them demonstrated over and over again in his spying days and he didn’t want that for his child. Oh Gods he didn’t want it for his little cub. Right now he knew he wouldn’t be able to get a word out without completely falling apart so he simply gave a short nod and pulled inside himself, focusing on the battle ahead.

Orion gave Harry a grateful look and got into his gear quickly. “Where do you need me?”

“Go with Fred and George, if there’s a single more destructively devious brain in the world than yours I’m a monkey’s uncle. They’ll give you a rundown on what you’ll be doing.”

“Oh.” Orion nodded and walked over to stand next to Fred and George. He sent Pansy an intent look that said everything that couldn’t be voiced out loud at the moment. Be careful and kick arse were pretty much the gist of it.

She nodded slowly back at him, her own gaze returning the sentiment along with promise of retribution should he fail in keeping himself safe.

Harry has his wand in hand. “Alright let’s go before they bring the barrier down.”

Everyone nodded, knowing where they were headed and what they would do. Despite the fact that they were heading for battle, Hermione felt a strange sense of calm. This was it, the final stand perhaps. She gripped her own wand tightly and followed Harry. She would keep him as safe a she could in every way she could.

Harry made his way with Hermione and Tonks to the front line that had formed, where Alek ordering his people into better positions.

Gold eyes slid over the Harry and the Marauders Headmaster nodded respectfully. “Harry. Barrier’s going to fall in under a minute.”

“Yeah. Just enough time for everyone to get into place.” He narrowed his eyes at the sight of a few Hogwarts seventh years on the other side of the barrier, throwing their magic in to break it down. He recognized the Ravenclaw girl now, and he out and out growled lowly at the sight of Romilda Vane. “Someone didn’t learn her lesson and the other needs to be taught one.” There were other Gryffindors and Ravenclaws as well as Slytherins standing with Voldemort but those two just plain pissed him off on a personal level.

Hermione locked eyes on Vane. Bloody bitch. Hermione could on some level understand what Vane had done before, who wouldn’t love Harry? It was impossible not to love him but this was something different completely, no excuses, this was evil and if Hermione had a chance she would love to dance toe to toe with the other witch.

Alek joined Harry in the growl. “It’s good that I chose to give her the most abrupt tour possible and didn’t leave her alone while in the school. Something about Lister made my hackles rise and now I know.”

Harry nodded and readied his wand as the barrier cracked further. “Stench of evil. She’s all yours if you want her. I’ve got a noseless wonder to take out.”

“You will beat that slimeball into the ground Harry. I know you will.” Hermione widened her stance and raised her wand as a loud cracking groan sounded and the barrier fell.

Harry cast the Patronus Charm in tandem with Hermione as dementors began to flood forward and
the battle was on. He ducked under hexes and curses and sent ones of his own back as his and Hermione’s patronuses fended off the dementors along with one great big silvery wolf that he was pretty sure belonged to Tonks. “Sectumsempra!” The curse cut a death eater’s arm off at the shoulder as Harry jumped and kicked another in the face.

Hermione was not playing nice, she used all the nasty curses she had learned over the years and in between she sent out new patronus charms. Even if it had been by mistake she had killed Dumbledore and if it came down to it she wouldn’t have any qualms killing again if it kept her loved ones safe. War was not pretty or just, it was all about survival. It was strange but, as she battled her way through Death Eaters and rogues, she could feel where Harry was at all times. Strange but comforting.

Tonks had her eye on Greyback. She wanted to rip him apart just like he had done with her Dad. She wanted to make him hurt and bleed and die.

Greyback snarled and clawed out the throat of an Auror before lunging at some blond beta upstart, having to pause with a pained growl when something hit him in the shoulder and sent the burn of silver scattering into his shoulder in several places. He looked behind him and saw Lupin’s whelp. He rubbed his wrist and turned to charge at the hill.

Ewan jumped over a Death Eater, werewolf strength lashing out a foot to use the Death Eater’s head as a springboard, cracking the skull open in the process and sending him forward to tackle Greyback to the ground in a rolling, snarling, clawing ball of savagery.

Orion’s amber eyes narrowed as he watched the two wolves battle it out. He wouldn’t have minded finishing what he had started with Greyback. He couldn’t afford to stop what he was doing though so he continued to send the most twisted and evil curses and potions toward the still attacking horde.

Tonks couldn’t mourn her fallen comrade now. Mills had been a good man a good Auror and she would cry later but now she would fight. She wanted to rush to Ewan’s side more than anything but she would stay alongside with Harry and Hermione and the Headmaster, this was where she was needed.

Harry growled as the dementors kept swarming. So long as they were around then he’d never be able to get to Voldemort, who was tossing killing curses with insane glee. He looked at Hermione. “Cover my back, this one is going to take a minute.”

Nodding Hermione moved so she could counter any curse flung Harry’s way and send a few of her own so she could give Harry time to do what he needed. She barely flinched when one of the Death Eaters screamed as she landed a flesh melting curse on him.

Harry had to close his eyes for this. He concentrated on every negative emotion, every bad memory he had, every single thing that had ever caused him pain, sorrow, or anger, gathering them all together in one big, magically powered ball under his skin then he held his wand up and called out an incantation, “Expecto Carnifax!”

An explosion of black light radiated out from him, covering the battlefield and making dementors drop down, dead, wherever they were.

Sirius’ jaw dropped. He’d never heard of any spell capable of killing even one dementor much less the hundreds that were gathered here but whatever spell Harry had just cast had felled every single dementor on the field. “Sweet Morgana...”
An eerie silence settled over the battlefield as everyone on both sides just stopped for a while as they witnessed the dementors drop like flies. A few of the Death Eaters actually took a few steps backwards at the pure power flowing from Harry Potter. More than one of the seventh years on Voldemort’s side wanted to turn tail and run as fast as they could.

The silence was broken by Voldemort’s scream as he forced his minions forward. He screamed with rage. Any sense that he might have had completely lost to madness. The only thing in his mind was killing that little upstart. He sent a killing curse up toward the bright blue phoenix circling over their heads as they charged forward toward Harry.

Harry reached out quick as a whip with his magic and redirected the killing curse to hit the leader of the rogue harpies that was attacking Ginny. He looked over at Hermione. “You’ve got the homefront love. I’ll be back as soon as I’ve finished him off.”

“Just be back.” Hermione replied as she vaulted over a vampire and sent a spine chilling smile Romilda Vane’s way. “Be back and kill that bastard, evaporate him.”

“As my lady commands.” He gave her a salute and made his way toward Voldemort via the path Tonks cleared for him. He sent one sectumsempra at the evil wizard, knicking his ear, and had his full attention. “Time to end it Riddle.” He slid out of the way of a killing curse and shot a fire whip in response.

“My thoughts exactly Mr. Potter. This has been drawn out long enough.” Voldemort sent him a parody of a smile. “So tedious, all you had to do was die like a good little boy and none of this would have been necessary, so many deaths all for nothing.” He sent an array of curses toward Harry, hoping that at least one of them would hit their mark.

Harry just dodged and snorted. “I’m not exactly keen on being a ‘good little boy’ as you so charmingly put it. I’m keen on living and being left the bloody hell alone by madmen like you. So,” a cutting curse landed on his arm, most of it bouncing off his dragonhide armor leaving only a half centimeter deep gash behind rather than the complete severing he knew Voldemort had been going for, “why don’t you be the good little bastard and die. Let the remaining scraps of your soul join the rest in the afterlife.”

He cast a silent curse that had acid eating rapidly through the material of Riddle’s robes over his ribs.

“I don’t want the afterlife, I want forever and I will not let you stand in my way any longer.” It was a low violent hiss, full of absolute hatred. Voldemort could feel hot blood run down his side from the acid burn but he would not let that stop him. He was weakened but not beaten and as soon as Harry Potter died then all would be well.

Red eyes narrowed and Voldemort sent his new wave of curses away from Harry, designing them to hit the pack of bugs surrounding the golden boy instead. See how prideful Potter would be with his friends dead.

Harry set his jaw and redirected the curses Voldemort had cast into the sick bastard’s own forces again. It didn’t take as much effort and power as he’d thought, his sessions with Snape on controlling another’s magic paying off more than he’d expected. “Your aim’s a little off there Tommy boy.”

Voldemort hollered in rage before pulling himself back together again, sending a new rain of lethal curses all around him, not really caring if it hit his own forces. They meant nothing to him after all. He hated Potter, he hated him with every fiber in his being. Hated that his knees were shaking.
beneath his robes and Potter had barely broken a sweat.

Harry didn’t bother with redirecting that volly. His people had noticed Voldemort’s unraveling and had watched, dodging out of the way with room to spare. He couldn’t cast the killing curse himself and it was too risky to try and make Voldemort send one his way so he could send it back.

He pulled a dagger that Orion had given him for his seventeenth birthday and ran forward, dodging and weaving around the spells Voldemort sent at him, sending curses back to distract and disorientate him. One booted foot lashed out as he dropped his torso, hand planted on the ground to give more leverage and force to the kick, and connected with Riddle’s knee, making him fall. Half a second later he threw the dagger and it sank into Voldemort’s heart.

A look of stunned surprise flashed over Voldemort’s features as he looked down at the dagger handle sticking out of his chest. He looked up into Harry’s face as he could feel the last of his life drain from him. He lifted his wand hand in a feeble attempt to at least take Potter with him but it dropped back down as he died with a drawn out hiss.

For a second time, everything seemed to go quiet as all heads turned toward the fallen madman and Harry Potter.

Harry took the opportunity, even as the sudden rush of Slytherin magics into him made his head feel like it was going to explode, to reach out. Grabbing hold of the magical bindings that were on every Death Eater, he pulled, sending a backlash through them that had them dropping unconscious to the ground.

Unfortunately the battle wasn’t over yet. The marked witches and wizards were down for the count but the rogue creatures and the unmarked members of Voldemort’s forces remained. He rolled to his feet and sent a blasting curse at a werewolf that had been going for his back, getting back into the fight.

Romilda Vane hissed as her cheek was cut open from the spell Granger had sent at her and she sent a curse of her own back, one that had been taught to her by the recruiting witch that made the bones in one’s body burst into flame.

Hermione deflected the curse and moved closer. “Come on, Romilda, you’ll see that I am not nearly as easy to take down the second time around.” She circled the other witch. “You know I could actually sympathize with you before...Harry is worth fighting for but now I’ve realized that you’re just plain crazy aren’t you?” She cast a crushing curse that took out one of Vane’s kneecaps.

She shrieked and crumpled to the ground before hissing out, “You’ll regret that! Avada Kedavra!” A bolt of green light shooting toward Harry.

Hermione’s breath caught in her throat, she was too far away to do anything other than scream out a warning. It took several minutes for her to realize that Harry had indeed managed to dodge and roll out of the way.

“I believe you will be the one regretting things.” Hermione’s voice was cold as ice. She grabbed Vane’s hand, wrenching the wand from her. Then she used the hold to forced Romilda to the ground, planting a booted foot on her back. She wanted to kill Vane, she really, honestly did but that would be letting Vane off too easy.

“You think things were bad for you after what you did with the botched love potion. Imagine how it will be now, locked up in Azkaban with everyone knowing that you tried to kill Harry Potter.” Hermione gave into temptation and broke Romilda’s wand hand with a nasty twist before stepping
on the wand, snapping it in two. She would not give her any chance to throw another curse at Harry.

“For the love of Merlin Granger stop bantering and tie her up already!” Pansy had a split lip and a shiner from where a vampire had managed to get the drop on her. “We need you back in the fight!” She hissed and flipped a werewolf over her shoulder in a judo throw driving a silver coated heel through his throat. She was very much over this mess. She wanted the fight done so she could spend an hour in a hot tub full of pretty scented bubbles and then binge on chocolate.

Alright fine. Just felt the need to taunt.” Hermione tied Vane up. “Imagine if it was someone who’d hurt Orion more than once.” She placed her back against the Slytherin queen’s and decapitated a vampire that came too close.

Right now everything was chaos, it wasn’t an ordered attack any more. Voldemort’s forces milled around fighting for their lives and for the chance to escape. In a way it was even more dangerous now.

Harry’s back fetched up against Alek’s and he ducked so the werewolf could slash out the throat of an attacking hag. He spun at a curse, grinned at Lister and, girl or not, punched her in the face and knocked her out. “Tonks! Go help your man!”

Ewan was still in a bloody, down and dirty fight with Greyback.

“Don’t have to tell me twice.” Tonks was off in a flash, running and throwing curses around her until she was where Ewan and Greyback was. Without a second thought she jumped on top of Greyback’s back, pulling out a short dagger and rammed it into the werewolf’s neck over and over again, not stopping even when hot, sticky blood ran down her hands and arms. She just wanted the bastard dead.

“Dory,” Ewan grabbed her hand gently, “Dory love, he’s dead.” He gently pulled her off of Greyback, arms wrapped around her tightly. “He’s dead, you can stop now. The others need our help.”

Tonks finally dropped the dagger and looked up at Ewan, winching at the scrapes and bruises she saw on the man she loved. “You alright?” She allowed Ewan to help her up, the fight wasn’t over.

He leaned in to brush a single brief kiss over her lips, “Yes. Are you?”

“Yes, I will be at least and I’m not hurt, no more than bruises.” She smiled at him, rubbing her fingers over his knuckles before throwing herself back into the fighting.

Fred launched another scattershot silver arrow at a rogue werewolf. “We need a way to bring down all the rogue wolves at once. Any ideas?”

One of the Aurors let fly a holy water bomb that melted a vampire on contact, “If we can figure out a way to get word to only our allies to plug their ears, I might have a thought.”

“All allies or just the wolves?” Orion growled at a very large wizard before throwing a self made potion at him and watched him scream at horrors only he could see. The wizard continued screaming until his heart gave out from fear.

“The wolves, vampires, and harpies actually. Humans, banshees, and hags might have a little ear ringing but other than that no problems.”

Fred grinned. “Ooooh I like the way you think Auror MacKay.”
Orion nodded slowly. “I am pretty sure I can get a message through to our wolves through Dad. I need someone else to handle the flappers and fangies though.” He was already searching through his pack for something he’d been working on down in the chamber lab.

“If I can get hold of Charlie or Gin then they can fly the message through.” George had his mirror out and hoped that one of his siblings wouldn’t be too busy in the air to pick up.”

“You rang dear little bro- Get you’re ugly arse off,” Charlie zapped a rogue harpy that had been trying to drag down another of the air assault team, “What do you need?”

"Any possibility that you and Gin can get word through to our allied vamps and harpies to cover or plug their ears at a signal? The rather brilliant Auror MacKay has an idea. Orion will handle the wolves.” George had to duck a cutting curse but he felt his cheek slice open and he cursed as blood ran down his face and into his mouth.

Fred snarled and sent the attacker a curse of his own that had a mass of scarabs eating him alive from the inside out.

Charlie hissed at the sight of George bleeding so badly but knew he couldn’t pause to fuss over him while in the air. “Gin and I can work that. How much time do we have to get the message out?”

Fred sent another cover curse then performed a healing spell to stop the bleeding before covering George’s wound with a new product, an everlasting bandage they hadn’t mass produced yet. “About three minutes at the max, operate as if it’s just one though.”

“Got it then.”

George wiped at the blood with his sleeve and put the mirror away since Fred had taken care of the conversation with Charlie and went back to fighting, keeping MacKay’s back clear so the Auror could set up whatever it was that was supposed to happen.

Orion grabbed a potion and ran on swift feet to where he knew his Dad was fighting. On the way though, he saw Tonks and Ewan and skidded to halt, it would probably work just as well with Ewan, he just needed a fullblooded werewolf that was on their side. He thrust the potion at the wolf. “Here, quickly, drink this!”

“Er what’s this then laddie?” Ewan held the bottle curiously even as he sent a spell at an attacking vampire, making it poof into dust.

“No time to explain, not poisonous so just open up and down the hatch it goes.” Orion bounced on his feet nervously. “We need to get a message to the wolves in our web as quickly as possible and you are my tool to do it so drink up.”

“If I regret this lad you and I will be havin words,” he drank quickly making a grimace at the taste, “Oh Morgana that’s vile!”

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“Well I didn’t brew it for the taste now did I...Believe me you don’t want to know what’s in it.” Orion peered at Ewan closely. “Close your eyes and just focus on one thought, that all our wolves need to cover their ears...Shush.” He hushed Tonks when she was about to say something. “He doesn’t need to think of your boobs right now...Wolves, ears...think!”

Ewan twitched but closed his eyes and did as asked, focusing on thinking of the allied wolves and the need to protect their hearing. He could infer what was about to happen from that.

“Wicked! It actually works...I can hear it, your thoughts in my head.” Orion did a little dance in
place, knowing that if he could hear it being a half wolf then all the true werewolves would hear it loud and clear. The real brilliance of the potion was that it excluded any wolf not known to be in their network. He raised his wand and sent a quick Patronus to the twins to let them know the message was sent to the wolves. “I am a bloody genius.”

“Lad I doona think I want ta know why ya came up with this.” He flicked his wand at the boy and then himself, casting a spell that would block loud and damaging sounds. “Now get back ta yer post will ya?”

Alek had caught the thought, loud and clear in Ewan’s voice, and looked over. As soon as he saw Orion with the beta he’d protected his ears. He’d learned well just how clever Orion was.

Remus cast a spell on his hearing to protect it. He knew his son was behind this, it had Orion written all over it and it almost scared him how smart his son was. He looked out and saw their wolves protecting their ears all over and wondered just what was about to happen.

The wolves weren’t the only ones who’d gotten the message, Charlie and Ginny had apparently figured out a way to pass along the need to save their hearing to the allied harpies and vampires. Those that could cast spells did, those that couldn’t got their fellows to do so or readied themselves for an unmistakable signal.

Fred hefted a firework in one hand. “You ready MacKay?”

The Auror grinned, “Oh I was born ready. I’ve been wanting to use this in the field for ages but the higher ups have always vetoed it because it’s based on muggle tech.”

Fred grinned wide and delighted. “Oh I like you. You ever get tired of Auror work, come on by the triple W and I think we can get you a cushy job. Okay, NOW!” He sent the firework flying up into the air, it exploded just a half second before MacKay set off his little trick, sending a massive ultrasonic explosion rocking over the battlefield. Those with human level or lower hearing were treated to a loud ringing in their ears but those with higher aural senses who’d not protected their hearing let out a piercing scream and collapsed, some vomiting, some out and out unconscious, and all of them bleeding from the ears.

Tonks shook her head in an attempt to clear it but the ringing still echoed inside her skull. She couldn’t stop grinning though as she rushed around, immobilizing and tying up their unconscious enemies. Oh she would definitely lobby for MacKay to get a promotion or at least a substantial pay raise when this was all over.

“That was awesome!” Orion came running back up the hill, smiling at MacKay. “You have to teach me that.”

“I might do just that, kiddo,” MacKay punted a sticky pot in the direction of a bunch of rogue hags looking very pleased with himself when it hit and bound the hags up in sticky ropes.

“I’ll remind you of that later...And I’m not a child.” Orion went back to disposing of the unmarked wizards and witches that were still putting up a fight even with Voldemort dead and gone.

The rogue hags, however, saw the writing on the wall clear and bright and began fleeing as quickly as they could.

Ron was pressed back to back with Sirius, a nasty gash splitting open his thigh, and had managed to keep the opposing forces away from the school building, “I don’t know about you but I’m already sick of this crazy. What the hell are they doing anyway? Seeking revenge?”
“Mostly,” Sirius grunted and kicked a witch back before casting the incarcerous, “they’re big believers in Voldemort’s rhetoric so they’re fighting for that and will to the last man.”

“Lovely,” Ron hissed as a wizard tried to desecrate Moody’s body, the old Auror had fallen to a Killing Curse just before the sonic wave. Ron sent a fire whip and a binding spell at the idiot. “Oooh would you look at that down there. Spath is fighting that little Lister twat.”

“And Alek looks like he’s about to rip someone in half over it too, Harry!” Sirius blinked at his godson as he and Hermione ran up to them. “Quel surprise. Whatcha doing here cub?”

“Less action up here, I need a minute to find the threads that Voldemort would have used to bind the unmarked Death Eaters to the Slytherin magics. Watch my back?”

Ron grinned, “Always,” and pulled Harry forward so that he was in the middle of them, their backs to him.

Hermione was still fighting back to back with Pansy, it was rather strange but they complemented each other's fighting styles rather brilliantly. They were both firing off spells, helping to keep Harry safe and to give Sirius and Ron a little breathing time. Hermione wanted to take a look at the wound on Ron’s thigh, since she didn’t like the look of it, but unfortunately that would have to wait.

Harry huffed and sat down in a lotus position, falling into a meditative state rapidly and feeling at the new magic flooding his system. New pathways were being forged by the full force of the Slytherin magic and were winding and merging with the magic he’d already had.

He breathed out and followed the oddly soothing, restful feeling of the new magic to find little off shoots reaching out. He picked each one out and gathered them all into a little bundle before hissing a command and sending his will along the threads. As he did, pain exploded at the base of his skull, the effort of imposing his will on another person was sheer agony but it had to be done. Enough blood had been spilt and it was time for this to end.

Pansy whistled lowly as the witches and wizards that remained after the hags’ retreat slowly dropped their wands, obviously struggling against it, then hit their knees, hands out harmlessly, waiting to be bound. “Okay. I’m impressed.”

“Me too, as well as bloody worried.” Hermione’s brows were drawn tight over the bridge of her nose. She could only imagine what this was doing to Harry and she hated it. She bound as many witches and wizards as quickly as she could and implored Pansy, Ron and Sirius to do the same while still keeping guard over Harry. She didn’t want him to have to stay under for any longer than he absolutely had to.

Johann was rather surprised when Lister fell to her knees. He had wanted to hurt her for tricking Alek but he couldn’t curse an unarmed witch, no matter how much he wished to. Instead he tied her up securely, hissing curses in German at her.

Alek made his way over, as each of the last standing of Voldemort’s forces were restrained for transport to some sort of holding cell. There were many allies who’d fallen today, who would need burials or, in the case of creatures not of vampire persuasion, a funeral pyre and he would mourn for them later, for now he wanted to get to Johann’s side. He set a hand on the potion master’s shoulder. “Pity we’ll have to turn her over to the Ministry for punishment.”

“Indeed.” Johann visibly relaxed at the simple touch. “I can have oversight with many things but that girl is the lowest of the low.” Oh there were so many things that he wished he could have done
to that girl, a few moments with his potions and she would be truly sorry for what she’d done. Johann didn’t make friends easily, he knew he was a difficult person and he had lost several of the friends he did have today...He was also not the forgiving kind and he wanted that blasted girl to pay.

“I doubt she'll get off easily,” Alek let his hand slide up to cup the back of Johann’s neck, his thumb stroking the side comfortingly as he looked to where Harry was. “She was a forward scout as well as an active participant in this battle. Harry will make certain she faces as hard a sentence as is legal.”

“I know and I know that is how it has to be. One can’t take law and punishments into one’s own hands but that does not stop me from wanting to tear her apart.” He leaned into Alek’s touch. “Are you alright Liebste?”

He moved closer so that his body brushed against Johann’s side. “Yes. No more than shallow scratches that will be gone by morning. And you?” He looked his mate up and down, searching the dark robes for any tears or suspiciously darker spots, nose twitching as he tried to see if he could smell any of Johann’s blood.

“I am well, bruises and aches but nothing else. No need to sniff me...Let us save that for later on private.” Johann wrapped his arm around his mate’s waist and looked out over the grounds he had come to love. It would take a little time but Marauders would stay open and be a place of refuge, he was certain of that.

Alek chuckled softly, “Let’s help the wounded.” His hand smoothed down Johann’s back as an Auror came to pick up the now screaming and sobbing Lister.

Ron looked back, “They’re all restrained now Harry. You can stop.”

He blew out a long, breath and yanked, pulling the Slytherin magics away from the witches and wizards, trusting Ron to know what he was talking about. Opening his eyes he saw a freckled hand in front of his face and took it, letting Ron help him to his feet. His head was pounding and his body alone hurt like hell but he knew he had to keep going for now. “Thanks mate.”

“Not a problem.”

“Get your bloody leg looked after will you?”

“Too right, I couldn’t agree more.” Hermione had finally abandoned Pansy now that the danger was over and rushed over to where Harry was. “Luna will be very cross to get you back in anything less than mint condition so move it over to Alek’s office. One of the staff is there to let Madam Pomfrey as well as a healer from the Auror department through to help those hurt.” She looked from Ron to Harry, her brown eyes worried when they landed on him, Harry practically bled exhaustion from every pore.

Ron saluted. “Aye aye. I’ll be going in dhole form though. Bit tricky to walk at the moment.” He transformed and ran off toward the office at a limp.

Harry smiled wearily at his girlfriend and reached out to rub away a smudge of dirt from her cheek. “I’m okay,” it was a soft murmur. “Parkinson go find your puppy. I know he’s bound to be worried about you.”

“Oh you don’t have to tell me twice Potter.” She loped off toward the hill Orion was at.

Hermione was still watching Harry closely, wedging herself under his arm, partly to be as close to
him as she could and partly to hold him up if he should need it. “Can’t blame me for worrying about you and I’ll believe you and your ‘I’m okay’ when you’ve rested and had a chance to actually take it all in.”

Sirius nodded. “You look like you’re a half a tick from passing out cub. I think that maybe you should head back to Hogwarts.”

“Can’t, not until the Aurors finish with the arrests.” And not until he’d made sure all his closest people were okay, until then he’d keep going on sheer will power if necessary. He looked up as Neptune landed on the shoulder Hermione wasn’t under and pet the brilliant blue feathers.

Neptune trilled softly and nipped at Harry’s ear in affection. Even the phoenix seemed worried about him.

Hermione rummaged through her pack and came up with a small bottle with pepper-up potion. It would make Harry crash spectacularly later on but for now it would give him a bout of artificial energy and alertness. She handed him the bottle with a kiss to his cheek.

He gave her a smile and nuzzled his nose against hers before draining the bottle in one go. “Thanks love.” He looked at Sirius, who was scanning the people milling around. “Go on, find and grab Remus, we’ll meet you in Alek’s office when we’ve got everyone together.”

Sirius nodded and, since it was easier to find someone by scent in a crowd than by looking, shifted to Padfoot to go find Remus.

Remus was fine, well mostly fine, he had a bump on his head from being knocked about by a harpy and a dislocated shoulder that was putting him in bit of a bad mood because of the ache. He had seen Orion up on the hill so he knew that his offspring was more or less intact but he hadn’t seen Sirius and that put him on edge. Every separation was difficult for him, even the short ones. Perhaps he was too codependent of his husband but after all the long years they had spent apart, Remus was so scared of losing him again.

Sirius caught Remus’ scent quickly and ran full tilt, aware of some very amused werewolves watching his passing, to follow it. When he saw him, and the nasty bleeding bump on his head, he let out a loud bark and ran faster, knocking Kingsley off his feet and onto his arse in his tunnel vision until he skidded to a stop at Remus’s feet with a concerned whine.

Remus crouched down a little biting back a wince when the movement jostled his shoulder. “I’m fine Pads, all in one piece so no need to fret or knock the Head Auror onto his bum.” He felt a knot loosen inside him though, now that he was able to see and touch Sirius. He looked the large black Grim over carefully, trying to suss out if his mate was harmed in any way.

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Remus shifted back to human under the single stroking hand. “I’m okay Moony, a couple of gashes, some fantastic bruises, but otherwise fine.” He cupped Remus’ jaw and leaned in to steal a long, gentle kiss.

He leaned into the kiss, tasting Sirius’ lips as their mouths pressed together. His good hand came up to run through Sirius’ hair. “Good, I was worried. I have seen our son and he seems okay, well enough to lift his she-wolf off the ground and twirl her around anyway.”

“That’s our boy.”

“Black! Canoodle off the field!” Kingsley’s voice was a strident bark, “And get your husband to a healer for that arm!”
“Well never let it be said I can’t follow sensible orders.” Sirius bent and picked Remus up to carry him toward a healer’s tent that was already being set up.

“Bloody hell! Carry me one more step and I will bite you and not in the way you like.” Remus squirmed the best he could with his shoulder. “Nothing wrong with my legs and I don’t need a healer either. Just pull my shoulder into place and I’ll be fine. Accelerated healing remember?”

“To buggery with the accelerated healing. You’re hurt, you see a healer no matter what Moony/ And I know you can walk, I just like holding you.” He didn’t let Remus down even as he squirmed, “So I’ll deal with the not-in-the-fun-way bite. You wouldn’t let me squirm out of a healer visit and the same goes for you. Look, Madam Pomfrey is there along with that nice werewolf medi-witch and Cedric Diggory so it’s all people you can trust.”

Remus grumbled but since Sirius had shot down all his objections before he’d even been able to voice them he grudgingly allowed himself to be carried much to the other wolves amusement.

“You are very lucky that I love you right now.”

“I’m always lucky that you love me Remus.”

Pansy, still firmly and a bit blushingly wrapped in Orion’s arms while he fusssed about her lip and eye, shook her head. “Your parents are positively Hufflepuff sweet.” She saw a familiar blond head coming their way and chuckled. “Oh morons,” she smiled at Fred and George, “last chance to tuck tail and run because my blond idiot is almost here.”

George winced slightly, his face was still sliced opened and though he wasn’t a healer he had a strong feeling it would scar. George wasn’t a vain person but he knew that their dragon liked beautiful things.

Draco made it up the hill and stared down his two morons, sword still in his hand.

Fred cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably. He wasn’t injured like George but he had taken a fist to the jaw and the thing about pale freckly skin was that it bruised very, very easily. He swept his gaze over Draco nonetheless, looking to see if he was injured anywhere and seeing nothing but the perfection he always was, aside from a little mussed hair that was and gods it made him look fuckable.

Their dragon’s silvery stare was starting to get to George and he shifted as well. He had a feeling they looked like two naughty school children that had been caught putting troll slime on the teacher’s chair but he couldn’t quite bring himself to care.

Draco let out a huff of breath from his nose. “I can’t leave you two alone for even a little while can I? Come on then, let’s get you patched up so we can go home and I can do unspeakable things to you.” He nodded toward Pansy. “Lovely shiner there Pans.”

“Silence you troll, at least I got down and dirty. You barely mussed your pretty hair.” Her rejoinder was spoken with a grin and she blew him a kiss as he bundled up his foxes, who had gone from worried and nervous to smiling like besotted idiots.

Fred very nearly plastered himself to Draco’s one side, fingers tangled with his twin’s. “Have I mentioned today that I love you dragon?”

“Not today no. You’ll be screaming it later on so it’s all fine.” Draco’s nose was firmly raised in the air to hide his worry, he didn’t like his lovers being hurt at all, no he didn’t like it one bit. “I do love you too though, both of you.”
George smiled at him. He wanted to lean in and kiss Draco but he didn’t want to get blood all over him so he would wait until he was cleaned up. “At least people will be able to tell us apart after this.” He looked at Fred.

“People who haven’t been able to do so before now are idiots the lot of them and I wouldn’t count on a scar if I were you.” Draco gave him a sharp look. “Severus is here and if anyone can work magic on scars or scars to be it is him.”

Fred made a hum. “Scar or not, you’ll still be our Georgie too. If Professor Snape can’t quite keep it from scarring that’s fine, it’ll just make you look doubly rakish.”

“Oh yes, I believe you would look dashing and just a little dangerous.” Draco nodded, completely serious. He could already picture himself running his tongue along the scar once healed if it did indeed scar. “Just saying not to put your mind to something that may or may not happen.”

“I don’t really care either way, not since all three of us are here and safe. Voldemort is finally gone and we are still here. A small scar seems a tiny price to pay for that.” George walked with his lovers toward the school building.

Charlie landed next to Ginny and smiled as his sister was scooped up in the arms of her great big bear just before he himself was nearly tackled by a very delicious incubus. He hitched his hands under Blaise’s bum to support him as legs wrapped around his waist and arms twined around his neck and his mouth was captured in a scorching kiss.

Blaise licked inside Charlie’s mouth as if he wanted to crawl in there and stay there and in a way he did. He wouldn’t mind being a part of his mate, he really wouldn’t. His hands were in Charlie’s hair and his legs wrapped tightly around a trim, muscular waist and he kept on kissing him as if his life depended on it.

Witnessing as Blaise devoured her brother’s mouth, Ginny buried her face in Neville’s neck and breathed in the scent that were purely Neville. “Love you.” It was whispered against warm skin.

“I love you too my ruby red.” He ran his hand over her hair lovingly, holding her close, “Are you hurt anywhere Ginny?”

She shook her head. “A hit to the ribs but no worse than being hit by a bludger during a game.” Ginny rubbed her freckled nose against his neck. “How about you Nev? Any injuries?”

He grimaced a bit shyly. “Well maybe one.” He wasn’t sure how bad it was but a hag had caught his shoulder blade and it still hurt pretty badly.

Instantly Ginny was all concern and a little bit of anger as well. “And you let me hang all over you? You...You...Man!” She stepped back and put her hands on her hips. “Come on then, off to find a healer. Where are you hurt by the way?”

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“Shoulder blade, I’m not sure how badly. Happened just before the hags retreated,” so not long ago in the grand scheme of things, “I haven’t been able to really check.”

“Turn around and let me see it.” Ginny ordered and manhandled Neville the way she wanted him, she was gentle about it though. She peeled the sliced through armor away and looked at the wound, letting out a distressed little sound at the sight of the razor straight, neat slash across his shoulder blade. It was deep, even Ginny could see that, all the way down to bone. “I can’t believe you let me glom onto you you. You idiot!” Ginny fought the tears that were threatening to fall. “Let’s go, we are going to get you fixed up this instant.”
“Oh. Real bad then. Okay.” He turned, tangled his fingers with hers, and started right for the nearest healer’s tent, not about to argue like some prideful idiots he knew.

She was still gentle but Ginny very nearly dragged Neville along, all to make sure he was healed and looked after as quickly as possible.

Blaise managed to pull his mouth away from Charlie’s long enough to look him in the eye. “How about you, hurt anywhere?”

“Mostly bumps and brusies and one harpy bite on my calf but nothing serious and all treatable by myself.” He stroked a dirt smudged cheek. “You?”

“Fit as a fiddle.” Blaise tilted his head and licked a stripe along Charlie’s jawline. “Famished though, starving...” Blaise had used his ‘skills’ to suck the energy out of their enemies but all that did was deplete his own energy. He rubbed himself against Charlie. “I need you, need you to fuck me hard and deep and soon, most importantly soon.”

Charlie kissed his brow. “Gladly baby. First let’s find all the family and get back to our personal little holes.” He nipped Blaise’s lips before his mate could make a smart comment. “Alek’s office. Knowing Harry that’s where everyone will be meeting.”

Arthur, a bandage wrapped around his head as his wife fussed over him, smiled broadly as each one of his children slowly trickled into the office one by one, he had to chuckle when his daughter came in and mirrored her mother with the way she was fussing over Neville. Soon the only ones not yet in the office were Harry and Hermione, much to his concern. “Where are Harry and Hermione?”

Ron rubbed his thigh absently. “Harry wants to stay out there until all the captured rogues are sent off with an Auror.”

“The idiot,” Pansy spoke from her position comfortably against Orion’s side, “He looked wrecked last I saw him.”

Neville tilted his head in an odd version of a shrug. “It’s Harry. He won’t leave that field until he’s certain no one else is going to get hurt on it.”

Ginny nodded still fretting over Neville. He had been patched up but the gash still haunted her and she knew he had to be sore. ”Neville's right. It's who Harry is, he will always be the last man standing, making sure everyone else is safe. Hopefully it won't take much longer."

There was a woosh of green fire and Luna stepped through eyes blazing and with her belly leading the way. Once she'd been told the fighting was over, she'd marched to the Headmistress' office, sick of waiting like a good little girl. Annis, the Herbology professor at Marauders who was there to keep the floo open started at the sight of the fierce, pregnant girl.

Ron smiled delightedly and immediately went to her, wrapping his arms around her. “Hey.”

Luna leaned against him with a soft hello of her own. “The vosswarbles are gathering, couldn’t stand to be around them so I came here.” She studied her husband carefully, taking in the bloodied trousers and the gash in the fabric over his thigh but she didn’t seem overly worried. If something serious had happened to Ron she would know it and she would have been here much earlier.

“I’m glad you’re here. Though as soon as Harry gets here we’re all bundled back through the floo,” his hand smoothed over her belly, feeling their son wiggle and turn restlessly, and pressed his lips to her brow. “We’ve all pulled through alright, some a bit more battered than others.” He
angled his head at George, who had a rather odd putrid green poultice hardening on his face and kept getting his hand slapped down by Draco when he tried to poke at it, then at Neville, who’d pulled Ginny back against him and was resting his chin on top of her head.

Luna hummed and leaned against Ron, just happy to be there with him and knowing that the pride and those closest to her were more or less in one piece. She just smiled when Molly took a pause in fussing over Arthur to come over and coo over her belly.

George tried to poke at the poultice again, it smelled something awful and it made the whole of his left face tingle but once again Draco slapped his hand away. It was probably terribly, horribly improper to get turned on by a forceful dragon but he was all the same.

Fred was starting to get maybe a little annoyed by the constant reach and slap so he shifted and wrapped his arms around George, over his arms soothing his need to be close while also ending the poking. He exchanged a quirky smile with Draco as he did it.

“Thank Merlin.” Draco mumbled and answered Fred’s smile with one of his own as George nearly sagged into his brother’s embrace. He wanted Potter to get here so that they could get back to Hogwarts. Draco didn’t care what McGonagall said, there was no way he would spend the night away from his morons, either they stayed at the school or he would go with them but they would be together.

Harry watched as the last rogue vampire was picked up by a massive vampire enforcer who looked like he could use a lorry as a dumbbell with one hand and wondered what in the hell the guy had been fed as a child.

“Dimitri is actually very much what humans like to call a marshmallow.”

The accented voice from just behind him had Harry turning in a sharp jerk and studying the vampire standing there. While the enforcer was certainly big and powerful, this man bled otherworldly power from his very pores. “I was actually wondering if he’d been fed something special as a child.”

The vampire gave an amused chuckle. “I see the stories don’t do you justice Lord Potter.”

“Um,” his brows furrowed, “Sorry Lord Potter?”

“You are the only heir and scion of the house of Potter, therefore its Lord, once outside the walls of Hogwarts it should be your main address. I would advise getting used to it.”

“Right. I forget about that. I don’t mean to be rude,” though he was exhausted enough that he really didn’t care if he caused offense, “but who are you and is there something you want?”

The vampire smirked and offered his hand. “I currently go by Lord Vladimir Drake Alucard however I am better known as Vlad Tepes of Wallachia, or if you like Lord Dracula.”

Harry’s eyes went wide mid handshake.

“As for what I want, I am extending an invitation to you and your lady,” he nodded at Hermione who was giving a clumsy Auror who’d sneered at a werewolf enforcer a verbal flaying, “to attend the next Underground Council meeting.”

“Why me?”

Dracula smiled wider, fangs flashing just a bit. “Let us just say that the Underground prefers to
deal with power as opposed to politics.”

Hermione finished her verbal assault, mildly pleased with herself that the Auror looked close to tears. She simply didn’t have any patience for such things now. They had just fought alongside these wolves for a future that wouldn’t have sneering in it for who you were and she couldn’t stand that it all started again just a few hours later. She sent the Auror one last scathing glare and walked over to Harry, only stopping to stare at the man next to Harry. She couldn’t help it, the man was breathtaking in every way.

“I guess I can understand that,” Harry noticed Hermione’s stare but squashed any little bit of jealousy he might have felt under his exhaustion and faith in his girlfriend, “but I’m not really planning on stepping into the running of anything, much less laws and things like that.” He took Hermione’s hand and squeezed. “Hermione this is the vampire king, Vladimir Drake.”

“Hello, I am sorry I’m not attuned to vampire etiquette, should I curtsey or something?” The vampire king was very nearly blinding but she would pick Harry any day, she loved him after all, always would.

Vlad chuckled. “No need Lady Hermione. I am here tendering an invitation, not in a major official capacity. And Lord Potter you might find that the world will not let you step into the shadows for very long. Regardless the invitation is open.”

“No disrespect your Highness but the world can stuff it.” Hermione stepped closer to Harry. “I am done with the world demanding things of Harry that he shouldn’t have to give. If he wants to come we will be there but if he doesn’t then I won’t stand for anyone pushing.” She didn’t know what the invitation was about nor did she care. Her concern was all about the man she loved.

“None taken.” He gave them a respectful bow, lips still curled up in an amused smile. “I will take my leave of you now.”

Harry nodded. “Safe journey.”

“I hope more for fun than safe truth be told Lord Potter but then I’m more than a few centuries old.”

Hermione snorted. “To a safe and fun journey then.” She looked around the battlefield, noticing that it was emptying, only their allies left now. She nodded to the vampire king and took a firmer grip on Harry. “Please excuse us, we have to leave as well. I am going to forcefully put my boyfriend to bed.”

The vampire king laughed as she pulled Harry toward the Marauders building.

“I’m okay Hermione, really.” Harry let her drag him, knowing that she needed to for her peace of mind.

“Not buying that love, you are practically dead on your feet. Once you’ve slept for a good twenty hours, then I might, might believe you when you say you’re okay.” Hermione stopped pulling him along for long, just long enough so she could kiss him. There was a trilling song from above them. “See, even Neptune agrees with me.”

He kissed her a second time, nudged her nose with his, and looked up at the blue phoenix. “Meet you back in the Headmistress’ office Neptune?”

Neptune let out an affirmative trill and flew on ahead, knowing he would beat his master there, floo or not.
Hermione began pulling on Harry again, really wanting him in the chamber where she could put him to bed and dote on him.

Heads turned in unison as they entered Alek’s rather crowded office and Harry smiled sheepishly, aware that he had to look like he was one good step away from collapsing. He still hurt like hell from the new magic and manipulating the rogue witches and wizards. Though he had magic to spare, he was wrecked in almost all other ways, as well as dirty, bruised and a little scratched up here and there. “Hey.”

“Oh Harry.” Molly was on him in an instant, wrapping her arms around him pulling him into a tight hug as she smothered his face with kisses. “My little boy, I am so, so proud of you.” She continued to hug him. “You did so well and you must be so tired.” She cooed and clucked over him much to George’s amusement.

“Get used to it Scar, I can see Dad bouncing, just waiting for his turned to mother you.” Orion smirked and ignored the glare Remus sent him.

Harry just smiled wider and returned Molly’s hug with arms that felt a bit like wet noodles. “I am not complaining. I am very, very far from complaining. So long as I’m not stuck in an infirmary bed anyone can fuss and mother as much as they like.”

That statement made George exchange a look with his twin and as one they rose to sandwich Harry between them, pinching his cheeks and placing slobbering kisses on them. “Ickle Harry, such a good boy. We need to fatten you up a little though, get some food over here...OW!” George rubbed the back of his head where Hermione had slapped him.

Harry laughed. “Funny. I’d have thought you’d much rather be sandwiching Malfoy between you two. Then again he’d probably kick you in the nads if you pinched his cheeks.”

Fred grinned unrepentantly. “Depends on the cheeks we pinch.”

Draco studies his nails and frowned at a chipped one. “You are very, very close not to be allowed either set of them for an extended amount of time.”

Fred squeaked and moved in unison with George. “Awww dragon don’t be like that. You know we love you for your insides way way more than your outsides, and we really love your outsides so you know it’s a lot.”

Harry shook his head at the trio. “Okay and before those two can dig the hole any deeper, I vote he head home. Right now.”

Sirius nodded, “Seconded.”

“Third and quadrupled as well.” Orion leaned his chin on Pansy’s shoulder since he had her firmly ensconced on his lap. “No offence to your lovely hospitality there Alek but I do believe your bed is full enough without added guests in it.”

“You’re not a fully realized alpha yet Orion,” Alek smiled sharply, “So watch your mouth.”

Pansy wiggled up to stand just as Harry snagged Orion by the back of his shirt before the boy could argue and tossed him into the floo, calling out for Hogwarts.

She had chuckle, “Well done Potter,” then she stepped through to soothe a crabby wolfling.

Ron studied Harry and sighed. He knew that his friend would refuse to go through until they’d all
gone first but he was worried. That little move wasn’t exactly in character for Harry. “Alright you lot, into the floo. I’m hungry and want a kip so move it move it move it!”

They all fell into a slightly chaotic and disorganized line and started to move through the floo back to Hogwarts.

Hermione hung back, waiting for Harry. She was worried as well, very worried.

Harry looked at her when they were the only two left to go through. “You want me to go through before you do don’t you?”

“Oh absolutely.” Hermione nodded. “The only way I can be sure that you actually go home.” She pulled him in for a hug.

He let her. “You’re kidding right? Why would I stay here when everyone, especially you, would be there? I’ll humor you though, so long as Alek makes sure you get through after me.”

The golden haired alpha chuckled. “Of course I will. Go home Harry, you’ve worked hard enough for one day.”

Hermione waited until Harry was firmly through the floo before turning to give Alek a quick hug and stepped into the fireplace herself, longing to be back at Hogwarts.

Harry was fully expecting to land face first on the floor, and was not completely certain he’d actually manage to get back to his feet at that point. He rather thought that once he was horizontal, he’d be staying that way for an impressive length of time. Plus the spinning of the floo travel made his massive headache worse.

Fortunately however, when he fell out of the floo, a pair of strong hands caught him and held him up. He smiled at the amber eyes looking at him worriedly. “Thanks Moony.”

Remus changed his hold and pulled Harry into a hug, moving them both away so that they weren’t blocking the floo. “Always cub, anytime you should need it I will always be there to catch you.” Harry might be a young man, a hero who’d just vanquished Voldemort but to Remus he was still his cub, always would be and Remus didn’t want to let him out of his arms.

The fire wooshed and Hermione stepped out, taking a deep breath of relief to be back at Hogwarts.

McGonagall scanned them all with a sharp eye, not bothering to pay attention to Narcissa doing a very subdued version of fussing over Draco in the corner, and nodded. “I presume those of you who need it sought medical attention,” her gaze landed on Harry, “And that you Mr. Potter sought it regardless.”

“Uh bad presumption there,” Harry gave Remus one affectionate squeeze and then turned to her, “Really, I mean it’s me. If I’m in a healer’s care it’s because I’ve been dragged kicking and screaming or unconscious.”

“And how is that rather glorious headache I know you are currently experiencing?” One brow arched up at his sheepish smile.

“Um can I get a promise not to put me in the infirmary? Really I’ll be happy to let Madam Pomfrey fuss over me, outside of the infirmary.”

“Now why would you be put in the-” McGonagall’s question died when Harry crumpled, passing out with surprising grace and being caught by Remus, “Well that answers my question.”
“Stubborn boy.” Poppy walked forward and ran her wand over Harry who was still protectively cradled in Remus’ arms. “Doesn’t seem to be anything worse than exhaustion and an influx of magic. Sleep will be the best medicine, lots and lots of sleep, some nutrient potions and good food. No need to keep him in the infirmary as long as someone will watch over him.” She sent a look Hermione’s way. “Which I don’t think will be a problem.”

“Not a problem at all Madam Pomfrey.” Hermione hovered over Remus and Harry.

Sirius moved to stand behind Remus and looked down at his godson. “You and he can stay in our quarters until he wakes up.” He knew that Hermione would prefer the Chamber but he and Remus needed to have Harry close for now.

“Yes, thank you, that would be best.” Hermione knew how much Sirius and Remus loved Harry and she knew they worried. She couldn’t take that away from them and she was happy as long as no one tried to separate her from Harry.

McGonagall sighed. “Alright all of you, out of my office, go...wherever you are not likely to be interrupted by impressionable younger children, when Mr. Potter wakes and is ambulatory, please send him here.”

Orion snickered at the impressionable younger children part and hugged his parents before slipping out alongside Pansy.

George kissed McGonagall’s cheek. “As always Headmistress you are a bright shining star of loveliness, grace and brains.” He grinned and took hold of Fred and Draco, once Narcissa finally released him.

“And you Mr. Weasley are a constant source of frustration and migraines,” her voice was frighteningly deadpan. “Out of my office.” She shooed them all out aside from Poppy then went to sit down, pulling a bottle of Glenlivet ‘14 and two glasses from a warded drawer in her desk.

“Whiskey Poppy?”

“Please Minerva.” Poppy nodded and sat down as well, stretching her feet out in front of her and pulling off her headpiece. “After today I believe we both quite need it. Can you believe it Minerva, he is finally gone and this time it truly is for good.”

She poured the whiskey and took off her own hat, sipping from her glass, “I can believe it. Harry was involved directly so I do believe it. A great deal of celebration is to be had but also mourning for those who’ve been lost along the way.”

“Indeed, we’ve lived for quite a while you and I Minny and we’ve seen loss through two worlds, seen people lose their way but also find it.” Poppy had to chuckle at herself. “Oh dear me, one sip and I am afraid I’m quite philosophical. I do apologize.”

“No need to apologize Poppy.” She leaned her head back and looked over at Fawkes as the red phoenix made a comforting trill. “Harry will soon find himself besieged by Merlin only knows how many people making various offers, as well as the thousands of witches wishing to bear his child,” she snickered, “I’m rather looking forward to seeing how Hermione handles that.”

“Oh dear, I must confess I would like to witness that as well. I believe each witch will only make a move once, or be subjected the hexes of untold horror.” Poppy smiled. “Poor Harry though, if his life has been a media circus so far it will be nothing in terms of what will be now. I wish we could spare him from the storm but that is quite impossible I am afraid.”
Minerva nodded, smiling as Neptune appeared in her office after apparently seeing Harry settled and flew over to share the perch with Fawkes. “Indeed. I believe he’ll handle it well though. He is Harry after all.” She exchanged a look with Poppy. “And with luck he’ll be able to stay out of a hospital bed for a solid year or two now.”

“One can hope, one can most certainly hope.” Poppy raised her glass in a toast. “To our Harry, not because he’s the hero of the hour but because he is Harry Potter, a lovely boy.” She took another small sip and watched Harry’s blue phoenix groom Fawkes’ feathers.

“To our Harry, Slainte.” Minerva toasted, drank, and pursed her lips as she watched the phoenixes. “Those two are lovely friends now aren’t they?”

Poppy nodded, keeping her eyes on the birds. “Mm, they seem very friendly and close indeed. It is a good thing is it not? Phoenix rivalry could’ve been problematic.”

She let her gaze wander around the comfort that was Minerva’s office, it was warm and friendly, felt like home and seemed as steady as the earth. It was a horrid thought but Poppy was glad that the fighting hadn’t taken place at Hogwarts.

“I’m rather relieved that Fawkes has a friend. He won’t let anyone but Harry near him and I don’t blame him in the slightest but it was worrisome. Everyone needs a friend after all.”

“That is the truth, we all need friends.” Poppy was most definitely relieved for for hers, especially Minerva. Both of them had spent nearly all their adult lives at Hogwarts and Poppy knew how difficult Dumbledore’s betrayal had been for her friend. For her as well, they had both placed all their trust in the man and been paid back with deceit, it was a bitter pill to swallow.

Minerva closed her eyes and sighed, “I am not going to miss the massive amounts of trouble though I will miss Harry and his ‘pride’,” she chuckled, “Lion through and through.”

Poppy smiled. “Oh yes.” She would miss Harry too, the boy was special, he had a warmth in him that drew people near. “I would not say goodbye to trouble yet though if I were you. You still have Orion here for another two years and if trouble found Harry...Well Orion definitely finds trouble.”

“That is certainly true, fortunately his parents and Severus are here to help contain his insanity.” Her smile hinted that she wasn’t as disapproving as she appeared in public, “I am simply relieved that it will be a good decade between Weasleys. Even the calm ones breed chaos.” She grinned, “And heaven help us if another set of twins comes along.”

“Oh Merlin, please don’t jinx us.” Poppy looked startled. “Another set of Weasley twins would do me in I’m afraid.” She adored Fred and George but they were responsible for most of the grays on her head.

“Aye and most of the school as well,” Minerva’s tone was greatly amused. She rather liked her little trouble makers though she never admitted that out loud and certainly not to the troublemakers in question.

“A little trouble though is needed, to keep things from going stale.” Poppy was confident that there would always be troublemakers at Hogwarts. “We already have another Weasley cooking, imagine the Weasley nose for trouble combined with the Lovegood’s gift for the sight.”

“Be afraid Poppy, be very afraid,” Minerva rolled her head around to loosen her neck. “I think it’s time for me to go to bed myself.”

“Yes, I believe it is bedtime for me as well.” Poppy was exhausted from the day’s events and she
could only imagine how tired the Headmistress must be. Poppy rose from her seat and put her glass down. “Thank you for the drink Minnie, rest well.”

“You as well Poppy. You need the rest dear, you’ve had a busy day.” She finished her glass of whiskey and cleaned the glasses with a flick of her wand before putting the bottle and glasses back in the desk.

Poppy leaned down and pressed a light kiss to Minerva’s cheek. “Goodnight Minnie, sleep well.” She straightened and headed off to her own quarters for a bath and then glorious sleep.

Minerva looked over at the phoenixes on the perch, “Don’t stay up too late lads. Even immortal birds need their rest.” She got to her feet and moved to the apartment connected to the office for a good night’s sleep.
Harry made a soft murmur and opened his eyes, aware of the weight sprawled over his chest and against his side and the scent of nutmeg and old parchment that he knew as Hermione. He looked down to see a head of bushy brown curls obscuring his girlfriend’s face and lovingly brushed it aside.

Hermione blinked her eyes open and smiled up at Harry. “Awake?” She had slept on top of him all night, gotten up for a quick shower and some tea only to sprawl out on top of Harry again. She felt comforted hearing his heart beating and knowing that her Harry were just sleeping. “How are you feeling?”

“Bit wrung out but better. How long have I been asleep?” His fingers began playing with her hair.

Grabbing her wand from the bedside table, Hermione cast a quick tempus. “Nearly twenty-one hours.” She shuffled upwards so she could press her lips against his. “Sirius was in here with a mirror earlier to check that you were still breathing...idiot.” It was spoken in a very fond tone though, in between kisses.

He chuckled against her mouth. “Ah well we love him for his idiocy.” He scattered kisses over her nose, cheeks, chin, brow, and eyes before returning to her lips.

“That we do, not as much as I love you though because I do...I really, really love you Harry Potter.” She kissed him back with enthusiasm.

“I love you too Hermione Granger. So very, very much.” He sealed his mouth over hers and rolled them over so he was ranged on top of her.

“Do I hear a certain cub aw-whoa!” Sirius laughed at the sight that greeted him. “Oopsie.”

Hermione growled. “Oopsie, really? That’s the best you can come up with?” She looked up at Sirius over Harry’s shoulder. “Don’t think I’ll forget, I know all about that little spot in the library that you drag Remus off to as often as you can...Be warned of interruptions a plenty next time.” She pulled Harry down for one more kiss before squirming out from beneath him.

“Nice Snuffles, real nice.” Harry gave him a narrow glare. “What do you want?”

“Well I heard you up and awake and thought that, since you’re alive in time to get cleaned up and go down to the Great Hall for dinner, you might like to do that. Lots of people are concerned for you, ya know.”

Harry groaned and rolled out of the bed. “Am I in your quarters?”

“Yup!”

“Joy.” He headed out of the guest bedroom he’d been in and waved to Remus lazily.

“Good morning...or rather evening Harry, it’s very nice to see you among the conscious again.”
Remus smiled at him. “Ron’s been here with fresh clothes if you wish to shower and change.”

“Gods yes. I’ve got battle crud all over me and I’m still in my armor,” he took the pile of clothes handed to him, “and it chafes like you wouldn’t believe after more than a day in it.”

“Oh I can believe it.” Remus chuckled. “Go ahead and get cleaned up, there’s an ointment on the the first shelf that should help with any chafing should you need it.”

“Don’t mind the hallelujahs you’ll hear from the bathroom then.”

Sirius chuckled as he watched his godson disappear to shower and sidled up to Remus, slipping his arm around a slim waist. “I’m relieved, are you relieved too?”

“Bloody hell yes.” Remus replied, leaning against his husband. “It’s like this huge lump in my throat is finally gone and it feels like I can breathe again at last. Our cubs are well and safe and it is finally, finally over Pads. Voldemort is gone, Greyback too.”

“To which I give a loud and hearty salute. I just hope Nym and Rommie will be okay.” He hated that his favorite cousins had lost Ted. It was just all kinds of wrong.

“I hope so too. Tonks has Ewan and though it won’t bring Ted back she got her revenge on Greyback. I am more worried about Andromeda, I am so happy that she and Narcissa have patched things up. At least she has a new little niece to focus on.” Remus held on to Sirius as he watched Aury play with a set of wolf toys that the twins had given her.

Sirius leaned his head against Remus’ and smiled as one toy pounced on top of their daughter and soon there was a funny little puppy pile that had him laughing. “Our kids are a mess Moony, an adorable, beloved mess.”

“Mmm, that they are and I wouldn’t want them any other way.” Remus had never thought he would be this happy, never thought that he deserved to be. He would never ever take his happiness or his gifts for granted.

Harry came out of the shower, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt and scrubbing a towel over hair grown long as Sirius’ while his bare feet met a rolling toy and child pile. He smiled down at a pair of big silver eyes. “Hey there little Aury. You getting into trouble?”

She opened her mouth and, rather than the expected, usual nonsensical squeal or babble, proclaimed, “Ha-Wee!” Reaching her arms up at him.

“Listen to that.” Remus gripped his husband tighter, feeling his heart give a little squeeze.

Hermione came out of the guest bedroom, her clothes straightened and wildly curling hair wrestled into a braid.

Sirius’ jaw had dropped. “Did she just say-”

“Ha-Wee! Ha-Wee!” She pouted and waved her arms in demand, jolting Harry out of his shocked stillness to lean down and pick her up, getting a delighted squeal of his name again.

“Figures that her first true word would be her brother’s name.” Remus nearly felt a little bit weepy. Harry was a man, Orion nearly one and even Aury was growing up so quickly. He was so proud of them but there was a tinge of sadness in him too that his cubs were growing up.

“I feel like I should be jealous. I mean really isn’t the first word supposed to be Papa or Dada?”
Sirius was grinning widely despite the words. 

Harry kissed his sister’s cheek and grinned back. “You’re just put out that I’m her favorite.”

“You got that right!”

“She’s a girl isn’t she?” Hermione smiled warmly. “Aury might be a miniature one but still a girl, of course she’s as crazy about Harry as all the rest of them are, including me.”

Remus was still holding on to Sirius. “We are just her parents, Harry is Harry.”

Harry laughed and wiggled his feet into his favorite trainers, tying them with a thought and a nudge of magic, and hoping no one noticed. “Awww she’ll be saying Papa and Dada soon enough, probably Padfoot and Moony too.”

“Pa-foo!” Aurora beamed.

And Sirius just about melted.

Remus had to laugh at Sirius expression, their daughter most definitely had him firmly, so very firmly wrapped around her tiny little fingers.

Hermione had noticed Harry’s move with the shoelaces and she would talk to him, later when they were alone. As long as he was well and safe then she was happy.

“Okay I don’t know about you lot but I’m starving. Great Hall right?”

Sirius nodded. “Right. Let’s go fill you up cub.” He shooed them all out, dropping a kiss to the top of his daughter’s head as they exited the chambers and headed to the Hall.

As soon as they walked through the doors of the Great Hall, pandemonium broke out as every student in there got to their feet to clap, whistle and in some cases sing or scream out their support for Harry and what he had done, ridding the world of Voldemort...again and for good.

Harry turned a shade of red normally reserved for Ron and ducked his head shyly, especially when he saw that the entire staff table, including Snape and McGonagall, had risen to their feet and joined in the applause.

Sirius grinned and ruffled his hair. “So shy innit he Moony?”

“Adorable really.” Remus nodded and took a slightly shell-shocked Aury from his oldest cub. “Go up to the head table and take a bow. They all just want to say thank you for all that you’ve done, thank you for the wonderful person that you are.” Remus was very glad that McGonagall had managed to keep the press out of Hogwarts. He knew that Harry would have to face the press sooner or later but he was happy that he would be spared a little longer.

“Er..” he saw McGonagall beckoning to him and gave in, making his way cautiously up to the head table, then turning redder than the Gryffindor pennant when the hall suddenly exploded into hoots and a chant.

“Speech! Speech! Speech! Speech!”

McGonagall pat him gently on the shoulder. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to Harry. It wasn’t a speech I called you up here for and I can easily silence the mob.”

He was about to take her up on the offer when he remembered Tonks clinging to Ewan and the
bodies of Aurors being taken away and the families that had lost someone they loved. Instead he shook his head. “No I’ll go ahead and give them what they want, sort of.”

She nodded and held up a hand, giving the Hall a glare until they all settled down, then stepped back to let Harry speak.

He cast a Sonorous on himself, careful to use his wand. “Thanks for the welcome but I’m not the only one deserving of applause. Everyone who fought yesterday deserves it, I’d list the names but you might throw fruit at me.”

“Of course we would!” Someone from the Slytherin table yelled out, prompting laughter.

“Well anyway, I’m not the only one who fought. And being on the battlefield isn’t the only way to fight. This war has taken a toll on us. People have been injured, scarred for life inside and out.

And,” he saw Andromeda sitting with the career counselors, “People have been lost to us. People have died and left loved ones behind to grieve. Voldemort is gone, for good, and his forces are going to face justice but the fight isn’t over. Because we still need to fight to heal. There’s still work to do, rebuilding that needs to happen, funerals that will be held, and mourning to go through. And once that’s happened there will still be work, the work of tolerance and community.”

He looked out over the people in the Hall. “We let ourselves be torn apart, believing that one kind of people was better than another but now that needs to end. I’m asking you, all of you, pureblood, half-blood, muggleborn, and creature blooded alike, not to let the sacrifices made by the people who paid the ultimate price in this war go to waste. You don’t have to like everyone, I’m not crazy enough to ask you to, but please, don’t let us be torn apart by a blood war again.

“A person’s blood doesn’t make them a better or worse person, we are all products of our upbringing and our own choices of what we do with what we’re given. To call someone less because of who their parents are is an insult to everything Magic herself stands for. So, can I ask you all to work with me and rebuild, to make things better for our future?”

For a few moments there was complete silence in the Great Hall, every face turned to watch Harry. Then Orion rose and raised his wand. “Of course we’re with you Harry, let us all work for it.”

Ginny was the next one to stand up and after that it was like a wave of raised wands.

McGonagall smiled softly, her own wand raised and squeezed Harry’s shoulder. Even now he was thinking of others.

Sirius gave Harry a salute and murmured softly. “I’m more proud of him for that than for finishing off Voldemort.”

Remus nodded, wiping away a few tears discreetly. “Harry truly is a good man, the best I think we’ll ever know. He’s how I know there’s hope for the world.”

McGonagall stepped forward after Harry thanked everyone and canceled his Sonorous. “Yes thank you everyone, for being willing to work for a better tomorrow. I would personally like to thank Mr. Potter for all he’s done, it is true that he had plenty of help but for the last seven years he’s been plucking together differing personalities and leading them better than the most seasoned Aurors I’ve known and has been fighting past his own problems to help others at the cost of his own safety, there’s a reason he had a plaque with his name on it in the infirmary.”

She let the laughter roll over them all, “He has been instrumental in removing multiple dangers to the school, and we all remember two years ago when he made certain you’d all pass your Defense
exams no matter what Umbridge did or said. And so I have created a new award with the assistance of the Sorting Hat, Fawkes, and Hogwarts herself, the Potter Award.”

Fawkes flamed into existence and flew a golden goblet, etched with a lion surrounded by a tiger, a dhole, two foxes, a hummingbird, a bear, a rabbit, a she-wolf, a snake, and an ermine and rimmed with rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and topaz, onto the head table.

“For extraordinary services, going above and beyond anything anyone has any right to expect, to not only this school, but also the world. Personally I’m hoping no one ever has to present this one again though.” Minerva turned and handed the vase to a very embarrassed Harry. “Thank you, Harry. For everything.”

“THANK YOU HARRY!” The crowd echoed and sent up sparks with their still raised wands, everyone was on their feet, Hufflepuffs to Slytherins.

Hermione made her way to the Gryffindor table and her friends, happy to see that Luna was sitting with Ron there. She was so proud of Harry that she could burst. If anyone had ever deserved to be celebrated and thanked it was Harry. He always put everyone else’s needs before his own and never complained about it. Of course he would be terribly embarrassed by all of this but he still deserved it. She suspected he would be forced to endure many more parades and ceremonies in his honor in the close future. Poor Harry, Hermione could only be there for him and give him all her support.

Harry finally managed to get to the table, head clunking down on it with a groan. He felt someone patting his shoulder.

“Buck up mate. You’re a hero now, going to have to deal with the hoi polloi that comes with.” Ron grinned and took a drink of pumpkin juice.

“Not if I go hide on the island.” It was muttered into the table.

"Oh please." Ginny snorted and reached out to pull on his hair. "You might have your own private paradise on that Island but you would be bored within a week. Besides, you’re going to become an uncle again, would you not want to be there when Star is born?" She looked at him with wide innocent eyes.

“You are an evil, evil woman Ginny Weasley.” Harry didn’t look up. “I’ve just gotten rid of the second biggest pain in my bum after seven years of fighting to do it. Don’t I deserve just a little peace and quiet without the ‘hoi polloi’?”

Ron smiled sympathetically and pat him on the shoulder. “Course you do but for a while people are going to be going mad for Potter this and Potter that. It’ll taper off and then you can just be.”

“Right. Okay, I can deal with the insanity for a little while longer. I reserve the right to whine about it in private though.” He lifted his head and snorted a laugh when Ron slid a full dinner plate in front of him.

"Whine all you want love, you know we’ll always be here to listen when you need it." Hermione kissed Harry's cheek before turning her attention to her own food.

Ginny who had beamed ever since Harry’d called her evil burst out laughing when she looked over at the Slytherin table and saw her brothers trying to feed Malfoy, oh that could never end well.

Harry looked over at the miscreants just as Malfoy hexed their hands to the table, to Orion’s hooting amusement, and he relaxed. Yeah he wasn’t looking forward to the media circus but it was
a small price to pay for his loved ones being safe and sound and as happy as they could be.

Harry settled in the library. The others aside from Hermione were all going off to their own beds but he’d slept for a day and wasn’t exactly feeling tired again. He didn’t know if Hermione was going to her own bed in the girl’s dorm or just showering and then would come find him. Either way was fine. He just wanted some of the peace and calm the Chamber provided. He lifted his hand and created a little ball of light in the center of it. He bounced it, made it fade then burn brighter, changed its shape, then just played with it like a crystal juggler. It was concerning and just a little bit frightening that he could do things like this now.

She walked down to the chamber after her shower, it still felt like something was missing now that Myrtle was no longer haunting the bathroom but Hermione knew she was happier now that Harry had helped her move on. Hermione paused in the doorway to the library and watched Harry play with a ball of bright fire. In all honesty it did send a thrill down her spine but it made her a little concerned as well. “Fire huh? And here I was all ready to have a conversation about the shoelaces from earlier.”

He didn’t jolt, just jerked his head over to the doorway and closed his hand, the ball snuffing out as he did so. “I should have figured you’d have noticed that.”

Hermione walked into the library and moved a chair so she could sit down next to Harry. “There’s not much I don’t notice when it comes to you.” She smiled at him and pulled her feet up underneath her. “Feel like talking about it?”

He pulled one knee up and wrapped his arms around it, chin resting on his kneecap. “It happened in the shower. The soap fell and I didn’t even need to think about it, just held out my hand, about to lean down to pick it up and it just shot into my hand. I pretty much dropped the soap again.” He rubbed his chin against the material of his jeans. “Then I held my hand out and did it on purpose. I could do regular wandless magic.” He made a snort, like wandless magic could be considered regular, “Like lighting a candle and snuffing it out, summoning small things and anything I’m really really good at with my wand just by using a parseltongue incantation.

“This...is different. I barely have to think and,” he held a hand out again and a large piece of coal coalesced into existence, as if it was drawing carbon to make itself up out of the air, then he made a fist, the coal shuddered and steamed and shrank down, becoming smoother and shinier and changing color to a bright red chunk of rough rock. He flicked his fingers and little chips flew off, floating over to settle on the desk and leaving behind a perfectly faceted gem. “I can do things like that.” He let the gem, a red diamond the size of a large blueberry, fall into his hand.

Hermione watched the gem and Harry with wide eyes as she chewed on her bottom lip. “That is incredible, absolutely incredible. In anyone else, I would find that amount of power terrifying but I know you Harry and I know you would never abuse it or let it corrupt you.” It was the truth, Hermione could never be afraid of Harry, she knew him and she loved him, trusted him with everything she was. The only thing that gave her pause was that once again Harry was so, so far ahead of her, in ways she could never even hope to catch up with. “You Harry James Potter, are simply amazing.”

He gave her a bemused smile. “Not nearly as amazing as you. I look at these...new abilities and I am terrified. Completely, utterly terrified. Ollivander told me once that all power comes with a price and he’s right.” He brought his hand over to her and tipped it to let the diamond fall into her hand. “And I’m afraid of what price it will demand from me. I’m afraid what I love most will be taken away from me for this.”
“No Harry, I am not going to let anything be taken from you.” She moved quickly until she was in his lap. “As I told the vampire king. Bugger the world, I mean it. I am not going to let anyone demand things of you that you are not willing to give.” Hermione reached out to cup his cheek with one hand, holding the diamond in the other. “Gems, power...Bloody hell you could shift the moon out of orbit for all I care. You Harry, not your magic or power but you is who I love.”

He slipped his arms around her. “I know that silly goose. What scares me is that this is so...effortless, so automatic that I might wind up doing something in public, like grab a child out of the way of a car or something, with the magic and the rest of the world will find out and go into a panic.” He wasn’t hopeful or naive enough to think that people would be celebrating the fact that he had enough magical power to personally level England.

Hermione hummed and shifted even closer, dropping the diamond onto the table so she could wrap her arms around Harry’s torso and lean her head against his shoulder. “People are idiots.” She sighed and just allowed herself to feel the warmth of her boyfriend. “Remember the spell I put on Sirius, when he was being a berk? Maybe we could develop something like that? Nothing that would dampen your powers, they are a part of you now but something to remind you of them when you are in public...” She trailed off.

“Have I told you lately that I love your brilliance?” He nuzzled the top of her head, “A yank on the tail when I start to use magic without the wand then?”

“Exactly.” Hermione beamed up at him. “And since I’ve already done the spell once it will be a piece of cake to alter it to fit your needs.” She pressed a kiss just below his ear. “Things will be okay Harry, I firmly believe that.”

“Yeah. I guess I’m just a worrywart. Bad habit.” He sighed and relaxed into her. “I’m going to write the Underground Council and let them know that, while I am honored by the invitation, I’m not in any position to do anything but enter university and spend time with my very pretty girlfriend and family at the moment.”

She kissed him again. “I like the sound of that, if the Underground Council really wants to work with you then they will be willing to wait until you are ready to do so. It’s not like time is something they’re running low on.” And she kissed him again just because she couldn’t help herself, she just had a very kissable boyfriend. “Speaking of uni, flat in Oxford or floo there from Grimmauld?”

She’d discussed it over with Harry plenty of times and her opinion changed every time. It was silly to get a flat when they had Grimmauld on the one hand. But on the other a flat would be closer and more convenient. She’d come to the conclusion that, as she couldn’t choose, Harry should.

He ran his hand down her back. “Flat, absolutely a flat. The less I have to floo the better. One day I’m going to wind up breaking my nose on impact.” He tilted his head to give her more room to do as she pleased. “We’ll look for flats over the summer.”

“Okay, I like the sound of that.” She nibbled her way along his neck and jawline. She looked forward to living with Harry officially, just the two of them and Hedwig, Neptune and Crookshanks of course.

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Harry ducked under the swing of the paint roller and gave Hermione’s Dad a grin. “Are you trying to knock my teeth out Mr. Granger?”
“He just might be.” Jeanine grinned from where she was washing the windows along with her daughter. “That way he’ll get to fix them.” She smiled at her husband. She was aware that Hermione and Harry could have fixed the flat up with a wave of those wands of theirs but she was grateful that the young ones let her and Bert be a part of fixing up their baby’s first home away from them.

“Well I’d hope I’d get the discount.” Harry continued with his task of painting the crown moulding, not at all worried about the possibility of losing teeth.

“Sure Harry, ten percent increase.” Hermione’s father grinned back and put the roller on the wall again, coating the bland white with a cheerful yellow. “So how’s that friend of yours and his wife? The baby come yet?” He’d had a moment of worry over his little girl when he’d learned that one of her circle was pregnant and married at sixteen but his wife had calmed him down.

“Not just yet, Luna says she feels like she’s about to explode though so it can’t be too much longer.” Harry chuckled. “Ron just says that if he’s made to go get one more bowl of plimpie soup he’s going to throw himself into the ocean.”

“I don’t blame him.” Hermione scrunched up her nose from where she balanced on the window sill to wash the outside of the windows. “If you ever get a taste for plimpies I will never kiss you again. Just the smell of them makes me ill. It wouldn’t surprise me though if little Star is waiting for your birthday Harry.”

He chuckled. “Ron might smack me in that case. And no worries about plimpie breath. I can’t stand the smell of them either.”

“Just what are these Plimpies?” Herb started on a fresh section of wall.

“They look like scaly golf balls with long, floppy webbed legs. Smell awful no matter what they’re cooked with.”

“Why on earth would anyone want to eat something like that?” Jeanine looked equal parts, curious and disgusted.

“Pregnancy cravings.” Hermione shrugged. “Besides if we judge purely by looks and forget the horrid smell of them, crabs, prawns and oysters aren’t exactly attractive either.”

“Oysters taste good though,” Herbert hummed happily.

“They look and taste like snot, you’ll never convince me differently.” Hermione stretched further out the window so she would be able to reach.

“I’m with Bert on this, I find them delicious.” Jeanine looked a bit worried about her climbing and clinging daughter.

“I have no opinion.” Harry watched Hermione carefully, keeping an eye out and a hand on his wand in case she slipped. “I’ve no experience with oysters.”

Herbert noticed the way Harry was ready to leap to the rescue if Hermione needed it and it soothed his paternal worry over this move a great deal.

“You’ve never tried oysters?” Jeanine actually manage to tear her eyes away from Hermione to send Harry a look. “Oh but we must rectify that, Bert let us take the youngsters out tonight for a nice seafood dinner.”
“Lovely idea darling.” Herbert smiled at her. “We do need to fix that. Oysters need to be tried at least once in a lifetime.”

Jeanine beamed at her husband and Harry and let out a breath of relief as Hermione came back inside after having finished with the outside of the window.

At that moment Hermione really loved her parents and their acceptance of the man she loved.

Harry relaxed and smiled. “Sounds like a plan to me.” He turned back to painting. “I’m always up for new things. It’s fun discovering things I’ve never tried before.”

“I still find them horrendous but you should try it.” Hermione jumped down from the sill. “Now lobster on the other hand, you can never have too much lobster.”

Herbert’s eyes crinkled with happy pride. “That’s my girl. Especially Maine lobsters. Remember that time we visited the States Jeanine and ate at that little seafood shack?”

“Oh yes I remember.” Jeanine chuckled. “Looked like an absolute hovel, thought you were insane when you suggested that we would eat there but the food...oh the food was the food of gods.”

Harry grinned. “Sounds like a trip to make one day don’t you think Hermione?”

“Absolutely, I want to see and experience the whole world with you.” Hermione nodded at Harry with a warm smile.

Herbert exchanged a look with his wife, remembering a similar scene between them many years ago.

Jeanine’s smile was just for Herbert and if her husband hadn’t been nearly covered in yellow paint, she would have gone over and snogged him breathless right in front of the children.

His cheeks pinked a bit and he winked at her. “Well let’s finish this job and clean up then, dinner is calling.” Herbert began humming a folk song.

Harry tilted his head, remembering the tune from some long buried time. “Is that She Moved Thru the Faire?”

Herbert grinned. “It is indeed, and how I got my wife to look twice at me the first time. You know it?”

“Sort of I think. Seems like I remember it from something, can’t place where I first heard it though.”

“It was rather popular when we were young.” Jeanine smiled at him. “Perhaps you heard it as a child.” Of course the moment she’d said it she wanted to bite her tongue off. She knew about Harry’s childhood and she felt absolutely awful for bringing it up.

Harry paused, tilted his head, and closed his eyes, prodding at the tune in his head, finding the voice singing it and his lips tilted up. “You might be right. Not real clear on memories from when I was a baby but I think you might be right.”

Herbert looked up at the young man. “It is a good song for a lullaby.”

“Yeah, it is.” Harry looked over his shoulder at Hermione’s mother and gave her a smile. “It’s okay, really.”
Harry was not as covered in paint as her husband so Jeanine didn’t hesitate as she walked over and hugged him. “Good and it is lovely that you have memories of her voice, even though they’re vague.”

He pat her back with the hand that wasn’t covered in wet paint. “It’s a nice surprise for me actually, to hear something and realize that it’s familiar because I heard it from my Mum or Dad.” Of course he had more vivid and fresh memories of his mother’s voice, from the time he’d gotten rid of the Resurrection Stone, but that was knowledge for him and Hermione alone, a private gift.

That only made Jeanine hug him tighter before letting go. She was firmly convinced that her daughter couldn’t have chosen a better suitor for herself and it was clear to see how much they loved each other. “So Harry, any big plans for your birthday? I know seventeen is the big one in the wizarding world but eighteen is a big one too, legal in both worlds.” She smiled at him.

“No really.” Harry lifted a shoulder. “I’m still not used to celebrating my birthday really. Still feels a bit weird.”

“How can you still say that after the ball?” Hermione chuckled, knowing just what Harry thought of grandeurs like the fancy dress ball, it had been fun though.

“I’m a simple guy love, a real birthday cake is extravagant to me,” he blew her a kiss, “Besides I’m having my first birthday without a death threat hanging over my head, that’s one heck of a gift.”

Herbert grimaced, though he hid it. He forgot just how much danger Harry had been in his entire life but such casual comments brought home just how precious simple things were to the young man.

“Knowing our family you’ll get like a dozen birthday cakes, all homemade. I might even throw my own hat in the ring.” Hermione frowned when her Mum burst out laughing.

“Darling, you are the brightest girl I’ve ever met but you can’t cook or bake to save your life.”

“It’s true sweetheart. You burn water,” Herb teased his daughter gently, “Take my advice and order in.”

“Oh very funny.” Hermione would have been upset if they weren’t right. She didn’t get it, she was good at potions, chemistry was no problem but cooking, she just couldn’t make it work. Even Molly had given up on teaching her.

Harry gave her a smile, “I’ll do the cooking and all so you can concentrate on being your brilliant self anyway.”

“I suggest that you take that deal darling, it is the best you’ll ever get.” Jeanine pat her daughter’s cheek.

“Careful or I will cook tonight and you’ll all be forced to eat it.” Hermione crossed her arms over her chest.

“Too late, we’re going out to dinner princess and nothing will stop that,” Herbert grinned at her. “Besides we love you, dreadful cooking and all.”

“Good thing that you do and that Harry is a truly excellent cook.” She laughed and walked over to get started on the other window.

“Otherwise it’d be take-away every night?” Harry smiled at her and blew her a kiss before
Ron grinned down at his wife and their son, both looked exhausted, and rightly so, but both were so, so..."Beautiful."

Luna looked down at the red faced baby lying on her chest, running the pad of her forefinger over downy hair so light it was almost invisible. “He is isn’t he.” It was difficult to believe that their Star was finally here, it seemed they had waited so long for him. Luna was more tired than she’d ever been but she was also happier than she’d ever been.

Ron’s finger traced a soft cheek, following a smattering of freckles. “And so tiny. Our little Star.” He kissed Luna’s temple. “You were amazing there by the way. Didn’t think I could have more respect for the female of the species but boy was I wrong.”

Luna smiled at him, giving birth had hurt, there was no escaping that and she had cursed Ron up and down but it hadn’t been as hard as she had feared it would be. Besides, having Star here with them was more than reward enough. “If I was amazing in any way it’s only because you were right there with me, supporting me and Star every step of the way.”

He dropped a kiss on her lips, “I love you.”

“I love you too husband mine, love both of you.” She ran a finger over the downy hair of their son again.

A soft knock came on the door and Harry’s head poked in, “Hey, sorry to interrupt but the natives are getting restless out there.” His eyes dropped to the baby and he smiled, “Want me to hold them off a little longer?”

Ron shook his head, “Nah. C’mere you berk,” he gently picked his son up as his best friend and brother in all but blood came over, “Meet your nephew, Star Leander,” he set the baby in Harry’s arms carefully.

Harry smiled and caught the babe easily, looking into the delicate features, “Hello there Star. You look an awful lot like your Mum, ‘cept that nose.” He grinned when the baby made a yawning squeak and wiggled a bit. There was a tickle against his magic and he just managed to hide his surprise under delight as newborn blue eyes opened and regarded him solemnly. The magic the baby already had was amazingly strong and had an ethereal flavor to it. Star was a very, very strong seer or he’d wear Dobby’s tea cozy and dance while singing I’m a little teapot.

“Mmhmm, as small as it is now I think he will have Ronalds, regal nose.” Luna smiled and viewed her husband’s long nose. “Now, I think the two of you should take him out and show him off, as Harry said, there are a lot of people out there who has waited to meet him.” Luna felt a little bereft not having Star’s warm weight on top of her but she wanted all their loved ones to get a chance to see him. Besides, she couldn’t deny just how tired she was and she knew that Star would be absolutely safe with his Daddy and Uncle as well as with the rest of their brood.

Harry carefully cradled the baby against his chest with one arm, “Before that,” he slipped a chain over Luna’s head, “For the new Mummy,” on the silver chain was a pendant of carved opal, a mother ermine curled up protectively around her kit.

She looked at it delightedly, eyes softening. She would never forget that Harry had been her first real friend and the reason Ron had even looked twice at her. “Thank you so much, this is beautiful,
really, thank you Harry.”

He kissed her cheek, “You’re welcome Luna. I’ve got a surprise for Star too but Hermione’s holding that at the moment.”

Ron grinned, “Then let’s go show my son off and get that surprise mate.”

Outside in the waiting area, Molly was practically bouncing in place, holding onto Arthur tightly. Their first grandchild, she could hardly believe it and she wanted so badly to meet him.

Ginny was openly very amused at her mother’s excitement. She wanted to meet her little nephew as well, of course she did but Molly was practically vibrating in her seat.

When the door opened, Molly let out a little squeak and was on her feet in an instant.

Harry chuckled and exchanged a look with Ron, handing the baby to Molly gently when she reached them, “Cute innit he?”

Ron grinned happily as his mother cooed over his son, “Course he is, he looks like Luna.”

“Oh but he looks like you too Ronnie, just look at his nose and those adorable freckles.” Molly was devouring the baby with her eyes, cooing over him lovingly. “He’s just the most beautiful baby in the world.”

“No bias there.” George chuckled as he looked over his mother’s shoulder. “Can’t say I disagree though.”

Fred was looking over Molly’s other shoulder, “He’s going to be a heartbreaker alright.”

Harry made a soft snort and moved back to let others crowd in, looking over at Hermione as she drew even with his side, a purple teddybear with amethyst eyes in her hands.

Hermione held the teddy bear tightly as she looked down at the baby, she could definitely see traces of both Ron and Luna in his tiny, delicate features and she was not ashamed to be a bit weepy. Ron was a Dad, their reckless Ronald. “So cute, you and Luna have done well Ron.” She handed Ron the plushie from her and Harry since she didn’t want to scare Star by waving it in his face.

“Thanks,” he grinned at the bear’s eyes, “Magically charged amethyst?” He slid a look at Harry. Magically formed technically but Harry hadn’t shared that with Ron so he nodded, “Yeah.”

“Thanks mate.” He cleared his throat, “Oi you lot,” he nudged people out of the way and took his son, “Star’s got a Grandda he’s got to meet you know,” he tsked at them and shook his head, carrying the baby over to Xenophilius, “Star Leander, meet your Grandda Xeno.”

Xenophilius startled a little when he heard Star’s middle name was. He wished that Leandra could have been there to see their first grandchild but he knew she was watching from behind the veil. He cradled the tiny little body in his arms and said his hellos. He hadn’t minded waited for his turn to meet Star, he would have his whole life to get to know this nifflemurgle after all. “Thank you for naming him Leander, his grandmother would have bursted with pride.”

Ron smiled gently, “Luna’s Mum was a special lady,” he knew that from the stories and pictures Luna had shared with him, “and special ladies deserve to have a legacy.”
Arthur watched and smiled, almost unbearably proud of his youngest. His arm slipped around Molly’s waist and he leaned his head on hers, “He’s grown up so much.”

Nodding, Molly sniffed and conjured a handkerchief into her hand so she could dab at her eyes. “He has, grown up a truly good man.” She leaned her head against Arthur’s shoulder. “We must have done something right don’t you think?” She looked around not just at Ron but at all their babies.

“Must have, or we’re exceptionally lucky.”

Fred chuckled as he heard that, “You are lucky to have such amazing children as us, but you did right more than there was luck involved. The luck is all our brilliance, that none of us have gone over to the dark side is all you.”

Molly had to laugh. “Brilliance and such humility.” She was proud of her children though and they were brilliant, all of them and in different ways, each one just as spectacular as the other.

“If Mum had ever decided to go dark we would all have been doomed. She would have mothered us all into darkness without us none the wiser.” George placed a smacking kiss on her cheek.

Harry laughed and looked around at the people who made up his family. Sirius, Remus and Orion were trying to ride herd on Aurora, who was being egged on by Pansy. The Weasleys were clustered around, a very heavily pregnant Fleur leaning against Bill and talking calmly with Blaise, who was plastered to Charlie as usual. Percy was blushing at something Oliver whispered into his ear, Fred and George flanked Draco as usual, each touching him absently and lovingly, Snape and Narcissa were holding their daughter, a surprisingly exotic beauty with pale blue eyes, jet black hair, and a smaller, less prominent version of her father’s nose. He knew Tonks was spending the month with Ewan at Marauders, looking after the orphans who stayed there over the summers. He spotted Ginny leaning back against Neville’s chest and narrowed his eyes at the sparkle on her finger that he’d not noticed til now.

He gently nudged Hermione’s shoulder and murmured quietly, “Do I see what I think I do on Gin’s hand?”

Hermione nodded with a smile. “Yup, you see correctly. He asked her only last night.” She burrowed against him. “I think they wanted to make sure Lady Longbottom can’t stick her nose into Neville’s business anymore no matter how much she’d want to. That and true love of course.”

He pulled her close and rested his chin on top of her hair, “Can life get more perfect right now?”

“You know, I don’t think it can.” She wrapped her arm around his trim waist and looked out over the chaos that was their family, she loved it. It was loud and people everywhere and it was wonderful. She and Harry would start at Oxford free of shadows looming over her beloved, everyone she loved was safe and sound and Harry was completely right, it couldn’t be more perfect than this.

Chapter End Notes

THE END

That’s a wrap folks. Thank you so very much for sticking with us on this wild, fantastic
ride.

End Notes

TW's A/N: Just a little heads up for the future. Harry is going to be clever in this fic. I for one believe that Harry is a very smart guy who was simply always distracted by all the crud that was piled up on him.

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