A wand for Steven

by ShayneT

Summary

Passing through the Veil to a world not his own, Steven Universe finds himself in a world of wizards, where he is forced to learn a different kind of magic to survive.
"It's never done this before."

Staring down at the Veil, Dumbledore cleared his throat. "I would imagine not."

The Veil was supposed to do what it had always done, sit in the still silence unless a living being came close, in which case the souls of the dead would call out from the other side. It was a trap, of course; nothing living could pass through the veil without ceasing to be alive, and once even a part of a being passed through it was too late.

Now, though, there was a humming sound which pulsed.

"Has it always had this rhythm?"

The Ministry agent shook his head. "It was slow at first, so slow that we didn't even notice the pattern. It has been speeding up for the last week."

"It seems to be speeding up even now," Dumbledore said.

"Which is why we've evacuated the Ministry and requested your help."

"I'm sure my help would have been even more useful a week ago," Dumbledore said dryly, staring down at the shorter man.

He looked away uncomfortably. "There were those who hoped we'd be able to solve this on our own. This is the first change in the Veil since it was discovered and many were excited to learn what they could."

"And what have they learned?"

"Nothing," the man said, sighing. "The Muggleborns seem particularly apprehensive, talking about something called a countdown, but no one has any idea what will happen at the end."

"Which should be very soon now, I would expect."

The pulsing had grown quite rapid by this point. Both men, in the interest of prudence were at the top of the amphitheater, as far from the veil as possible while remaining in the same room.

The Veil was glowing, an unusual rose color, and both men instinctively drew their wands.

The ground beneath them trembled and the ministry official apparated away, his courage finally at its limits.

Dumbledore considered following him, but his eyes were drawn to the pulsing veil. The humming sound had sped up until it was an almost continuous hum which was growing louder and louder.

The light grew brighter and brighter until finally Dumbledore saw the edge of a sphere pushing its way through the veil.

He cast a shielding charm, and a moment later found himself rocked backward as the Veil exploded.
He barely remained conscious long enough to see the rose colored bubble in the center of the room. The bubble vanished suddenly, leaving an unconscious child in the middle of the rubble, approximately the age of his first year students. He was heavyset, wearing a dark pink muggle shirt with a yellow star on it, blue denim trousers, and sandals.

Beside him were four gemstones lying inert in the rubble.

"It's impossible. He couldn't have gone through the Veil. Nothing living could have survived."

Dumbledore stood above the group of aurors and for once his eyes were not twinkling. "I will be happy to offer my memories for examination with a Pensieve, but I can assure you that I know what I saw."

Several of the aurors had surrounded the boy, wands out.

"He's only partially human," one of the younger aurors said. He flicked his wand and the boys shirt front lifted, exposing his stomach. A large gemstone was embedded in his stomach.

"It's magical," the second auror said. "And partially alive. If I didn't know better, I'd think that it's part of him."

"These other gems have the same properties," the third auror said quietly.

The three men glanced uneasily at each other. Were the four gems on the floor part of other beings like the boy? If they were, then they were rather grisly trophies.

They were all too experienced to touch the gems or the boy with their hands. There were all sorts of magical traps that could be unleashed at a touch. If this boy had actually come from the other side, it was impossible to know if whatever traps could be found would bear any resemblance to anything known to the Wizarding world.

A cough sounded from the floor, and the three men stepped back quickly, wands quickly pointed in unison.

He was waking up. Hopefully they would have their answers soon.

**************

The boy opened his eyes slowly.

Staring up at the men pointing small sticks at him, it took him a moment to seem to understand what he was seeing.

"I guess...we made it?"

He showed no fear of the wands, slowly sitting up and holding his head.

"It would seem so," Dumbledore said. He stepped forward. "My colleagues would be most interested in discovering just where you came from."

"Beach City," the boy said distractedly.

He looked around for a moment. "Have you seen Pearl, Amethyst, Peridot, Sapphire or Ruby? They usually wake up before I do."
Finally seeing the gems on the ground, he lunged for them. "Guys! Guys!"

"Stupify!"

For some reason it took three trained Aurors to make the child unconscious.

"He clearly has an American accent," one Auror said.

The second shook his head. "The muggle money in his pocket was American, but I spoke to a contact in the Salem Institute and he says it's not like any money they use, muggle or Wizarding."

"It has snakes," the first Auror said glumly.

Given the connection between snakes and dark wizards in general, this caused the aurors to glance meaningfully at each other.

"Asking him might have been much easier if he hadn't been stunned into insensibility," Dumbledore said mildly.

"For all we know, those gems might be his world's version of a wand."

"How would we even know if he was telling the truth?"

A new voice came from behind him. "Veritaserum. Slip some in his drink and he won't know any different."

Mad Eyed Moody limped into the room.

"He's at least partially magic resistant," the first auror said. "Which may be part of what allowed him to survive passage through the Veil, "Along with the fact that he's only partially alive."

"What?" the others asked.

"Only part of him is organic. I've run further tests, and at least half of his lifeforce is in that gem of his. The gem is not alive in the same way we are."

The aurors frowned.

The youngest looked up. "It's actually a little comforting, the thought that the afterlife might be at a place called Beach City."

Moody rolled his eye, although no one could tell if it was a sarcastic gesture or not.

"We didn't have a choice," Steven said, staring at his hands.

Dumbledore sat as the child's advocate, with Amelia Bones to his right and Moody to his left.

"Your...guardians had to protect the Earth."

Steven looked up. "Homeworld wasn't ever going to stop."

The pain in his expression was palpable. It had been hard enough getting him to speak in the first place until he'd been allowed to see the gems behind a protective pane of glass.

"What do you DO?" Moody asked, leaning forward.
"We salted the Earth," Steven said. "Made it so that gems couldn't be created there or live there for long."

"And the humans?" Amelia Bones voice was mild, as though this were merely an academic exercise and not a possible genocide.

"They'll be OK. Pearl says that human science probably won't even notice what we've done for a couple of hundred years."

"Couldn't the enemy...bomb...the planet anyway?" Moody asked.

Steven shook his head. "Gems don't care about humans, really. It was the only way to keep my dad and Connie and all my friends safe."

The three adult wizards glanced at each other. Steven had been dosed with Veritaserum in his water, but there was no way to tell if he was resistant to magic. He'd managed to pass through the Veil after all.

"Your guardians have not yet returned."

Steven stared at his hands again, looking miserable. "It was a really bad poison. I don't know how long it will be before they come back."

"Why weren't you affected?" Amelia asked.

"I'm half human. I'm resistant to gem technology," Steven said. His hands tightened in his lap. "And I was on the other side of the planet when they did it."

He'd already described the apparatus the gems used; Dumbledore imagined it as something like the Floo Network although apparently it did not involve fireplaces at all.

"How did you get here?" Moody asked.

It was the most important of all the questions that could be asked. The Veil lead to the land of the dead. A thousand years of wizardly researched had proven that. Steven's description seemed to be of an alternate reality, with a history that seemed to be both similar and different from their own.

"There was this gateway. It was already here when gems came six thousand years ago. Pearl says it might be a million years old as far as the gems could tell."

"A veil?" Moody asked, glancing at the other wizards.

"I don't know what that means," Steven said. "Unless somebody is having a wedding."

No one bothered to correct him.

Steven stared at them for a moment before continuing. "Pearl said there was a chance that it opened up to other universes, but that nothing gemkind had ever send through had ever survived."

He stared at his hands. "Whatever happened, we were going to die. If Homeworld won, they'd never let us live. If we poisoned the world...at least by taking the chance my dad and Connie and my friends would get a chance to live."

"How DID you survive," Moody asked. It was clear from his tone that he didn't believe the boy, but Steven didn't seem to notice.
"I've got my mom's bubble and shield." Steven subconsciously rubbed his stomach over his gemstone. "It was strong enough to protect the gems from the worst weapons Homeworld had. It was our only chance."

"It seems like a likely story," Moody said, the sarcasm in his voice dripping.

None of them acknowledged that if Veritaserum didn't work there was little they could do to force the truth out of the boy.

"It fits the evidence," Dumbledore said quietly. "Investigations have showed that the gemstones are alive in some fashion."

"And you yourself saw the bubble." Amelia said.

Moody was silent for a moment. "I don't suppose you took a look inside his head?"

Dumbledore grimaced slightly. "He was telling the truth as he knew it."

Of course, there were holes in his story. Primarily, though, they seemed to be due to a lack of understanding. The boy had been home schooled throughout his life and seemed ignorant of much of his own nation's human history.

"Let's say the boy is telling the truth," Moody said. "It could be disastrous."

"Why?" Amelia asked. "He says that neither he nor his offer any threat to humanity."

"His world has a United States, an England, France and China," Moody said. "Just as ours does."

"So?"

"Much of it is just the same in his world as ours," Moody said.

Amelia lifted an eyebrow and didn't speak.

"It's possible they had their own version of a wizarding world."

"He didn't say anything about that," Amelia protested.

"Ask any of Dumbledore's muggle students about wizards on the day before they get their letter, what would they tell you?"

It was certainly possible that his world's wizards were just as secretive as their own.

"His world also has an entire alien species out to suck the world dry like a raisin, destroying all life, Muggle or not." Moody said. "Who's to say it's not the same here?"

***************

You must be joking," Cornelius Fudge said.

He stared at the paper on his desk as though it was a snake, likely to bite him.

Dumbledore shook his head. "The Quill of Acceptance has placed his name in the book. There is no question."

"He's not human," Fudge said. "There are laws against non-humans using wands."
"True," Dumbledore said. "But half-humans fall under a different set of rules. Two of the instructors at Hogwarts are the beneficiaries of those rules."

Fudge scowled. "You'd put a potentially dangerous creature around impressionable children?"

Dumbledore stared at him impassively. "He's been here for a month without causing any problems. I believe the reports I have are that he is a delight to work with."

Fudge shuddered. "He's so...cheerful."

"His entire world has crumbled around him, but his first impulse is to spare the feelings of those around him." Dumbledore said quietly. "That does not seem such a bad quality in a young wizard."

"He's not a wizard. He's...something else."

"According to the quill, whatever magic he has is compatible with wizarding magic. The Book of admittance confirmed it. He is not a squib."

"He is not a wizard either."

Dumbledore said "He may not be a wizard yet, but he could be."

"I thought the quill only recorded British births?"

"Apparently he came into the world in Britain as a magical being, and that was enough for the quill."

Fudge was silent for a moment. "What happens when he stops being cheerful?"

"What better place to have him be than a place with a staff trained in dealing with children and a thousand sets of eyes from his peers to keep an eye on him."

"We can't allow his guardians to go with him," Fudge said.

Dumbledore shook his head. "I doubt he'd be willing to be separated from them. Perhaps if I were to keep them in my office...?"

Fudge scowled.

Keeping them in easy reach of the most powerful wizard in the wizarding world might not be the worst idea anyone had heard of. His aurors were convinced that they'd learned all they could from the gems without actually cracking one open.

They'd already spent too many galleons guarding the things, and all they ever did was sit there. They were a dead end.

Also, there had been arguments among the aurors; several wanted to adopt him. There was something about the boy that seemed to make people like him. Fudge distrusted this, of course. No politician was likely to underestimate just how powerful likability and charisma could be.

Still, if something did go wrong, Dumbledore would be to blame. Dumbledore had too much power and the Ministry could use something to hold over him.

"Very well," he said. "But it's on your head."

As they entered Diagon Alley, Sevarus Snape noted that Steven didn't have the wide eyed
fascination most muggle-borns had with their first exposure to magic. Presumably that was because he wasn't actually muggle-born. He'd lived with magic his entire life, although he'd also lived among the muggles openly.

Snape wasn't sure what to make of him. He was stocky, but Aurors had reported that he was at least ten times as strong as an adult human male. They said he was fast and nimble as well, belying his appearance.

He wasn't as cheerful as reports from the aurors had made him out to be, which Snape was more than grateful for. Little grated on his nerves as much as a prattling child.

At the same time, he didn't seem intimidated by Snape at all. He'd been facing a variety of monsters for more than two years by his own report.

Snape suspected that he'd been showing the aurors what they'd wanted; a cheerful face in spite of his circumstances. Seeing that Snape had no such expectations, he'd dropped the mask slightly.

Or perhaps he was playing on Snape's own expectations.

"Why are we here again?" he asked.

"There are supplies you need for school," Snape said.

"I've never been to school," Steven said quietly.

"Most pure bloods are home schooled," Snape said.

"Pure bloods?"

"Wizards from wizarding families. Muggle borns come from non-magical families."

"So I'm kind of like half of each? I'm magic on my mother's side, but my dad is pretty normal, except for being a rock musician."

"You'd be a half-blood if your mother were an actual wizard," Snape began, but he quickly saw that Steven wasn't listening.

The mention of his father's name seemed to cause Steven to shrink into himself.

His father had been unable to make the transition between worlds; his guardians still hadn't recovered. As far as anyone could tell, it would be impossible for the boy to ever see his father again.

At least his father was still alive. That would have to comfort the boy; it was more than many had in the aftermath of the last war.

"Don't dawdle," Snape said.

"A real challenge," Ollivander said.

He'd been informed of the boy's circumstances of course. The boy's magic might be close enough for the Quill of acceptence, but it might present unique challenges for the wandmaker.

The boy looked curiously around the room, but he showed none of the trepidation normal wizarding children showed.
"The wand chooses the wizard," Ollivander continued.

The first three wands he pulled out had no reaction at all.

"Maybe I'm not a wizard," Steven said. He didn't sound upset.

The fourth, Ash with a phoenix feather core caused an explosion of light that made Snape grimace. When he could see again, he saw that the boxes of wands had all collapsed to the floor.

"Of course it would be a phoenix core," Ollivander muttered.

"Why?" Steven asked, seemingly curious for the first time since Snape had met him.

"It should be obvious. Phoenixes die and then rise again from their own ashes. From what I hear about your people, isn't that what they do as well?"

The boy looked startled. For a moment Snape thought that he was going to cry, but then the boy's face broke out in a big smile.

It transformed his face in a way that was startling.

Snape forced himself to scowl. "Let's get on with it."

There was something likable about the boy, and Snape didn't trust it.

"Hazel with a phoenix feather core, fourteen inches, pliant and supple," Ollivander said triumphantly. "A very large wand for such a small boy."

He glanced up at Snape.

Wandlore had it that longer wands suited those with big personalities. Hagrid's wand was the largest known at sixteen inches. Hazel was capable of powerful magic but tended to reflect its owner's emotional state; it was so loyal that it would not serve another master after its owner died.

Snape scowled and handed eight galleons to the wandmaker.

"We have places to be," he said.

Steven looked up at him and smiled slightly. "I had a friend named Lars. You remind me of him a little."

**************

It wasn't just the lack of awe that bothered Snape. The boy had been around magic his entire life, even if it was of a type unfamiliar to wizard kind, so it wasn't surprising that he was able to adjust to the sights of Diagon Alley.

It wasn't even the way his attention flitted from one thing to the next; the boy had by all reports never been to a human school at all. He'd never even had the formal tutoring that most wizard born children received, tutoring that instilled the same sort of discipline that the muggle educational system did.

Fortunately, Ministry testing indicated that he'd somehow managed to receive an adequate education in reading, mathematics and the basic sciences, although his knowledge of human history was woefully lacking. He didn't even know much about his own world's history, much less that of this one.
Doubtlessly he would find the History of magic even more excruciating than most students. Binns had been teaching the subject since before he'd died, and he'd been a terrible teacher even then. Snape had his own recollection of Binn's class and he regarded it as an excellent preparation for Ministry work.

What bothered Snape was Steven's utter lack of fear. Eleven year old children lived in a world of giants, adults who controlled their lives in ways they couldn't even comprehend. Any adult had more power than any given child, and they knew it.

Most children trembled at the sight of Snape. He'd purposefully cultivated an image of being fearsome, long ago learning to billow his cape as he walked. Some of the muggle children compared him to a raven.

It was useful. A terrified child was a compliant child, and of all the classes taught in Hogwarts, his was the most dangerous.

Oh, most of the practical classes had the potential for disaster. Transmutation, defense against the dark arts, care for magical creatures. Generally, though, a disaster in one of those classes would affect one, perhaps two students.

Potions had the potential for lethal explosions if not done correctly. Watching over fifteen sets of cauldrons stirred by thirty brats who not only had the attention spans of gnats but often actively attempted to subvert each others potions would have made a lesser wizard pull his hair out with anxiety.

It made Snape irritable.

He'd long ago learned that a cowed group of children was a group of children who ended the school year with fewer injuries. They might hate him, but they were alive instead of splattered all over the walls of the school dungeons.

Also, it felt good to set dunderheads in their place.

Steven, though walked as though he owned everything he surveyed. He hadn't even noticed Snape's billowing cape or his scowl.

Instead he'd simply described a teen-aged friend who he described as being irritable but inwardly decent, and told Snape that he reminded him of that person.

Ministry reports said the boy was at least ten times as strong as an adult human. It would be absurdly easy for him to hurt another student even accidentally.

Furthermore, he was much sturdier than any human. Ministry estimates were that despite his size he was sturdier than a half-giant like Hagrid.

In a way, Steven reminded Snape of Hagrid. The big oaf was resistant to things that would harm ordinary adults, much less children. This made it difficult for him to estimate how dangerous the creatures he cared for were to ordinary children.

Steven had not learned discipline. He had no fear of ordinary things and with good reason. Furthermore, he was not afraid of Snape.

He was going to be a disaster.

Snape considered stocking up on cleaning solution for the walls of the dungeons. It was only a
matter of time before he blew another student or himself up, and Snape suspected that Steven would survive just fine.

The same couldn't be said of the other students.

"You don't want an owl?"

The boy was thin, looking almost undernourished. He had glasses perched on his nose, which reminded Steven a little of Connie, even though the glasses looked not even remotely alike.

"I've got nobody to send messages to," Steven said. He looked down. "I haven't had good experiences with pets anyway."

You loved them and then they sacrificed themselves for you.

Lion was just one of the holes in his heart.

"I don't have anybody I want to send letters to," the boy said. "Not yet anyway. My relatives don't like magic. I'm getting one anyway."

"I'm Steven."

Steven forced himself to smile. Smiling had been easy before, as easy as sunshine and as natural as the waves. Now, though, it was the only way he could hide the pain that was just under the surface.

His dad, Connie, all his friends in Beach City...he'd had to leave them behind forever.

He'd lost Lapis and Lion, and he wasn't sure if the gems were going to make it, and even if they did he didn't know if they'd return before he was an adult.

His entire world was gone and it was all he could do to keep up a veneer of normality.

Of course, that's what he'd always done.

Garnet had once told him that he was the glue that kept them all together, that he inspired not just them but the people of Beach City.

Deep down he'd known it was true, but no one had ever thought about how much pressure that put on him. He always had to be strong for the others, and he knew they expected him to step into his mother's shoes.

His mother's shoes were enormous and he was only a small boy.

"Harry," the boy said. "Harry Potter."

He stared at Steven expectantly, as though he expected some sort of reaction. At Steven's shrug of incomprehension, the boy grinned.

"You're an American, right?"

Steven shrugged uncomfortably. "Kind of."

"They say Americans don't pay much attention to the rest of the world," the boy said. "Like British magical history."

"I don't even know American history," Steven said.
The boy's grin grew wider. "I think we'll get along just fine."

Seeing who Steven was talking to, Snape decided to double his order of cleaning reagents.

This year wasn't going to be a disaster. It was going to be an epic disaster.
This is really nice," Steven said as they took their seat. "Much nicer than sitting on hay."

Harry gave him an odd look, then grinned. "It's fantastic."

They hadn't seen each other since they'd met in Diagon Alley, but Harry's face had lit up when he'd seen Steven.

It was good to have friends, even if it hurt when you had to leave them.

A family of redheads was outside on the platform, the mother saying her last goodbyes to the children. Steven felt a pang and he looked away. Even after all these weeks the pain of losing his family was still fresh in his mind.

Mr. Ollivander's comparison between gems and Phoenixes came to mind, and Steven felt himself once again relieved by the comparison. Gems lived lives that lasted thousands or tens of thousands of years. A few weeks would be nothing to them, especially from within their gems.

If only it wasn't an eternity to an eleven year old boy.

He forced himself to smile. "It's great, really."

He felt uneasy about leaving London. The gems were here and it felt wrong to leave them. What would they do if they woke up in a new world and didn't know where he was?

He'd written a note and given ministry officials explicit instructions about how to handle the gems. He just hoped the gems would give the ministry time to explain.

The train began to move, the platform sliding away slowly.

The compartment door slid open, and a redheaded boy stepped inside.

"Is it all right if I sit in here? All the other compartments are full."

Harry shrugged.

"Are you really Harry Potter?"

Steven looked up. Harry had seemed embarrassed about the whole fame thing. Steven wasn't sure why; everyone at home knew him, and privacy had never been a thing the gems had bothered to give him.

"Nope," Steven said. "Nobody's ever accused me of being Harry Potter."

The boy flushed. "Sorry, mate. I'm Ron. Ron Weasely."

"It's nice to meet you, Ron Ron Weasely," Steven said.

"No, it's just...are you having me on?"

Steven grinned.
"Hey, you're American! I thought Hogwarts was just for British kids."

Steven shrugged uncomfortably. "I live here now."

Harry leaned forward. "Yeah. I'm Harry."

Steven was grateful. He'd been trying to save Harry embarrassment and instead Harry was coming to his rescue.

"Do you really have the..."

Harry sighed and pulled his hair aside to show his scar.

Friends required sacrifice. Steven could only hope that no one else would have to do anything greater than this for him, not again.

Thoughts of Lapis and Lion danced at the edges of his thoughts.

"It snows occasionally," Steven said defensively. "Almost every year."

His perpetual tan hadn't faded, even though the Ministry had been keeping him indoors for weeks. Steven wondered if that was just his natural color. After all, his mother had been sort of...pink. It wasn't any different than Amethyst having lilac skin, or Pearl being pale white. It was just part of who they were.

Of course, the Ministry had suggested that he not tell everyone his full story.

"Still, it sounds nice. Living on a warm beach..." Harry said.

From what Harry had told him, it sounded like they came from opposite backgrounds. Steven had grown up with vast amounts of freedom, surrounded by people who loved him.

Harry had been locked away by people who didn't care for him at all.

"It was great," Harry said. "I wish we hadn't had to move."

Hogwarts had to be better for Harry than what he'd had at home. Steven, despite his innate optimism didn't hold that same hope.

Nowhere was like Beach City. He could only hope that he made new friends.

It would be the only thing that would make the wait for the gems bearable.

"My name's Malfoy. Draco Malfoy."

"Do all British people talk like James Bond?" Steven asked Harry in a low voice.

Ron sniggered, although clearly not from Steven's comment. Steven had the impression that Ron didn't know a lot about non-wizarding popular culture, although from his smirk Harry clearly did.

"Think my name is funny? My father told me all about the Weaselys. Red hair, freckles and more kids than they can afford."

Steven frowned, especially after Ron stiffened.

"That wasn't a very nice thing to say."
"He told me about you too. You're not a wizard. You aren't even human. You shouldn't even be on this train."

"I am too human...on my father's side," Steven said.

"So a half-breed and poor wizarding trash. There are better friends you could make, from decent families, Potter. You wouldn't want to get associated with the wrong sorts."

Draco leaned forward with his hand out.

"I think I can tell who the wrong sorts are," Harry said quietly. He didn't take Draco's hand.

"Be careful Potter," Draco said. "Or you'll go the same way your parents did. Hang around this sort, and it'll rub off on you."

Ron stood up, scowling. "What did you say?"

Harry followed a moment later. He looked anxious, probably because of the two hulking boys standing behind Draco.

"So you are going to fight us, are you?" Draco smirked.

"Unless you leave now," Harry said.

"We don't want to leave. We've eaten all our food and it looks like you have a lot here."

"Nobody's fighting," Steven said. He sighed and stood up.

"Afraid?" The boy to Harry's right lunged forward.

Steven stepped forward and caught the boy's hand. He squeezed slightly. "Not really."

The bigger boy tried to push forward, but it was like trying to push a brick wall. Steven slapped him on the back, and the boy almost fell to his knees.

"It's important for people to get along," Steven said. "We're here to make friends, aren't we?"

The other boy tried to rush forward, but Steven had spent too many afternoons first watching Connie train at sword fighting and later learning it on his own. His time as Stevonnie had only improved his skills.

His stance was wide, and neither boy could as much as budge him, even though they each weighed half again as much as he did.

"Still," Steven said. "It's getting a little crowded in here. Maybe you'd better find another car."

He shoved the first boy slightly and he went flying, hitting the wall and slumping to the floor. The second boy followed, almost hitting Draco.

Draco stared at Steven, his face almost as white as his hair.

"I'm only human on my father's side," Steven said. "It wasn't very nice of you to talk about Harry's parents like that, and I'd be really upset if you said anything about either of mine."

The boy was gone so fast Steven almost didn't see him go. His cronies scrambled to their feet and ran limping down the corridor.
Steven turned to find the other two boys staring at him.

"You're only half-human?" Harry asked.

"On my dad's side," Steven said.

"Blimy," Ron said. "Who was your mum? Hercules?"

Apparently Ron actually knew a few Greek myths.

Before Steven could respond, a bushy haired girl stepped into the room. "What's going on?"

Steven had seen her earlier; the girl talked fast and apparently read a lot. She reminded him a little of Connie, although she seemed a lot more pushy.

"You boys haven't been fighting? You'll be in trouble before you even get to school!"

Steven shrugged. "I haven't been fighting."

It was true. Fighting was being smashed in the face by Jasper, struggling against an entire ocean sent by Lapis...being struck by Malachite. Fighting meant someone was at a risk for dying.

Schoolboy scuffles were nothing.

"I only came because people outside are behaving very childishly, running up and down the corridors," the girl said with a sniff.

"I think it's nice that you were worried about us," Steven said. The girl was lonely; it was clear to Steven that like Connie she hadn't had many friends.

The girl's face brightened, and despite her teeth for a moment she looked beautiful.

"We need to get dressed," Ron said, somewhat rudely. "So if you could just..."

"Are you Harry Potter?" she asked suddenly. "I've read all about you."

Behind him, Harry sighed.

************

Stepping off the train, Harry felt a thrill of excitement deep in the pit of his stomach. This was it, the beginning of his new life.

Steven stepped down beside him, with Ron taking the other side.

It was fantastic; he hadn't even reached Hogwarts and he already felt as though he'd made two friends. This was two more friends than he'd had in his entire life. There had been those in his Muggle life who might have been interested, but none of them had been willing to face Dudley and his friends.

Steven wouldn't have been afraid of Dudley. If he said strange things from time to time, and if expressions of sorrow occasionally passed over his face when he thought no one was looking, he was loyal and kind.

Ron seemed simpler, but Harry thought he also wouldn't have let Dudley stop him.
It was dark, but in the distance a familiar voice called out "First years! First years here!"

Hagrid towered over the sea of small bodies, more than eleven feet high.

Beside him, Steven stopped for a moment. "Is he a fusion?"

Harry glanced over at him, and then at Ron. At Ron's inquisitive look, he shrugged. He didn't always understand Steven, but he assumed it was just another Americanism.

Ron probably thought it was a Muggle expression.

"Mind yer step now, follow me!" Hagrid called out.

They followed Hagrid down a steep, narrow path. Harry worried a little about tripping, especially with the hems of his robe being unfamiliar.

"Won't be long now. Just 'round the bend here," Hagrid said.

Harry heard gasps from up ahead. A moment later as he and his friends rounded the bend he stared too.

There was a great black lake and on the other side, atop a mountain was a great castle with towers and turrets.

Steven wasn't one of those who gasped, Harry noticed. He simply looked up and nodded a little.

"Just four to a boat" Hagrid said.

Harry, Ron and Steven took one boat, with the girl Hermione scrambling in behind them.

"Everbody in?" Hagrid called out. He had a boat to himself. "Then FORWARD!"

Steven didn't seem impressed even when the boats all seemed to move on their own. Even Ron, who had been raised in the Wizarding world seemed a little impressed.

Of course, Steven had admitted to not being completely human. He hadn't said anything more about it, but maybe he knew a lot about magic from the magical side of his family.

The little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy into a dark tunnel in the cliff face. They reached a small, rocky harbor and they scrambled out.

Harry would have thought that Steven would have had difficulty getting out of the boat. He was heavyset, and if it had been Dudley he'd have been lucky not to fall into the water. Steven scrambled out the boat easily though.

They followed Hagrid up a passageway into the rock leading to a door.

Hagrid pounded on the door, and a moment later it swung open.

A tall, stern faced witch stood before them, and Harry couldn't help but feel a little intimidated. He glanced over at Steven, who was watching the woman intently. Steven didn't seem intimidated, and Harry forced himself to stand up straight.

"The firs' years, Professor McGonagall," Hagrid said.

They followed the witch through a vast entrance hall floored in marble. Torches on the wall cast light
across the space and in the distance Harry could see a marble staircase.

They could hear hundreds of voices in the hallway to the right.

The professor began to explain the House system, and sorting, and Harry's stomach began to tighten up.

They hadn't even begun school and there was going to be a test?

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Pulling the hat off, Harry walked shakily to the Gryffindor table.

The table clapped and cheered. Harry was so relieved to have been chosen than he barely noticed what people were saying around him.

There were only five names after his. Dean Thomas and Lisa Turpin.

Steven's name was called next, and he strode forward to sit on the stool. From this distance he looked tiny. Harry was one of the smallest boys in his class, probably because the Durselys didn't feed him much, but Steven was even shorter.

Somehow his personality seemed to make up for his lack of size. He just seemed to take up much more space than other people.

The hat shouted "HUFFLEPUFF!" almost the moment it touched Steven's head.

Instead of getting up, Steven simply sat there for several long moments, almost as though he was arguing with the hat. Finally he pulled the hat off and handed it to professor McGonagall. He glanced over at Harry regretfully and shrugged his shoulders.

Harry felt a moment of regret. He'd hoped that Steven would have been in the same House.

Ron was next, though, and the hat shouted "Gryffindor!"

Harry felt relieved. Ron had desperately wanted to be in Gryffindor, and now they would both be in the same house. At least one of his friends would be with him.

For a moment he worried that Steven would be alone in his house, but a moment later he dismissed the thought.

Someone like Steven would have no problem making friends wherever he went. Besides, from what the hat sang, his house was all about loyalty and friendship.

Still, it felt strange that Harry had been placed in the house that valued courage while Steven had not.

Harry sometimes felt as though he had no courage at all. He had many fears, maybe more than most people. It wasn't as though the Dursleys hadn't given him more than enough to be afraid of.

Of course, if he'd given into those fears he'd have never been able to leave his cupboard under the stairs.

Maybe courage wasn't about being afraid, but about facing those fears?

The Headmaster said something that Harry didn't catch, and then dinner was served.
The food simply appeared before him, and Harry stared in astonishment. This wasn't a half eaten sandwich. The amount of food in front of his plate alone would have fed him for a month.

Hogwarts was an entirely different world.

************

Astronomy class was easy.

Pearl had spent millenia dreaming about going back into space, and so she'd enjoyed telling Steven about the stars from the time he was young. She'd laughed about human constellations; the human believe than Earth was the center of the universe amused her.

She'd known Copernicus and Keppler and other great thinkers in the past. It had only been in the past few centuries that the gems had retreated from humanity. Steven's mother Rose had always been fascinated by humans, and she'd drawn the others with her.

So her education about astronomy had been unusually thorough.

Herbology was almost as good. Steven had inherited his mother's abilities with plants, although thankfully he'd managed to not raise the contents of the first year greenhouse as a sentient army dedicated to protecting him.

He still wondered sometimes what had happened to the watermelon army that he'd raised and later sent into the sea.

Still, he enjoyed working in the earth, and he enjoyed learning about the magical plants. Professor Sprout was kindhearted and she seemed to have a talent for saying the comforting thing.

History of magic was a struggle though. The professor was a ghost and he droned on and on about names and dates that didn't make any sense to Steven. The only saving grace was that his fellow students seemed to be struggling almost as much as he did.

It was difficult to sit through the entire class trying to take notes when he'd never had to take notes before, and he'd begun to wonder if he even belonged at the school at all.

So it was with a sense of trepidation that he followed the other Hufflepuffs into Transfigurations.

It was a large room filled with rows of desks, just like history of magic. Unlike that class, there was no ghost at the head of the class, only a cat sitting on the desk.

Steven stopped suddenly, uneasy.

Ernie McMillan, his housemate asked, "Steven?"

Steven shook his head. Not taking his eyes off the cat, he slid into his seat.

Amethyst's favorite form had been a cat. Sometimes it had seemed as though she spent more time in other forms than she had her own. It wasn't until later that he'd learned that she didn't like herself. She'd relished the chance to become anyone or anything other than herself.

As the students finally settled down, the cat leaped off the desk, transforming in a single motion into the imposing figure of Professor McGonagall.

Steven stiffened, forcing himself not to hyperventilate.
"They aren't going to make us do that, are they?"

The last time he'd tried shape shifting into a cat, he'd almost died, his body turning into a hideous mass of cats. He'd been lucky to return to his own form.

Ernie shook his head. Unlike Steven he was good at school.

"She's an Animagus. That's rare magic and you have to have a license to be able to do it."

Steven forced his breathing to slow.

They weren't going to force him to shape shift. This wasn't going to be a dangerous, life threatening class.

The other children had been talking among themselves, but the professor quickly silenced them.

"Of all the magics you will learn at Hogwarts, transfiguration is some of the most dangerous. Any tomfoolery will not be tolerated. You will be asked to leave the class and not come back."

Steven nodded soberly. Ernie had told him that transfiguration was the art of changing other things instead of yourself, but if it was anything like becoming a mass of cats it was dangerous indeed.

With a wave of her wand, McGonagall changed her desk into a pig.

Immediately Steven was distracted, wondering if the pig remembered having been a desk, and if changing back into a desk was a form of murder. Was creating life and then taking it away again right?

She gave them each a match and had them try to turn it into a needle.

Steven struggled, and only the fact that the students around him were struggling gave him any hope at all. Ernie was the only one who's managed to change his match much at all.

Ernie and Hannah Abbott did their best to reassure him that they would help him.

Defense against the Dark Arts sounded useful. Steven had learned through hard experience that knowing how to fight evil was important. Their first class with Professor Quirrell seemed easy enough, although the room smelled liked Fish Stu's Pizza back home, and Quirrell wore a strange turban. He smelled of garlic.

Although he seemed innocuous enough, Steven felt uneasy around Professor Quirrell. He didn't particularly like him, which was very strange.

Steven liked everyone. He'd even liked Peridot when they first met. Only Jasper and some of the more dangerous gem monsters hadn't made his list of people he liked.

He'd even tried to domesticate a Centipede once, teaching it loyalty through kindness and salty potato chips despite it's tendency to spew acid when it got excited.

The fact that Quirrell made him uneasy was unusual enough that he had to examine his own reasons. It wasn't the stutter. He'd dealt with people who were hard to understand without any problems at all in the past.

It wasn't the stench of garlic. Jenny Pizza and her entire family had that; Steven had been polite enough not to mention it, knowing it was the price they paid for working in a pizzeria.
There was just something...Steven couldn't put his finger on it.

He dismissed the thought. Doubtlessly he'd bring the professor around. In his experience, almost everyone could be made into a friend if you worked hard enough at it.

The few exceptions had been exceptionally dangerous, attempting to destroy humanity. With the exception of Jasper they hadn't even been actively evil. They'd simply had a job to do, creating more gems for the armies of the empire. It was simply unfortunate that the process that created new members of their species also drained the life force right out of a planet.

The Kindergartens had been completely devoid of life for over six thousand years, not able to grow as much as a single lichen or piece of moss. If they'd had their way they'd have done that to the entire planet.

Sometimes Steven wondered if the definition of being evil was just not caring.

Finally potions class came.

Steven had been looking forward to potions. The dour professor had tried to pretend that he didn't like Steven, but Steven just knew that he'd already made inroads with him.

He'd already decided that the professor was a lot like his friend Lars. He was someone who liked to present a prickly outside as a way of hiding the goodness inside.

The professor glowered down at him as the students settled into their seats.

"Mr. Universe," he said. "Where would you find a bezoar?"

***********

"Out of a goat?"

The boy stared up at him with a horrified look. Any other student he would have suspected of mocking him, but Severus Snape had been around Steven Universe for the majority of an afternoon. The boy didn't have a disingenuous bone in his body.

"Wouldn't that hurt the goat?"

Snape stared down his nose at the boy. "There are ways of extracting the bezoar without injuring the animal."

Most wizards didn't bother, of course. Most bezoars were extracted from animals already meant for some other purpose. He didn't bother to inform the boy.

"It is used to save you from most poisons."

"So that's why goats can eat almost anything!" Steven said.

Snape glanced at the boy, surprised. Most Ravenclaws didn't make that association, not right away. Of course, the boy's reasoning as to why was undoubtedly wrong, but still...

"What would you get if you added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

The boy shrugged.

He didn't even seem to be bothered by his ignorance.
"It creates a sleeping draught so powerful as to be called the Draught of living death."

The boy's expression cleared. "Oh! For the goat!"

The children around him giggled. They undoubtedly thought the boy was being clever, but Snape knew better. The boy was too much of a dunderhead to even try to be sarcastic.

"It could be used much as Muggle healers use certain chemicals before they cut someone open," Snape acknowledged, "But it is typically used for other purposes."

The Purebloods looked horrified while the Muggleborn seemed unaffected. Muggles didn't have access to advanced magical healing and had to make do as well as they could.

"What is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

"Wolfsbane is for werewolves," Steven said. "Monkshood is for...monks?"

"They are the same thing!" Snape said sharply.

"I didn't know monks and werewolves were the same thing." Steven said.

The class burst out laughing.

"The plant," Snape said, gritting his teeth. "Monkshood and Wolfsbane are two names for the same plant. And I will see you in detention, Mr. Universe."

Steven leaned over to his classmate, doubtlessly to ask what detention was.

The Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs got along perfectly well, unlike the barely controlled chaos between the Griffendores and the Slytherins. There were no attempts to sabotage each others' potions, and so there were only the usual mistakes leading to injury due to carelessness.

He'd tried for years to pair the Slytherins with the Ravenclaws and the Griffendores with the Hufflepuffs. It would be far safer, but Albus Dumbledore believed in the "spirit of competition," and refused to allow it.

Sometimes Snape thought it was his way of continuing to punish him for his past as a Death Eater.

Because the class was relatively quiet, he had more of an opportunity than usual to observe the boy, Steven.

To his surprise, the boy was meticulous in his potion preparations. He followed instructions exactly, and he was neat and precise while weighing the dried beetles and crushing the snake fangs, although he visibly winced when he saw the ingredients. Doubtlessly he was hoping that the snakes had lived full and satisfying lives before their fangs had been pulled from their decaying corpses.

When a careless classmate caused his cauldron to melt and explode, the boy lunged across the room, grabbing the boy and bouncing to a stop out of range of the bubbling mess.

He held his classmate above him in one hand.

"Skills!" He shouted.

Despite himself, Snape had to be impressed with the boy's reaction time.

He was even more impressed when the boy was able to complete his potion despite the interruption
with only a small variation in the color.

The boy stepped into the room at the allotted time.

Most students crept into detention, with looks of fear on their face. A few swaggered defiantly.

Steven walked into the room as though he didn't understand that he was in trouble.

"You may begin by cleaning these cauldrons out by hand," Snape said. "No magic."

He showed the boy the cleaning supplies, and the boy went work willingly enough. He wasn't as precise at this as he was at his potions work, and Snape had to correct him several times.

After a time, Snape spoke.

"Your potion work was...acceptable today."

The boy looked up at him, and his face broke out into a large grin.

"Had you worked with potions in your previous life?"

The boy shook his head.

"Most children aren't as proficient as you proved to be," Snape said. "How do you explain it?"

The boy frowned for a moment. "I guess I grew up a little different than most kids."

An understatement if Snape had ever heard one.

"The gems don't have children," Steven continued. "They are created as adults, and that means that they don't have childhoods."

Interesting, although it seemed to be off topic.

"Garnet, amethyst. Pearl...they did their best, but I don't think they knew what a human childhood was supposed to look like. My dad tried to tell them, but once I moved in with them, he wasn't around all of the time."

Snape stared at the boy without speaking, hoping he would eventually get to the point.

"They don't either...well, Amethyst does, but she'd just as soon eat the box as what was in it. None of them knew how to cook anything other than pies...Pearl liked the smell of them."

The infuriating thing about eleven year olds was that they were incapable to telling a story without going on numerous tangents.

"So I've been cooking for myself since I was six."

Sometimes they also skipped steps.

"So your guardians allowed you to work with open flames from the time you were six."

"Pearl taught me to read directions," Steven said. "And they let me cook what I wanted. I learned pretty soon that it tasted better if I actually did what it said on the box."

"And this?" Snape asked, gesturing at the sloppy cauldrons.
Steven flushed. "Pearl loved to clean. Even when the other gems tried to help she took over."

Snape stared at the boy for a moment, then sighed. "You need to do the cauldrons again. Leaving remains from old potions contaminates the new potions."

"And that can make your cauldron melt," Steven said, staring up at him.

Snape nodded. "Using magic to clean them can affect the potions."

The boy looked at him for a moment, then nodded, a look of determination on his face. He set to work on the cauldrons much more vigorously.

Snape wasn't sure what had possessed him to explain himself to the boy, but apparently knowing that this was important did wonders for his work ethic.

Snape's first impression of the boy had been that he was a dangerous dunderhead, oblivious to the harm to which he was going to expose others.

Undoubtedly when it came to harm to himself, the boy wasn't all that concerned.

Yet he'd saved a classmate from a trip to the infirmary, and now, as the boy bent to scrub the cauldrons even harder, Snape saw his shirt slip up.

There were boils on his back, undoubtedly from where he'd put himself between the classmate and the potion.

Snape knew from experience how painful those boils could be. Most children his age would have made a dramatic production of being injured. Children loved drama.

Yet the boy had had them all day, and he hadn't said a word to anyone.

Even now, he was scrubbing his second cauldron.

Snape checked the first cauldron Steven had re-cleaned, and it gleamed.

By the end of the evening, the cauldrons were cleaner than they'd been since they were new.

The boy never complained, not once.

As the boy stood up, Snape handed him a vial.

"Rub this where ever you have boils. They should be gone by the morning."

The boy stared up at him for a moment, and then a smile bloomed on his face as he stared up at Snape.

As he left, Snape found himself staring at the door.

The boy was dangerous, but not in the way he'd thought. He'd thought the boy was good at manipulating people, at reading body language, and doubtlessly some of that was true.

Yet people liked him instinctively not because of how he was able to manipulate, but rather because of what he was. He was honest to a fault, naive even, but not stupid. He genuinely cared for other people in a way that felt alien to Snape.

In Snape's experience, most people only had the capacity to care for a small number of those they
were close to. Some people were not able to care for anyone else other than themselves. His former master had been one such.

Steven seemed to care for everyone, down to those who supplied the potions ingredients.

It was hard not to respond to someone who genuinely liked you, and unlike most of the popular children who would occupy their time with frivolities, the boy seemed destined for more.

Unfortunately, those who would follow in his wake would be far less impervious to damage than he was.

The boy would bear watching.
Troll

Steven!" Harry called out.

He'd heard about Steven's detention, the first in the entire school year. He only wished he'd been brave enough to stand up to Snape that way.

Of course, he'd been too flabbergasted to think properly. He'd thought he'd left all that sort of abuse back home with the Dursleys. The Wizarding world was supposed to be better than that, and it had been a crushing disappointment to find out that it wasn't.

He promised himself that he would be quicker on his feet the next time.

The American boy slowed down and waited on him.

For a moment Harry thought about asking him about detention the previous evening, but realized that it might be a sore subject.

Instead he said, "I'm going to visit Hagrid and Ron's coming with me. Would you like to go?"

Steven frowned and then said, "I was going to ask him if he was a fusion..."

"I heard he was a half-giant," Harry said quietly. "People don't seem to like to talk about it."

Steven brightened. "So he's like me!"

Harry stared at the shorter boy for a moment. He couldn't see a resemblance at all, but that didn't matter. "So do you want to go or not?"

Steven nodded eagerly.

Setting out in search of Ron, they found him and soon were making their way across the castle grounds. Hagrid lived in a hut at the edge of the Forbidden forest.

Harry noticed Ron glancing nervously in the direction of the forest, but Steven seemed oblivious. He walked as though he didn't have a care in the world.

Although he still didn't understand a lot about his new friend, Harry had to admire his courage. He still didn't understand why the smaller boy hadn't ended up in Gryffindor. It was hard to get to know him as well as he'd like when they were in separate houses, but he assumed he would have to make do.

He knocked at the door to Hagrid's hut.

A scrabbling noise came from inside and a moment later Hagrid's voice, "Back, Fang! Back!"

"Come in boys. Make yerselves at home."

Fang broke free and lunged toward Ron.

Steven stepped forward, interposing himself between the huge dog and his intended victim.
The dog seemed to grin, and then it was licking all over Steven's face.

Steven giggled, grinning as he was doused in saliva.

Ron leaned forward and whispered, "Thanks, mate."

"This is Ron," Harry said.

Steven rolled the massive dog on its side and was rubbing its belly. He grinned and seemed carefree.

"One of the Weasleys, I'll bet." Hagrid said. "And who's this?"

Steven stood up, giving the dog a last belly rub. He didn't even bother to wipe his face as he extended his hand.

"I'm Steven. Steven Universe."

"Nice ter meet ya, Steven," Hagrid said.

When he shook Steven's hand, a sudden surprised expression crossed his face. "That's quite a grip you've got there."

Steven grinned, pulling his hand back. "I'm half human on my dad's side."

The huge man stared down at him for a moment, then grinned. "You don't say? My da was human too."

Smiling up at the big man, Steven said, "I think us half-humans have got to stick together."

Glancing at Harry and Ron, Hagrid leaned forward and said, "What about them?"

Harry felt Ron stiffen beside him. From what he'd seen already, pureblooded wizards were very sensitive about non-humans. He'd heard someone muttering something about the goblin wars, but since he kept falling asleep in Binn's class he wasn't sure what they were talking about.

"They can be in the club," Steven said. "They're half humans too."

Hagrid frowned. "I'm not so sure about that. I knew James and Lilly..."

"They just happen to be half human on both sides!" Steven said.

Beside him, Ron relaxed.

Hagrid stared at him for a moment, then chuckled. "Yer a good boy."

He stood up and moment's later returned with rock cakes, which were shapeless lumps with raisins that almost broke their teeth.

Steven muttered something about Amethyst loving them, but he didn't seem to eat any more of them than Harry or Ron. Instead he simply petted Fang as he drooled all over his school robes, soaking them. It didn't seem to bother the boy at all.

He would have asked Hagrid why Professor Snape hated him, but after what had happened to Steven, it occurred to Harry that Snape might just be a smarter version of Filch, the disagreeable caretaker who didn't seem to care for anyone.
Glancing at the paper on Hagrid's table, which was screaming about a break in in Gringott's, Harry said, "Hey, this happened on my birthday! It might have happened when we were there!"

For the first time, the big man didn't look Harry in the eye. He was hiding something.

The big man's face was expressive, and he couldn't hide his feelings at all well. Normally he seemed so honest that it didn't matter, but now Harry's mind whirled.

He'd seen Hagrid remove something from a vault at Gringott's the very day of the attempted theft. Had he gotten it out just in time?

What was it that he was hiding?

Steven sighed. "I wish I had my Ukelele."

Ron stared at Steven, and for once Harry was just as much in the dark. Harry was sure it was a Muggle thing, but the Durselys hadn't exactly let him watch a lot of telly from his cupboard under the stairs. Dudley had been even worse. He'd managed to catch some things of course, but he'd rarely got to seen an entire program. He mostly caught things in snatches while doing his chores.

At their expression, Steven explained. "It's kind of like a guitar, but from Hawaii. My dad started teaching me to play it when I was three."

Looking down at the dog's massive head in his lap, Steven hesitated, then said, "He's a musician. He was even a rock star for a little while, although he wasn't famous."

He hadn't talked much about his family. Harry assumed they were still back in the United States.

"You could always visit him. The floo network reaches the states," Ron said. "It's not like you have to take a muggle airicpter or whatever."

Steven looked stricken.

"I'm not..." he stopped for a moment, visibly collecting himself. "I'm not going to see him again, ever. Not him, or Connie, or Lars or Sadie, and I'm worried the gems aren't ever going to get better."

Closing his eyes for a moment, he said, "I'm alone here."

"I don't understand," Ron said. "Are they all dead?"

Steven hesitated, then said, "If I tell you something, can you keep it just between us?"

The boys nodded.

Glancing up at Hagrid, he said, "Everybody I know is in another universe, and I can't ever go back there."

He told them the story, his voice flat and dull. It was almost as though he was telling a story about someone else, as though it hadn't been him it had happened to.

After he told them, they sat in stunned silence for more than a minute.

"I wanted to take my ukelele but there wasn't room," Steven said. "I had pictures of Connie and my friends on my phone, but electronics don't work around magic here."

Harry couldn't help but stare at the boy, unable to comprehend some of the things he'd been told.
Steven was his own mother? Harry hadn't understood that at all, but it appeared that they'd both lost their respective mothers when they were babies.

He didn't understand much about the war, or the spaceships shaped like body parts. The experiments done to fuse gems sounded like one of the bad monster movies he'd sometimes seen Dudley watching.

Poisoning his entire world so that he could save it, but never being able to live there again was more than Harry could comprehend.

He hoped he would never have to make those kinds of sacrifices.

Most importantly, it seemed that the happy Steven they sometimes saw was the real Steven. The serious child they'd been seeing was simply trauma.

"Playing music was a way for me and my dad to feel closer, even though we didn't live together," Steven said. He sighed, his hand stopping its compulsive petting of Fang's head.

Harry suspected that he was comforting himself as much as he was the dog.

"They've got music classes," Hagrid said. "It's just for third years, but I know the professor and I'll put a good word in for you. I never heard of the ukelele, but the professor has all sorts of instruments he doesn't use, and even if he doesn't have once, he could transfigure one up. That wouldn't be as good as a real one of course..."

Steven looked up at the big man, his face looking hopeful for the first time.

Music, apparently was important to him.

"Steven!" Hermione called out.

It was a moment before she realized that he was with Harry Potter and Ron Weasely, and she stopped uncertainly.

"Hey!" he said.

"I heard you were having trouble in Professor McGonagall's class, and I wondered if you could use some help?"

She heard a rude snort from Ron and for a moment she considered turning around and walking away. Ron had been nothing but rude to her since they'd met on the train. He'd latched onto Harry from the moment they'd met and he seemed very territorial. It was almost as though he was afraid someone would replace him as Harry's best friend.

"That'd be great!" Steven said. "I've never been to school before, so it'll be really helpful to have somebody who's good at school to give me some pointers."

He smiled at her, and Hermione found herself relaxing. She felt a rush of pleasure at the compliment, even if it was true. Helping Steven was almost her civic duty.

Besides, it wasn't as though she had a lot of other things to do. The classwork was easy, and there was only so many times she could go over it before even she grew bored.

In her old school she'd just read ahead, but her parents had balked at buying her books that were more than one year ahead. They'd wanted her to make friends, take a little time to enjoy herself.
She didn't have any friends in this place; she didn't really know why. At least at home she could always go home to her parents. Here she had no one.

Steven though struck her as someone who could be a friend.

"The only test I ever had involved giant boulders, walls of fire and swinging blades," Steven said. He hesitated. "You don't think they'll have any of those here do you?"

His voice actually sounded hopeful.

"Only if Neville keeps doing the way he has been in potions," Ron said.

Hermione didn't allow herself to smile, even if she privately thought the joke was a little funny. Neville was a disaster, but it was rude of Ron to mention it.

"Where are you going now?" she asked.

"We're going to get a musical instrument for Steven," Harry said. "A...uke something."

"Ukulele?" Hermione asked.

With a glance at Steven, Harry nodded.

"I play the violin," Hermione said. "My parents had me take lessons."

"Like Connie!" Steven said. His face lit up for a second before dimming. "My friend...from back home."

More than a friend from his expression.

"I know where the music room is," Hermione said.

"Of course you do," Ron said, rolling his eyes.

"I'll show you the way," she said.

"Is that...Muggle music?" Ron asked.

Hermione glanced at Harry and they both shook their heads slightly. Neither of them had ever heard the tune.

At times, it was haunting, in a way that Hermione hadn't had much experience with. At other times it was raw and visceral.

They were in the great hall, and there was no one around, although Hermione kept glancing nervously around. If they'd all been in the same House it would have been a lot easier, but there weren't a lot of places where Steven could play for them without other people watching.

"Is that from your...from Beach City?" Harry asked, glancing at Hermione.

There were secrets in that look. It wasn't outright rejection, like she'd gotten from Ron, but it still stung.

Steven's eyes were closed; after a moment he looked up.

"No," he said. "I'm just jamming."
"You're improvising?" Hermione asked. She winced at the sound of her own voice. She was more grateful than ever that she hadn't let Steven talk her into taking a violin.

She could play well enough, if she had the music in front of her, but improvising was beyond anything she could envision for herself.

"How do you just come up with something like...that?" she asked. "Without practicing."

"I think it's a gem thing," Steven said. "They can all do it. My dad can do it some too, but he's better if he writes it out first."

"He's a professional musician," Harry said, glancing at Hermione.

"So there's music on both sides of my family," Steven said. There was a melancholy look on his face.

Steven always acted so happy; he had a smile for everyone.

Hermione had a vague sense that Steven had once been even happier. If his music was anything to judge by, he was at least as unhappy inside as she was.

She resisted the urge to hug him; boys were easily embarrassed. Still, she smiled widely.

At least one person at Hogwarts had always been nice to her; the least she could do was return the favor.

"You have to get the words AND the gestures right," Hermione said.

They'd been studying for weeks, and still Steven struggled. If he'd been an idiot like Ron, Hermione would have given up, but he was bright.

"I'm not even really a wizard," Steven said. He sighed. "What if this kind of magic isn't something I can actually do?"

"The Aurors at the Ministry seemed to think differently," Hermione said. "Dumbledore seems to think you can do it too."

It wasn't that he was even bad at all subjects. From all reports he did very well in potions, Herbology and Astronomy.

He simply struggled with writing and with the practical applications of magic.

"You do well in potions," she said. "So I know you can follow instructions."

"I can cook," Steven said, shrugging.

"And I've seen you juggling three plates of breakfast and an apple without dropping a single piece of food," Hermione said. "So I know you don't have any problems with your hand-eye coordination."

"Skills," Steven said, smirking.

Hermione hesitated. "You're over thinking things. You worry too much about not being able to do it, and then you can't do it."

"You worry about things," Steven pointed out.
"I worry about not doing enough," Hermione retorted. "Not about not being able to do them at all."

Steven was quiet for a long moment. "I always worried about not being magical enough. My powers took forever to show up, and then it took me forever to get control of them."

He'd opened up to Hermione about his past during their study sessions.

"If you spend all your energy worrying, it doesn't leave anything for actually doing things," Hermione said. "That's why people like Harry and Ron do so well."

Steven looked up.

"Ron's just worried about his next meal and Harry...he's a doer more than a thinker."

Steven was quiet. "Harry worries."

"He's got a lot to worry about," Hermione said. "The way Professor Snape treats him."

Steven looked uncomfortable.

For some reason, he seemed to believe that Professor Snape was a good person, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

"You're the smartest person in school," Steven said. "I don't know why you bother with me."

Now it was Hermione's turn to look uncomfortable. "You're my friend."

Her only friend, as it turned out.

Harry didn't hate her, but he didn't have much to do with her either, and Ron actively conspired to make her life more difficult.

The other students seemed offended by her for some reason she could never quite understand.

Steven looked at her for a moment, then sighed.

"I've told you about the gems, right?"

She nodded.

"Pearl is the smart one. She's a lot like you, really, she worries too much and she likes to talk about all the stuff she knows," Steven said. "It doesn't bother me, because I know I don't know anything anyway."

He hesitated. "Amethyst, though...she always felt like Pearl was showing off, trying to make her look stupid."

"She wasn't," he hurried to explain, "At least not most of the time. I think Amethyst felt stupid and she blamed Pearl for pointing that out."

Hermione frowned.

"And you're saying I'm like Pearl."

Steven nodded reluctantly.

"And who do I make feel stupid?"
Shrugging uncomfortably, Steven said "Everyone?"

Staring at him, Hermione was speechless.

"I'm just saying," he said uncomfortably. "Everybody likes to feel smart sometimes."

It was grammar school all over again.

Staring at him, Hermione tried not to cry.

How could he even suggest that she made people feel stupid? It wasn't as if she called people names like Ron Weasley or Draco Malfoy.

All she had ever done was try to do her best.

"I don't know what you are talking about," she said. She looked away from him.

"Imagine that you were playing basketball with a group of three year olds," Steven said, his voice patient. "And you kept making basket after basket. How long would it be before they started to resent you?"

"They aren't three!" Hermione snapped. "They've all got the same opportunities I have...some even more than me. The purebloods have been around d magic their whole lives."

"So have I," Steven said. "And I still need your help."

"It's not the same thing," she said impatiently. "They can study just as easily as I can."

"Can they?" Steven asked. "How many of them get things on the first try like you do?"

"Then they should work harder, instead of spending all their time worrying about quidditch and dresses and...whatever they spend their spare time on."

"Like friends?" Steven asked.

Hermione flushed and looked away.

"Everybody knows you are the smartest," Steven said. "You don't have anything to prove."

"Tell that to Draco and his pureblood friends."

"Do you really care what they think?" Steven said. He grimaced. "It would be nice to think you can be friends with everybody, but some people..."

He sighed.

"It's got to be hiding something," Ron was saying. "Or they wouldn't put a bloody three headed dog in the middle of a school."

"There's a trap door under it," Harry added.

Steven was sitting at the Gryffindor table as he sometimes did. He spent more time with Hermione that Harry and Ron usually, but currently they were on the outs.
"I like dogs," Steven said. "I'll bet a dog with three heads is even better than one with one."

Ron shook his head. "It nearly took our heads off. We were lucky to get away with our skins."

Hermione passed by and Harry and Ron grew quiet.

Steven waved, but she walked to the end of the table.

"She's still mad at me," Steven said glumly.

"Somebody had to tell her," Ron said. "She was bloody unbearable."

Harry stared at her and said, "She's been better, though. She was a lot nicer about helping us with Wingardium Leviosa."

"You should be nicer to her," Steven said. "She'd be a great friend."

"Her?" Ron shook his head. "She's..."

Harry elbowed him in the side. "You should be nicer. After what you said to Hannah Abbott today..."

Steven frowned. "What did he say to her? Hannah's my friend."

Ron flushed. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"It upset her enough that she's been crying in the girl's bathroom all afternoon," Harry said.

"What did you say?" Steven asked, staring at Ron.

Before Ron could reply, Professor Quirrell staggered into the dining hall. "Troll...in the dungeons..."

He fell to the ground.

There was chaos immediately, and people only stopped talking when Dumbledore lit off fireworks with his wand.

"Prefects...lead your housemate back to the dormitories immediately."

Steven stood to go with his housemates, who were looking confused.

Harry said, "Hannah won't know about the troll."

"Which bathroom is she in?" Steven asked.

"The girls' bathroom on this floor," Harry said.

"I'll tell the prefect," Steven said. "It's not too far out of the way. We'll swing by and pick her up. Hufflepuffs take care of their own."

He gave Ron a hard look, and Ron had the grace to look chastened.

Steven ran up to the prefect assigned to his year. "Hannah Abbot's in the girl's bathroom, and she won't know about the troll."

The male and female prefects glanced at each other and scowled.
"It's on the way," Steven said.

They nodded, grimly.

"Hufflepuffs," they said. "With us."

Rounding up the frightened, confused members of Steven's year group took longer than it should have.

The Slytherins and Ravenclaws left in an orderly fashion, and the Gryffindors left rowdily.

Finally, the older teenagers managed to get the puffs rounded up and moving in an orderly fashion.

They were anxious; Steven could see it in their body language, but they did their best not to let the younger children know.

Steven followed to the rear, making sure the other children didn't fall behind. The two teenagers should have had one in the front and one in the rear, but in their anxiety they walked closely together, muttering to each other in uneasy voices.

They were getting close to the girls' bathroom, and Steven felt a sense of relief. They'd gather Hannah and get back to their rooms and everyone would be safe.

The front of the group turned a corner and Steven suddenly heard a roar and a scream.

He grimaced and threw himself through the group of scattering Hufflepuffs.

Both prefects were on the ground; it looked like they'd been hit by shrapnel from where the troll had struck the wall with it's club.

It was twelve feet tall, and it probably seemed huge to the children behind him. But it wasn't even in the top ten compared to the gem monsters Steven had fought.

The smell, though was much worse than any of them.

He stepped forward, his hands open.

"Can't we talk about this?" he said, forcing a smile.

The creature stared at him and it didn't seem to understand a word he said.

It growled and started running toward them.

Steven glanced behind him and sighed. He'd hoped that the others would have had the sense to run, but instead they were frozen, staring up at the creature bearing down on them.

"All right," he said. "Let's do this."

As the club came crashing down toward him, he summoned his shield.

Snape forced himself not to grimace. Fluffy had bitten him, and there hadn't been time to find a healing potion.

An entire year of Hufflepuffs were missing, and the threat of the troll was apparently entirely real. Undoubtedly it had been released by Quirrell as a distraction in his attempt to steal the stone.
He'd managed to thwart him for the evening, but the missing class was still a matter of concern.

"What's that noise?"

Minerva stopped and listened.

In the distance they could hear a crashing sound, and the sound of singing.

Flitwick moved behind him, quickly considering the size of his legs. With a glance at the other teachers, Snape began to run.

As they turned the corner, they stopped. Despite himself, Severus couldn't help but stare.

A group of Hufflepuffs was huddled in a terrified group while Steven Universe fought the troll.

In one hand he held a shield that was obnoxiously pink. In the other he held what looked like a plank from the door to the girl's bathroom.

The club lashed out, striking the shield and the boy continued to sing.

There was something odd about his fighting style. He kept stopping for short periods, almost as though he expected something to happen that clearly was not happening.

Hand to hand fighting wasn't at all popular among Wizardkind, although some purebloods took up fencing as a hobby. It took Severus a moment to realize what was wrong with the boy's fighting style.

He was used to fighting in a team, and he kept unconsciously reaching for a partner who wasn't there.

How he was able to sing and roll between the troll's legs, Severus had no idea. He didn't know the song, but it seemed to be about protecting friends.

The troll looked confused. A moment later, the boy hit him behind the knees.

A moment after that he was falling, directly onto the boy. The troll's head hit the floor with a loud cracking sound.

Minerva rushed forward, but the body was already rolling to the side.

"I'm gonna need a bath," Severus heard the boy mutter.

A moment later he smelt the distinct smell of troll. This one was even more malodorous than the usual member of its species.

Steven stared at the troll even as Minerva rushed up to him.

"It's ok!" he called out. "You can come out now Hannah."

From the girls' bathroom, and frightened looking Hufflepuff slowly emerged, staring at the troll.

"Are you all right, Mr. Universe?" Minerva asked, regaining her composure.

Steven shrugged. "I'm fine."

"Why were you singing?"
"I was hoping a professor would hear me before I had to hurt him," Steven said, glancing down at the unconscious troll. "Gem monsters just go poof, but..."

The implication was that he could have taken the troll down more quickly if he'd been willing to hurt him.

The boy had obviously been given combat training of some kind.

Snape had known he was dangerous, but if he was able to take down a full grown mountain troll this easily, he was even more dangerous than he'd believed.

"Where are your prefects?" Minerva asked sternly.

The boy paled, rushing over to two bodies laying on the floor.

The huddled mass of Hufflepuffs had obscured them. Severus stifled a curse and stepped forward. "We need to get them to Pomfrey right away."

"I think they got hit by shrapnel," Steven was saying. He stared at them for a moment, then he suddenly brightened.

To Severus's disgust, he licked both his hands, knelt down, and before any of the professors could stop him, he slapped his hands on both teenagers heads.

As the wounds began to knit themselves, he grinned up at them.

"I've got healing spit!"

"He wasn't a hundred feet tall," Steven said irritably. "Maybe ten or twelve, tops."

For once Hermione was sitting with Ron and Harry, although she occasionally gave Ron a cautious glance.

"I heard you saved the lives of Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall," Ron said enthusiastically. He didn't bother to close his mouth when he was eating.

Hermione looked disgusted, but she didn't bother to correct him. It was an improvement over her previous behavior; she'd have lectured him for sure.

Ron on the other hand...he seemed to do well enough with boys, but he just didn't know how to act around girls. Harry had a touch of that too, but he'd been locked in a cupboard for the last ten years.

Maybe it was because he'd been raised in a family of almost all boys.

"It was just two prefects," Steven said. "People keep making more of it than it was."

Ron grinned. "I heard you woke that Hufflepuff girl prefect with a kiss."

Steven scowled at Ron. "I've got healing spit. I applied it with my hand."

"You saved the entire first year of Hufflepuffs from a troll," Hermione said firmly, with a glance at Ron. "It should have been worth more than ten points."
Steven shrugged. "They probably don't want to encourage people to go troll hunting."

Ron snorted. "Nobody would be that barmy."

"How'd you learn to fight like that?" Harry asked.

"Pearl taught me," Steven said. He stared at his bowl of porridge. "Me and Connie. Connie is a lot better at it than I am...and we mostly learned to fight as a team. It was weird fighting alone."

He felt his mood blacken as it always did when he thought about Connie or his father, or any of this friends from Beach City. It was easier just to focus on the present. If he thought about any of them, or the crystal gems, he tended to feel bleak and empty.

He forced himself to smile.

"At least you'll be getting to play today," He said to Harry, hoping to change the subject.

He glanced back at the Hufflepuff table and forced himself not to wince at the expressions on the faces of his classmates. Hero worship wasn't something that he was used to; it certainly wasn't something he'd ever wanted.

Even the older 'Puffs stared at him when they thought he wasn't looking. They weren't all that good at being sneaky.

Harry smiled and said, "I hope I do well."

"You're our secret weapon," Ron said, more loudly than he probably should have. "There's no way we can lose."

The entire crowd gasped as Harry's broom buckled from under him.

"Somebody's hexed it," Hermione said grimly.

She kept looking at Snape, who was staring up at Harry and muttering. To Steven it looked like he was trying to protect Harry, not hurt him, but he'd never been able to convince Hermione that Snape was a decent person.

She stood up and began making her way along the bleachers.

Steven grimaced; there wasn't time to worry about it. If Harry fell from this height, he could easily be hurt or possibly even die. Steven wasn't all that sure about how fragile normal people were, although he knew they were a lot more than he was.

Now Harry was hanging by one hand.

Steven pushed his way forward, but by the time he reached the front of the crowd, Harry was already falling.

People don't poof. They only got hurt.

He lunged forward, but he was too slow. The world seemed to slow around him, but he just wasn't fast enough.

Somehow Harry had managed to keep hold of the broom as he fell and he was able to pull it out of the dive at the last minute, rolling to a stop in a move that Steven himself would have been pleased to
accomplish.

He coughed, and the snitch popped into his hand.

Steven stopped. Harry looked to be all right, but it easily could have happened the other way. He hadn't been fast enough again. Any of the gems would have been able to save Harry easily, but Steven was always too slow.

If he'd been faster, maybe Lapis and Lion would still be...

He shook his head, ignoring the cheering of the crowd around him as he walked off the field.

Hero worship; what a laugh. If only everyone knew.

Away from the Quidditch pitch, the castle was strangely deserted. Everyone was still down celebrating the Gryffindor win. Steven hadn't been in the castle when it was this empty.

He wandered; even when he heard the sounds of the students returning to the lower level, he ignored it.

Sometimes he wondered what he was doing here. Was he just biding his time until the gems woke up? Was Hogwarts just some kind of holding pen for someone who was too inconvenient to deal with otherwise.

Even when the gems woke up, what sort of life would they have?

They'd been the guardians of the earth, spending most of their time fighting corrupted gem monsters and being the caretakers of gem facilities that had deteriorated over the last six thousand years.

They wouldn't even have a temple to live in.

He couldn't see Amethyst or Garnet getting a job. Pearl maybe...she'd be a good teacher. What would they do with their time, now that they had thousands of years with no purpose other than to take care of Steven.

And what would happen when he was gone? Would he live a normal human lifespan or would he live much longer?

What would happen when he finally poofed. Would he be reborn without his human limitations? Or would his mother finally re-emerge?

In his old life he'd rarely let himself wonder about those things. There was always so much to do, people to see and monsters to fight.

In this new world though...he wasn't a wizard, not really.

He'd always been a creature with one foot in each world, neither gem nor human, but it hadn't really mattered that much in Beach City. People had accepted him for who he was, and the gems had loved him.

Here...he didn't know how long it would be before the gems woke up. Would he be an adult by that time?

What sort of role did he see for himself in this new world?
Maybe an auror. He liked helping people, keeping them from getting hurt. He was uneasy about all these memory charms he heard they did on Muggles, but maybe he could just help fight bad wizards.

Or maybe he could work with plants. His mother had loved plants, and he seemed to have a lot of talent in herbology.

Maybe even working as a healer; Professor Snape had expressed an interest in experimenting with his spit, which seemed somewhat more effective than usual wizard methods of healing.

His natural optimism reasserted itself. He'd make a place for the gems. If they didn't wake up for a long time, he would create a home for them.

If they woke earlier, they'd make a home together.

In the distance, he heard someone walking. He scowled. He didn't feel like talking to anyone right now. After his failure on the Quidditch pitch...

There was an open door to his right; he slipped through it.

It looked like an unused classroom, except that in the corner was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling. It stood on two clawed feet.

He closed the door quietly behind him and he slipped forward.

The mirror had an inscription; Erised something...he didn't know any of the words.

Looking at himself in the mirror, he looked pale and drained. But there was something...there were other people in the mirror.

The gems were there!

He was holding hands with Connie, and his dad was behind him with his hand on his shoulder.

His mom was there too, behind his dad, as impossible as it was that they could both exist in the same world at the same time.

And there was Lion! And Lapis and Peridot.

He slowly sank to his knees, his eyes on the mirror before him. He couldn't look away; this was everything he had ever wanted. His family happy and together.

He reached forward wistfully to touch the mirror, hoping that somehow instead of being a mirror it was a portal, like the one he'd come through to find this world.

It was hard and flat and cold, unyielding.

Only a reflection, then, but still everything.

He couldn't look away.
"Something is wrong," Hermione said.

"You always think something's wrong," Ron said. He'd started becoming more accepting of Hermione as she'd started spending more time with them, but Harry could tell she still grated on his nerves sometimes.

"He hasn't been coming to study," she insisted. "I hardly ever see him anymore."

"He's a Hufflepuff. Maybe he's been making more friends over there, being a hero and all."

Harry frowned. Steven had never lacked for friends even before the incident with the troll, but he hadn't noticed him spending more time with his own group.

Hermione had only started spending more time with them since Steven had left her to her own devices.

"Maybe it's better that he stay with his own kind, being a badger and all," Ron said.

"Ron!" Hermione said. "He's been nothing but a friend to all of us, and you act like you don't care."

"He'll be old enough to play on the 'puff team next year...I'd hate to see what he could do with a bludger," Ron said, shaking his head. "He could take somebody's head off."

Hermione sniffed. "It's always about Quidditch. I'm sure that Steven would never try to hurt someone."

"He knocked a troll out with the door to the girl's bathroom," Ron said. "I'm surprised he doesn't break people's bones just shaking their hands."

"Well he doesn't," Hermione said firmly. "And it doesn't change the fact that something's wrong."

They argued like an old married couple; at least like the couples on the sit-coms the Dursley's liked to watch.

"Besides," she continued. "It's not like the professors would let him play if they thought someone would get hurt."

Ron stared at Hermione for a moment. "They're keeping a giant three headed dog on the third floor behind an unlocked door. It's not like they're that worried about student safety."

"Hermione's right," Harry said quietly. "Susan Bones asked me the other day what we had Steven doing all the time. The Puffs aren't seeing him any more than we are."

Ron looked startled. "It can't be anything bad. It's Steven. He's practically Hagrid in a kid's body."

"He's smarter than Hagrid," Hermione said, lowering her voice. "And he might be tough physically, but he misses his family terribly."

Harry and Ron both stared at her for a moment. She was better at understanding people than they were in some ways, although she did have her blind spots.
"We need him anyway," Harry said.

"Why?"

"Music soothes the savage beast." Harry said, his voice low.

"So what can we do?" Ron asked. "It's not like we can stop him."

"We find out what he's doing," Hermione said. "Then we decide what to do."

They stared at each other, then nodded reluctantly.

Getting the Weasely twins to cast disillusionment charms on the three of them had taken some fast talking on Ron's part; worse; in order to see each other they had to remain in contact with each other. It would have been easier just with Harry and Ron, or especially if it had just been Harry, but Hermione had refused to be left behind.

Luckily their classes let out before Steven's on a Friday, so they were able to wait for him to get out of class.

Normally it would be risky trying to navigate through the hallway invisibly when it was full of students, but according to Hannah Abbot, Steven always stayed until he was the last one in class.

They waited patiently as the class was dismissed, hiding in a corner in a little used part of the hall. The students left class quickly, excited about the weekend.

They waited almost five minutes; by the time Steven finally came out the hallway was entirely empty.

He looked cautiously down the hall, then started walking toward them.

The direction he was coming wasn't the way back to the common rooms. It wasn't a direction he should have been going at all.

Harry held his breath as Steven passed and he could hear Hermione do the same. Ron kept breathing normally.

They let Steven get some way down the hall before they began to follow him.

He led them down a winding path, almost as though he knew someone was following him. Harry suspected that he didn't, however. This seemed too much like a path he'd traveled many times before.

They began traveling up, past the first floor, the second, even the third.

It wasn't until they reached the fifth floor that he finally seemed to reach his destination. He looked both directions, then slipped into what seemed like an unused classroom.

They waited and five minutes passed, then ten minutes, then fifteen.

Finally they couldn't stand it any longer. Whispering among themselves, they approached the door and gently pushed it open.

Steven was sitting cross legged in front of a massive mirror, staring into it. He didn't move a muscle.

They stood and watched him for five minutes. He didn't move once. Slowly they backed out of the
room and made their way down the hall.

"If he wanted to stare in the mirror he could do it in his own room," Ron muttered. "He doesn't even comb his hair."

"I don't think that was an ordinary mirror," Hermione said.

That seemed obvious to Harry. Given that it reached the ceiling, it would have been impossible to even get it in the room without magic.

Harry frowned. "Should we wait for him, or confront him about it?"

Whatever it was, it was obsessing Steven, and it couldn't be healthy.

"He hit a troll in the head with a board," Ron said flatly. "And knocked it flat out."

Hermione hesitated. "For once I agree with Ron. Steven would never hurt anyone intentionally, but if he's under some kind of a spell..."

"So we wait."

"It'll be a while," Ron said. "Some of the puffs say he doesn't come back until almost curfew."

Harry stared at Ron for a moment, noticing the same expression on Hermione's face.

"What?" Ron asked. "He's my friend too. I can ask a few questions just like everyone else."

Hermione stared at him for another moment, then patted him on the shoulder.

"He's going to be here for hours." Hermione said. "Waiting around here won't do anyone any good."

"Yeah," Ron said. "We'll miss supper."

"So we come back after lights out," Harry said.

Hermione hesitated. The old Hermione would have lectured them about breaking the rules, but now her lips just tightened and she nodded.

It was his entire family. His mother and father smiled back at him, their hands on his shoulders.

He'd never seen them before; his mother was pretty.

Just seeing it made his heart ache.

"What do you see?" Ron asked, jostling behind him.

"There's people in there with me," Harry said. He was reluctant to step aside. "What do you see?"

"Just me," Ron said. "With the Quidditch cup. And I'm head boy!"

Hermione pushed him aside. She'd been reluctant to look in the mirror, lest they fall under whatever spell had captured Steven, but curiosity had apparently got the best of her.

"I'm the Headmistress of the school," she said. "My face is on chocolate frog cards as the most powerful witch of my generation."
"Do you think it shows the future?" Ron asked hopefully.

Away from the mirror, Harry shook his head. "My parents are dead. The only way that can be the future if I'm de..."

Hermione frowned, examining the mirror.

"There's an inscription...Erised stra..." Hermione scowled for a moment, then her face brightened. "It's written backward, like how you'd see writing in a mirror.

Harry stared up at the writing. He'd have never caught on to that.

"I show not your face, but your heart's desire," Hermione read, saving Harry the trouble of working it out.

Harry frowned for a moment, then he scowled. "It's not real then. It just shows us what we want to see."

"What do you suppose Steven sees when he looks in there?" Ron asked quietly.

"Same as me, I suppose," Harry said. "His family. Only it's got to be a lot worse for him, because I never knew mine."

"He was really happy before," Hermione said, her voice subdued. "You can hear it every time he talks about it. He doesn't talk about it much...I think it hurts him too much."

"So what do we do?" Ron asked helplessly.

"I know neither one of you trusts the professors much," Hermione said. "But maybe this is one of those times."

"We could talk to Steven first," Harry said.

"Troll..." Ron reminded them.

Harry sighed. He wasn't nearly as intimidated as Ron seemed to be about the troll thing, although that might be because he'd had years of experience dodging bigger, stronger children. Who'd have thought Harry Hunting would have come in useful? It certainly did on the Quidditch field.

"We could talk to McGonagall," Harry said slowly. "She's our head of house."

"She's not HIS head of house," Ron said.

"Well, what about Professor Sprout?" Hermione asked. Professor Sprout was approachable, and she was sure to do what needed to be done to help protect Steven.

"She'd tell him we told her for sure," Ron said.

"Snape?" Harry said. He grinned at the expression on his classmates' faces.

"Professor Flitwick might work," Hermione said. "He's smart enough to get things done."

"He's gone for the weekend," Harry said. "A Wizarding conference."

"Dumbledore?" Ron said, staring behind them.
"That might be best," Hermione said. "If we could get into his office. How do you make an appointment I wonder..."

"He'd know about this mirror for sure," Harry agreed.

"I do indeed."

Harry and Hermione froze as they realized that Ron hadn't been offering Dumbledore up as a choice. He was standing behind them.

"I see that you have discovered the Mirror of Erised," Dumbledore said. His expression gave no clue as to his reaction to the three of them being in the room after hours.

Harry glanced back at the mirror for a moment, longingly, then sighed. "It's a lie, isn't it?"

Dumbledore looked surprised. "Older men have not come to that conclusion nearly as quickly. How did you come to realize this?"

"Hermione deciphered the inscription...something about the heart's desire," Harry said.

"It shows the heart's deepest desire," Dumbledore said. "Unique to each person who views it. That is what makes it so addicting."

He frowned. "Hundreds of men have been obsessed with the mirror...to their detriment."

Hermione spoke, "It's not good to look at it for too long, is it, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore shook his head.

"Steven has been coming here for a month," Hermione said. "And his grades have been dropping. He's changed, and not for the better."

"Perhaps I had better speak with Mr. Universe," Dumbledore said. "And I will have the mirror moved."

Hermione nodded gratefully. "He's been a really good friend to all of us. I'd hate for him to be hurt."

Harry and Ron nodded their agreement.

Dumbledore sent them on to their rooms without assigning a penalty for breaking curfew. The thoughtful look on his face as they left made Harry wonder if he'd simply forgotten.

Steven was quiet and withdrawn for the next week, but apparently Dumbledore didn't tell him of their role in keeping him from the mirror. Soon he was talking to them again, and things returned to normal. The only difference was that Hermione continued to spend more time with them; her place in their group finally cemented in place.

Impressing Dumbledore for something other than schoolwork had finally impressed Ron, if only slightly. Privately he was willing to admit that she was somewhat bright, although he'd never tell her to her face.

They told Steven about the Cerberus on the third floor, and about learning that it could be soothed by music. He seemed intrigued.
Hermione seemed to think that giving him something to think about other than how much he missed his family could only be a good thing.

The winter break came faster than Harry could have believed. While most of the other students returned home for the Holidays, Harry was more than happy to remain. Life at the Durselys' wasn't anything he would voluntarily go back to.

Steven had to remain as well, but he seemed increasingly glum. Without the distraction of schoolwork and friends, he seemed to fade into a ghost of himself.

Ron had stayed as well, and they did everything they could to keep Steven engaged. Ron taught them both to play wizard chess.

Steven tried to teach them to play the Ukulele, teaching them to strum through a few notes of the Hogwarts school song. He tried to teach them songs he knew, but they were unfamiliar to both boys. The Dursleys hadn't approved of American music, and Ron didn't know muggle music.

They got permission to have him in the Gryffindor common room, and Steven found a couple of the older muggleborns who'd remained behind. They appreciated his music.

On Christmas day, Harry was given an invisibility cloak.

It was the perfect gift.

"I really liked the Beedle Bard book," Steven said quietly as they made their way under the cloak toward the third floor.

Ron shrugged. "I figured you wouldn't have heard about it, being from another world and all. Worse than a Muggle, that is."

Harry didn't comment. If it hadn't been for Hermione's help, Ron would have just gotten Steven candy.

Of course, everyone liked candy.

"And you and Hermione..." Steven said. "I...can't thank you enough."

Getting the photographs off Steven's cell phone had required a massive undertaking, considering that the technology to create a cell phone like Steven had didn't even exist in the world yet. Apparently Steven's world was more than twenty years in the future.

Steven had brought his phone charger, but apparently his world and this one used different electricity, or maybe it was a difference between the United States and Great Britain. Harry wasn't clear about it, but the Grangers had found a converter that allowed the telephone to recharge.

Getting the photographs off the phone without damaging it had required help from certain muggleborn specialists in Diagon Alley.

The pictures were only as good as what was on the phone; none of them moved around or talked or anything, but the expression on Steven's face when he'd gotten them had been worth every galleon it had cost.

At least he would have something to remember his family by.

"It wasn't that much trouble," he lied.
"Still..."

"We're here," Harry said. Glancing up and down the hall, he pulled the invisibility cloak off of them. The last thing they needed was for the Cerberus to smell them and then rip the cloak.

"You ready?"

Harry pulled the door open, and the growling started inside as the giant three headed dog leapt to his feet.

Steven didn't seem worried at all. Instead he simply began to play, singing in a low voice.

It was some sort of lullaby, about dogs and loyalty and laying down to rest. It had the sound of one of Steven's songs, the ones he seemed to compose effortlessly.

Yet it seemed to do the job. The Cerberus lay down and all three heads fell into a deep sleep.

Harry was a little hesitant. It was possible that the dog was just pretending, whatever Hagrid had said, and it would leap up the moment they entered the room.

"It fell asleep on the trap door," Ron hissed, with a fearful look at the hound.

Before Harry could respond, Steven was already in the room. The dog didn't jump up and it didn't attack him. Of course, that might just be because it was Steven; he had a way with creatures. It hadn't helped with the troll, but from what he'd heard from Hagrid, Steven had the touch.

The only way to know whether it worked for all of them was to show courage. Cautiously, Harry stepped foot in the door.

"It worked," he said. "We can come back later."

Steven acted as though he hadn't even heard him. Instead he simply walked over to the Cerberus, turned around and pushed with his back to the dog's side.

"Move over," he murmured, even as he continued playing.

For once, Harry found himself as slack jawed as Ron as Steven simply pushed the huge dog to the side. It stirred despite his playing, but settled down almost immediately.

Opening the trap door without Steven was harder, but he and Ron eventually managed it.

The door dropped down into a dark pit, with strange smells coming up from below.

In the distance they heard a sound; it took Harry a moment to realize that it was coming from outside the room and not from the mysterious place under the trap door.

He and Ron carefully set the door down, and they backed out of the room, Steven's playing getting softer and softer as they backed away.

They barely had time to get the door closed and the cloak around the three of them before Professor Snape came around the corner. He was obviously looking for something; he stopped at the door and seemed to think about steeping inside.

He winced after a moment and subconsciously rubbed his leg before moving on.

They made their way down to their common room. Steven hadn't let them in the Hufflepuff common
room as he hadn't thought to get permission.

"It's Snape," Ron said. "He's the one after the Stone."

"I saw him threatened Quirrell," Harry admitted, "In the forbidden forest."

"It's not Professor Snape." Steven was adamant. His Hufflepuff qualities were obvious, although why he would be loyal to someone like Snape escaped Harry.

"Hermione saw him trying to hex Harry at the Quidditch match."

Steven frowned. "Professor Snape is the head of Slytherin, right?"

Harry nodded.

"Aren't Slytherins supposed to be sneaky? You'd think he'd be a little less obvious if he was really going after the stone."

Harry frowned. Snape certainly wasn't stupid.

He felt a tug at his shirt and he looked down. He suppressed a shudder.

Steven's gift still sort of freaked him out. A watermelon shaped like Steven stood beside him, with dark seeds for eyes. It had bumps on its rind where Steven had hair.

It waved at him and he sighed. "Yeah. It's time for bed."

According to Steven, an army of these things had even given his mothers...or whatever they were, trouble. Even more disturbing, Steven said that if it was killed it made for a great snack.

Even Ron had shuddered at that.

This one was supposed to watch over him when he slept. It was freaky and unnerving, and Harry was sure he wouldn't be able to sleep a wink with it watching.

He was wrong.

****************

It's the Philosopher's stone," Hermione said triumphantly.

School had resumed without a chance to go back and explore the darkness under the Cerberus, but Hermione had worked hard at discovering just what it might be guarding.

Harry had to admit that she was brilliant as a researcher. He watched, bemused as she laid out her argument. It involved chocolate frog cards, books, articles from the Wizarding paper and a certain amount of conjecture, but in his gut he knew she was right.

"So it creates gold AND you can live forever?" Ron exclaimed. "Everybody would want that!"

"You only live until you die," Steven said. "Even if you don't get old."

He had an odd expression on his face, and it took Harry a moment to recall that his mothers or aunts or whatever they were had lived thousands of years. He wondered for a moment if Steven himself
would have that kind of lifespan.

In a way, he and his aunts were their own philosopher's stones.

"Still..." Ron said. He gave a low whistle.

"It's Snape for sure," Harry said. He was still excited from winning the Quidditch match. "I overheard him trying to get Quirrel to tell him to get past the Cerberus."

"Are you sure?" Steven asked.

Harry quickly recounted what he's seen.

"I never liked Professor Quirrel," Steven said quietly.

The others, ready to express their feelings about Snape stopped in astonishment. Steven never disliked anyone. He'd even tried to make up with Draco before he'd realized just how much he'd been bullying Neville.

"Why?" Ron asked, astonished.

"He liked people to think he's harmless," Steven said. "But have you ever noticed that his stutter disappears sometimes?"

They looked at him blankly.

"It's almost like he's two different people...the teacher everybody sees and somebody else," Steven said. More quietly, he said, "He watches me a lot when he thinks nobody is looking."

Harry stared at him for a moment, then admitted, "I have headaches a lot in his class. I always just thought it was from the incense."

"You lot are crazy," Ron said. "Quirrell couldn't hurt a flobberworm."

"Maybe they are working together," Hermione said. She leaned forward. "I read that sometimes the followers of the Dark Lord worked against each other, trying to win his favor."

Harry shook his head. "It just sounded like Snape was trying to bully Quirrell."

Ron shook his head. "Well, Steven's right about one thing. Snape's Snape no matter who he's talking to."

"Still, maybe we'd better keep an eye on both of them," Hermione said.

At this, they all agreed, although Ron still insisted that Quirrell was innocent. Steven didn't say anything about Snape, although he was quiet.

Of course it was Snape; Harry had heard him with his own ears. They were just humoring Steven.

It wasn't like Quirrell was anything other than a harmless incompetent.

Weeks had passed with no changes, other than more and more homework and preparing for tests. Snape continued to be in the same foul mood, and the stone stayed firmly where it was at.

Quirrell, though...Harry never would have noticed it if he'd remained focused solely on Snape, but
there was something unnerving about the man. He watched Harry when he thought Harry wasn't looking.

They hadn't had time to go looking at the trapdoor under the Cerberus, but Hermione had suggested that they try to find out more information from Hagrid.

Steven had objected, at first, not wanting to take advantage of the man, but he'd eventually come around.

Apparently the challenges had been created by all the professors, including Snape. Hagrid claimed that each only knew about their own challenge.

Harry wasn't sure he believed him, although Hagrid was even more honest than Steven.

Steven never seemed to lie, but he also was very good at keeping secrets. Harry had had to work to keep Ron from talking about the Cerberus, his invisibility cloak, even their Quidditch plans where others could hear them.

However, Steven never mentioned anyone's secrets. They still didn't know how to get into the Hufflepuff common room, even though the Gryffindors had slowly become accustomed to seeing Steven in their own room.

Harry had even heard rumors that he'd been seen in the Ravenclaw commons, although he'd never mentioned it to the rest of them at all. Steven kept his secrets close.

The only common room he hadn't managed to get into was that of the Slytherins, and it wasn't for a lack of trying.

Normally the Slytherins would have bullied a first year Hufflepuff, but everyone knew what he had done with the troll. They were careful not to say anything bad about him to his face. Even when he wasn't around they were careful in what they said.

They knew that Ron Weasely at least would be happy to pass along anything they said to Steven, and the rest of the Gryffindors were the same. The Hufflepuffs were all loyal to Steven, especially after he had saved their younger brothers and sisters.

The Slytherins were therefore carefully neutral around him.

Still, given a chance to get him in trouble, Harry had little doubt that any of the Slytherins would be more than happy to inform a teacher.

If they managed to catch him with a highly illegal dragon on school grounds...they'd be happy enough to catch Steven, but catching Harry, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasely all in one fell swoop would be a coup.

For the hundredth time, Harry wondered what they were doing. There had to be a better way to get the dragon out of Hagrid's hut than to sneak it out.

Harry stared at the crate dubiously. The invisibility cloak was large enough to cover the entire crate and the rest of them underneath, although it hadn't seemed nearly that large before.

Beneath the cloak, Steven picked up the crate and set it on his shoulder. The ripping sounds from inside the crate reminded Harry of just how dangerous the dragon had been. Hagrid had been crazy trying to keep the thing in his hut.
Ron had almost gotten his hand bitten the day before, having been saved only by Steven's quick reflexes.

According to Hermione, this kind of dragon was poisonous, although Hagrid seemed to do well enough.

Steven had been quick enough not to be bitten, and the dragon had seemed to like Steven better than it had Hagrid, who it had mostly ignored when it wasn't lashing out at him.

That might be because Steven had been feeding it potato crisps he'd somehow talked the house elves into providing.

He had a talent with animals, that was certain.

They went up the flights of stairs. Steven was sweating by the time they were halfway up, and Harry suspected it was less the weight of the dragon's crate than it was the stairs he was having to climb.

"Just a little further," he heard Steven murmur to the dragon. "And then you'll be going on a nice trip to a place where you can be free."

There was a sound of movement from up ahead and they shrank back against the wall.

"They're going to be here with a dragon!" Draco protested.

Professor McGonagall had him by the ear. "Detention! Trying to excuse your own misbehavior by telling absurd lies about others! Twenty points from Slytherin Mr. Malfoy!"

They grinned to each other as the voices retreated, with only Steven abstaining. He only seemed tired.

The rest seemed to do him good, however, and he trudged up the remainder of the stairs without complaint.

Throwing off the invisibility cloak, they lay out at the top of the astronomy tower and stared at the stars.

"I've been there, you know," Steven said quietly, staring up into the sky.

"Where," Ron asked. "Romania?"

The dragon was headed for the Romanian nature reserve.

"No, space," Steven said. "I went there twice."

"What was it like?" Hermione asked.

"Scary," Steven admitted. "The first time we were on a homemade rocket that was breaking apart. The second time we'd been captured by my mother's enemies."

"What's a rocket?" Ron asked Harry quietly.

"It's like those things your brothers make that fly around," Harry explained quietly. "And explode."

"I didn't have a lot of time to think about it when I saw it," Steven said, "But it's beautiful."

He was quiet for almost a minute. "I just don't understand how people can see something like that
and want to destroy it."

Hermione said, "I think if you see it all the time, it stops being special."

"It shouldn't," Steven said. He scowled, deep in thought.

Thankfully, Harry could see four figures on broomsticks in the distance. He jumped to his feet, eager to distract Steven from his mood, and even more eager to unload the dragon.

The transfer went professionally. Ron's brother and his friends were clearly professionals who knew what they were about as they strapped the crate to a harness that would be supported by their four brooms.

The four of them were in high spirits as they headed back down the stairs.

It was only as they turned the last corner that Harry remembered that he'd left the cloak at the top of the tower.

Filch grinned at them nastily.

They were in trouble.

************

As disasters went, this was the worst.

Sitting in Professor McGonagall's office, all Harry could think about was how much trouble they were in. How could he have been so stupid as to have left the invisibility cloak? Why hadn't any of them, especially Hermione, who always seemed to remember everything remembered.

There had to be some kind of story, some kind of excuse that would get them out of this.

Hermione was pale and trembling. Harry suspected that she'd never been in any sort of trouble in her life. She looked as though she was going to spew into the professor's house plant.

Ron looked sick as well. His face had never been able to conceal any of his emotions, and the worry was palpable.

Steven, on the other hand didn't seem to be worried at all. He simply sat, looking at the books on the professor's shelves with interest.

A flash of anger struck Harry. Didn't he understand how important this was?

Hogwarts was everything to Harry. Hogwarts meant life away from the Dursleys...away from the cupboard under the stairs. It meant freedom, and a place where Harry was allowed to have friends, where he wasn't a freak.

It was more important to Harry than to the others. Hermione would do brilliantly no matter where she went. Ron...Ron could learn magic even if he had to be home schooled. Steven...

Steven didn't even really consider himself to be a wizard. In his mind, Hogwarts was just something to bide his time while he waited for his family to reawaken.

Being expelled probably didn't matter to him at all.
Leaning over, Steven put a hand on Hermione's shoulder. Her murmured something in a low voice.

Harry felt ashamed. It wasn't fair for him to take his anger at himself out on Steven. Steven was what he had always been. It was Harry's own fear talking.

The door slammed open, and Harry took a deep breath.

"I expected better," Professor McGonagall said. "From all of you."

She stared at Hermione and Steven for a long moment before continuing. "It's one o'clock in the morning. What were you doing in the astronomy tower?"

Hermione, normally the first to have an answer for any question didn't speak. She stared at her shoes.

None of the rest of them spoke either.

"I might have expected it from you, Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasely. Your feud with Mr. Malfoy hasn't gone unnoticed. But you, Miss Granger...I would have thought you'd have had more sense than this."

"And you, Mr. Universe...I wouldn't have thought you'd have been involved in a deliberate attempt to harm another student."

Steven looked up, and they all glanced at each other, confused.

"You think I don't know...you fed Mr. Malfoy a ridiculous story about a dragon, hoping he'd be caught after curfew. I've already caught him."

She stared at the four of them. "I'm disappointed in all of you. It's fifty points from each of you from your respective houses."

Harry stared at her in horror.

"You can't..." he said.

"I think you'll find that I can...and it will be detentions for all of you as well." The Professor stared at them grimly. "I've never been so ashamed for Gryffindor."

She glanced at Steven. "I'm sure Professor Sprout will feel the same about Hufflepuff."

Losing the points had been a nightmare for all of them, Harry especially. He went from being the most popular member of his house, to the least. One hundred and fifty points from Gryffindor put them in dead last place.

The Hufflepuffs didn't turn away from Steven the way Harry's own house did him. Whether it was the legendary Hufflepuff loyalty, the fact that he'd saved the lives of everyone in his year, or the fact that the Hufflepuffs had never been in contention for the house cup anyway, no one seemed to shun Steven the way Harry, Ron and Hermione were shunned.

The Ravenclaws even seemed to like him better. Possibly because theirs was the only house not to lose points.

Despite his popularity, Steven continued to study with Hermione. Hermione, in turn had begun to study with all of them.
It was good for Ron's self esteem to have someone who struggled almost as much as he did in charms.

Steven was able to help them in turn in potions and herbology and astronomy.

Hermione mostly had to help Steven with writing, although he was slowly getting better, and charms. She had to help the rest of them with everything.

The weeks passed, and as exams approached, they finally got their note from Professor McGonagall.

It was time for their detentions.

"What we're about to do is dangerous," Hagrid said. "An I don't want anybody takin risks."

Harry glanced at the others; all of them, with the exception of Steven were pale. They'd all experienced what Hagrid thought was appropriate for the classroom. Something he thought was dangerous? They'd be lucky to get out with their lives.

Steven simply looked attentive.

Of course, he wasn't really in the same kind of danger the rest of them were in. He'd beaten a troll singlehandedly, and if he could do that, then he wouldn't have a lot to worry about.

Hagrid led them to the edge of the forest, lifting his lantern.

He crouched and pointed. "This silvery stuff is unicorn blood. Somewhere in the forest is a unicorn that 's bleedin and hurt. We have to find it."

He glanced at Steven. "I hear you've got some kind of healin magic."

"Healing spit," Steven said. "It doesn't always work."

He looked grimmer than Harry had ever seen him, except on the night the troll had attacked.

"Better hope it does," Hagrid said. "Or we might have to put the poor thing out of its misery."

"How did the unicorn get hurt?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Something in the forest has been hunting them. This is the second unicorn just this week. The last un I found was dead."

"And what if whatever has been hunting the unicorns finds us?" Draco asked.

"As long as yer with me or Fang nothin in the forest can hurt ya." Hagrid hesitated. "I hear Steven here can handle himself pretty well too."

"I can make a bubble that's pretty hard to get through," Steven said. He stepped back and gestured.

It almost looked like a rose blooming, but a moment later there was a bubble surrounding Steven.

Hagrid knocked at it with a fist and looked impressed.

Steven gestured and the bubble disappeared.

"We're gonna split up into two groups," Hagrid began.
Before he could finish his sentence, Draco said, "I'm in the group with Steven."

Harry scowled. Draco was just being a coward, and he'd likely take advantage of Steven. "I'm in too."

"I guess that leaves Hermione and Ron with me," Hagrid said. "You can take Fang with you. He's a coward, but he's got a good nose."

He hesitated.

"If ye find the unicorn, and do yer healing thing, be sure and don't get any of its blood in yer mouth. It's cursed."

In class, Harry had heard that Steven always looked bored, as though he'd rather be somewhere else. That wasn't true of herbology or any of the classes Steven liked, but the others it was true.

Even in Hogwarts he always looked as though part of him wasn't there. But here he seemed totally focused. He was in his element.

From the stories he'd told them and Hermione, this was essentially what he'd trained for with his aunts. They'd hunted members of their own kind who'd become monsters.

"If ye find the unicorn ye'll send up green sparks. If ye get in danger, ye'll send up red sparks. Let's practice."

They practiced dutifully, and then Hagrid left with Hermione and Ron.

Suddenly the trees seemed to loom over them. He glanced at Draco, and without a word they stepped closer together.

Steven glanced up, but then seemed totally focused on the trail of silvery blood in front of them.

He moved quickly, so much so that Harry and Draco had to hurry to catch up. The last thing that Harry wanted to do was to get lost in the forest alone. Even being with Draco wasn't much better.

They moved into the darker parts of the forest.

It was completely silent. Once, Harry had heard that the sounds of the forest only stopped when there was something there so dangerous that it scared all the animals.

As they stepped into the clearing, they saw the unicorn. It was beautiful, and it was dying.

A dark figure loomed over it; it was holding the unicorn's head down and it was drinking it's blood.

Harry couldn't move. He was frozen in fear. He could feel Draco trembling beside him. The figure looked up, and he felt a sharp pain in his head. It was blinding.

Although he couldn't see the figures face, he could see the silvery blood of the unicorn glowing on its mouth.

Through his pain he could see a sudden blinding light from beside him.

A rose colored shield appeared on Steven's arm, and Steven rushed forward, heedlessly into danger.
Silvery blood dripping from its mouth, the hooded figure froze as it noticed Steven charging toward it. It stepped back, a wand in its hand.

Harry was still frozen, crippled by the pain in his head and fear, but Steven was moving quickly; much more quickly than he should have been able to move given his weight.

"Avada..." the voice began in a gutteral tone.

Steven threw his shield, knocking the figure backward. The shield disappeared.

The wand was still in its hand, and it pointed it directly at Steven. "Avada Kedavra!"

Green light shot from the wand, but Steven stepped aside just in time to avoid the beam. He didn't stop, moving forward inexorably.

Given his strength, the odds were that the the fight would be over the moment he got his hands on the hooded wizard. Apparently the wizard knew this too, because a moment before Steven would have reached him, there was a flash of...something, and the figure disappeared.

Steven stopped and looked around, cautious. For a moment Harry wondered what he was looking for before he remembered his own invisibility cloak. Turning invisible would be the perfect opportunity for the wizard to shoot Steven in the back.

The pain in Harry's head was gone, though.

"I think he's gone," Harry said, finally able to speak again.

Steven looked around a moment more, then his eyes settled on the unicorn. His face twisted and he ran to the unicorn, dropping to his knees.

"Please work, please work, please work..."

Steven continued muttering even as he spit repeatedly into the unicorn's wounds. He was careful not to get it's blood on his hands, although his jeans were becoming soaked in it.

Harry finally found himself able to move and he moved quickly to stand behind Steven. He put his hand on his shoulder. If it didn't work, he knew how upset his friend would be.

He heard the sound of hooves from behind him.

Looking up, he saw a creature with the body of a hand atop the body of a horse.

It aimed a bow at the two of them. "What is he doing?"

For a moment Harry was confused. It took him a moment to realize that it probably looked disrespectful, spitting on the body of a dead unicorn.

"He's trying to help," Harry said, stepping back and turning to face the larger creature.

The centaur stared at him and slowly lowered his bow.
It wasn't until he felt the breath on his shoulder that Harry realized that something had changed. Slowly he turned.

It was right behind him, so white that it made the moon seem pale and dark. It's hooves were golden and it's breath was surprisingly sweet.

The horn looked surprisingly sharp, so Harry took a cautious step back.

Steven was still kneeling, his hand on its flank. It turned it's head to look at him, and there was something in its expression...he’d always heard they were dumb beasts, but right now it almost seemed as though there were stars in its eyes.

"It's going to be all right, girl," Steven said, his voice calming. He slowly stood, his hand never leaving the unicorn's side. He stroked it gently.

"You need to be more careful. The woods are dangerous."

The creature didn't speak, although Harry wouldn't have been surprised if it did.

"Harry, Steven...are you boys all right?"

Hagrid's voice seemed to break the spell and the unicorn bolted away. It was so quick that after a moment it almost seemed as though it was a dream. A flash and it was gone.

"That was well done, youngling," the centaur said.

"Was that a unicorn? Hermione asked, her face flushed. She stared off into the darkness. Harry mutely nodded.

"Where's Draco and Fang?" Hagrid asked.

Harry looked around and he was surprised to see them gone. Apparently they'd left after the hooded figure had shown up.

"I think they ran off while I was fighting the unicorn killer," Steven said. He stared off in the distance where the unicorn had run. He seemed to stand a little straighter than he had in a long time.

Two other centaurs joined the first, quietly. They stared at Steven.

"The first of the four new comets," the first one said to the third. "Or is it five? It is difficult to tell."

"Kids, this is Bane, Ronan and Firenze."

"Hello," Harry said.

One of the centaurs looked at him and sniffed. "Your story has been written in the sky since the beginning."

"Will the comets change the course of the planets?" the third centaur asked.

"More likely the planets will alter the comets," the second said, still staring at Steven, "But it is a new world."

Steven stared at Harry, who shrugged helplessly. A glance at Hagrid showed that he didn't know any more than they did.
"We'll collect Draco and Fang," Hagrid said. "And then it's back to the castle to get you cleaned up."

"I smell garlic," Steven said quietly.

**************************

It had taken them almost an hour to find Draco white and trembling, up in a tree. Somehow Fang had managed to find a branch up with him, although Harry couldn't understand how he could have possibly gotten up there.

"That green light?" Steven asked quietly.

"That was the killing curse," Harry said. "Like what killed my parents."

Hagrid had told them about the curse on those who drank unicorn blood; cursed to a half-life. The only one Harry could possibly conceive of who might be willing to risk that would be someone who had even less of a life.

"I think that was Voldemort," he said.

Steven shook his head. "I smelled garlic. I'm pretty sure it was Quirrel...or maybe a wizard from Italy. If we see somebody who really likes pizza we'll know."

"So Ron is on the list of suspects?" Harry asked. Truthfully he wasn't sure Ron even knew what pizza was; his knowledge of muggle life was almost non-existant. However, he was sure if Ron discovered pizza he'd like it.

Harry himself had only ever had cold half eaten pizza he'd stolen from the trash. He could only imagine what it would taste like hot.

"If it's Quirrel, then Snape knows about it," Harry said. "I overheard him warning him off."

"Do you think the headmaster knows?" Hermione asked. She'd been walking quietly behind them.

"No way!" Ron said. He'd been making fun of Draco for being a coward. "The greasy git would never tell Dumbledore."

"I don't know," Harry said. "But I'm pretty sure it's not Snape. I can see him using the blood for some kind of potion ingredient, but no way would he just drink it like a vampire."

"He looks like a vampire," Ron said.

"The gems could look like anybody they wanted," Steven said. "Just because you look like something doesn't mean that's what you are."

"Snape's not stupid," Harry said, warming to the idea. "If he needed the blood, he'd just use it to make a potion that would work even better than the blood, without the curse."

Hagrid was in front of them, talking in heated tones with Draco, who was loudly protesting.

"I can't wait until tomorrow," Ron said. "I'm gonna let the whole school know just how much of a cowardly git Draco is."

"You weren't there," Harry said sharply.

He remembered having frozen in place, being unable to move. As much as he tried to tell himself
that it had been the pain, he knew that it had simply been fear. He'd have to do better.

Even running away would have been better than freezing, as far as he was concerned. If he'd been alone, he had no doubt that Voldemort, or Quirrel or the evil Italian wizard...whoever it was would have killed him.

Some savior of wizardkind he was turning out to be.

Steven glanced at him, concerned. He started walking slower so that Ron and Hermione passed them.

"It's not easy the first time," he said. "It gets better."

"I just froze up," Harry said, his voice low.

"People do that," Steven said. "Your brain just kind of seizes up and doesn't know what to do. That's why soldiers train so much...so when their brain freezes up they can keep doing what they have to."

"Did you freeze up the first time?"

"Not the first time," Steven said. "I just messed that one up royally. There was another time though...there was this death trap and Garnet had to carry me out I froze so bad."

"You made it look easy," Harry said.

"Keep your mind on what you're trying to accomplish," Steven said. "Worry about the rest of it later."

Harry nodded slowly. He'd do better next time.

He might not feel like the savior of the wizarding world, but the least he could do was be able to think on his feet.

If Voldemort was really trying to return, it was the only way he was going to be able to survive.

**************************

Watching carefully, the foursome noticed that Quirrell was moving carefully the next day. A pained expression came over his face occasionally, usually when he thought no one was looking. He favored his left side.

Harry recalled that Steven had hit the figure in the forest on its left side with his shield. More and more he was convinced that it was Quirrell and not Snape who was the one who'd gone after the unicorns.

He wasn't sure what to do about it. They didn't have any real proof. A scent in the forest, the occasional odd facial expression...it wasn't enough to bring to the teachers. In his experience adults didn't listen to children against other adults.

In his old life he'd once told a teacher what the Dursleys were doing to him. The Dursleys had spent years painting him as a liar to everyone in the community. Instead of investigating further, the woman had simply informed his aunt and uncle that Harry was acting out again.

He'd learned a lesson about trusting adults. Similar things had happened over and over again, all of which had convinced him that the only one he could trust was himself. It was probably why the sorting hat had almost sorted him into Slytherin.
Fortunately, Steven seemed to be even more used to doing things on his own than Harry was. Ron was willing to follow Harry's lead, and only Hermione had to be convinced.

She wanted to go to McGonagall, but Harry finally convinced her they didn't have any real proof. Even if Quirrell was still injured, he could claim it was from some other cause. Wizard healing and potions were quite potent in any case, and he might be completely healed by the time they got any of the professors to listen.

Besides, Snape already seemed to be suspicious of Quirrell, given the way he'd warned him off. If he was loyal to Dumbledore, then he surely would have informed the headmaster. If he wasn't, then it would be risky to go to him.

It was best to watch and wait.

At first it seemed nothing was going to happen. Exams were coming, and in the press of studying for them, Harry didn't have much time to worry about Nicolas Flamel, magical stones or Quirrell.

Once exams were over, though, they were free for a glorious week until results came out.

Steven was worried, of course. He'd never actually had end of year exams, or any exams at all before this year that didn't involve actual monsters.

Harry suspected that he'd do fine. He'd been tutored by Hermione for pretty much the entire year, and she'd made sure that none of them had been unprepared, no matter how much they'd wanted to skiv off from studying.

Still, they didn't leave the matter entirely to chance. Steven had created more of the watermelon Stevens, much like the one that was still in Harry's room. Ron had decorated that one with a large hat and scarf. It had thrown the first three down, never moving while anyone was looking. The fourth set it seemed to like though.

It made it look like some kind of weird, watermelon musketeer, but it seemed satisfied.

Steven had hidden the Watermelon Stevens in several locations in the castle. They'd apparently been good enough at hiding that even Filch and his cat Mrs. Norris hadn't found them even after three weeks. It was a little creepy.

They were coming back from dinner when Harry felt a tugging on his robe.

He looked down and was shocked to see that it was one of the watermelon Stevens. The creature stared up at him and gestured.

"Which one is it?" he asked.

Hermione gestured toward its shoulder, where she'd inked a number one.

"He's going for the stone now," Harry hissed. This was the Watermelon Steven set to guard the entrance to Fluffy's room on the third floor. He'd been hidden up in the rafters; how he'd gotten down Harry couldn't even imagine. They'd had to levitate him up there with some difficulty.

"We've got to tell the headmaster," Hermione said firmly.

Reluctantly, Harry nodded. Quirrell was a full adult wizard; nothing they could come up with as first years was likely to be able to stop him. Steven might be able to do so, but they weren't sure where he was.
A moment after he’d had the thought, Steven came around the corner, following a second watermelon Steven. The first had presumably cued the second to help find their master.

"It's happening tonight," Hermione said breathlessly.

"Has anyone been to Dumbledore's office?" Harry asked.

They looked at each other helplessly. By some miracle, they’d all managed to avoid any infraction that would bring them to the headmaster's attention. None of them even knew where it was.

"We could ask a painting," Steven said slowly. "Or maybe one of the ghosts."

It took three paintings before they found one willing to give them directions.

The elderly lady in the picture frame stared down at them. "You'll need a password to get into his office, but it will not do you any good. He is away for the evening."

"Away?"

"He has a meeting at the ministry of magic. I overheard him telling Minerva right where you are standing."

"It's up to us," Harry said.

"You could tell Professor Snape," Harry said. "You said he tried to warn Professor Quirrell off."

Harry shook his head. "He could be just as bad as Quirrell. Maybe they both want the stone. Besides...it's not like he'd listen to anything I have to say."

"I don't think you give him enough credit," Steven said quietly.

"You don't have to have potions with him with Harry and Neville in the same classroom," Ron said.

"All right," Steven said. "Let's go."

As they ran through the corridor, Harry noticed shapes jumping from the rafters as they passed by. Just how many watermelon soldiers had Steven made, anyway? What had he been preparing for?

Had he been worried that Fluffy would get loose? That was...actually sensible.

Harry had no idea how powerful any of these soldiers could possibly be; it looked like it would be easy to smash their watermelon faces in. Steven seemed confident in them, though.

It seemed like no time at all passed before they reached the third flood corridor. The door opened easily, and the Cerberus leaped to its feet. A harp was laying on its side on the floor beside it.

"If you're evil and you're on the rise, you can count on the four of us taking you down," Steven sang softly. The Cerberus stared at them for a moment, then it's three sets of eyes began to droop.

He continued to sing, even as Ron and Harry slowly lifted the trap door.

Steven gestured, and the watermelon Stevens jumped down before the rest of them did. Harry counted; there were twelve of them.

Finally he jumped, followed by Hermione, Ron and with Steven coming last.
They landed in waiting hands; the watermelon Stevens were wrapped in some kind of a plant, but Harry found himself caught by the first Steven. This one handed him over to the second, who handed him to the third. He found himself being handed from Steven to Steven until he was outside the area of the plants.

"It's Devil's snare plants," Hermione said, as the last soldier handed her off right after Harry.

Ron followed, then Steven.

"Devil Snare hates light," Hermione said uncertainly. "But I'd hate to hurt the Watermelon Stevens."

The watermelon soldiers were completely ensnared now.

"They were just waiting for us," Steven said confidently. "Come on guys, let's get a move on."

As one, the watermelon Stevens moved forward. There was a shrieking sound as roots ripped and tore. The watermelons moved as though the Devil's snare wasn't even there. A moment later they were standing in front of Steven, staring impassively.

Harry felt a chill. Steven had admitted once that these soldiers weren't entirely under his control. If they had this much of a portion of Steven's strength, in these numbers, they could be incredibly dangerous.

"We need to get moving," Hermione said. "for all we know he has the stone by now."

They all nodded and turned to move on.

The next challenge involved flying keys; the soldiers could do nothing but stand silently as Harry flew around the room on a broomstick grabbing for the one key out of hundreds that would open the lock.

A chessboard was the next room.

"We've got to play to get through," Ron said, but even as he was speaking, the watermelon Stevens were moving forward, smashing everything in sight.

Ron looked a little disappointed as they walked through the mass of destroyed pieces, which were beginning to reform behind them.

The troll in the next room had already been knocked unconscious, although the watermelons all moved to guard him as they passed through the room.

Finally there was the room with the potions and the curtain of fire.

"There's only enough for one of us to pass through the curtain," Hermione said.

Harry frowned. It would be suicidal to face an adult wizard by himself. Even Steven probably wouldn't fare well if he had to go it alone.

Still, he didn't see how they were going to get through the wall of fire unless...

"Can you make a bubble?" he asked Steven.

Steven stared at him for a moment, then frowned. "I can make one big enough for the two of us. Any bigger and it would be too big to go through the door...and I can only do circles."
"It should be me and Steven," Harry said finally. He turned to Hermione and Ron. "I need you to go back and use the brooms to get out. They'll let you get by Fluffy and the rest of it. Send an owl to Dumbledore; we're going to need him."

Hermione hesitated, then nodded.

"Two of you guys go with Hermione and Ron," Steven said to the watermelon Stevens. "The rest of you stand guard here. It's OK to let any of the professors through except for professor Quirrell."

Neither of them had to say that if Professor Quirrell came through, the odds were that something terrible would have happened to them.

Harry took a deep breath. It was time to confront Quirrell.

Deep down, Harry had held onto a slight suspicion that it might be Snape instead of Quirrell. After all, Snape was the obvious suspect, and he'd never really understood Steven's faith in Snape. Quirrell had seemed so...harmless.

Quirrell stood waiting for them, standing before the mirror of Erised.

He smiled, looking oddly pink through Steven's bubble. "I should have known you'd bring him."

He'd dropped all pretense of having a stutter, and now the way he was moving was more predatory, like the thing they'd seen in the forest. All vestiges of the harmless professor had dropped away, leaving his true self behind.

"I would have thought it would have taken longer."

"We're not letting you get the Stone," Harry said.

"You'll have to drop the bubble to stop me," Quirrell said. "And when you do, I'll stop you."

Harry glanced at Steven, who looked back at him uncomfortably. While Steven had done well against Quirrell the first time they'd met, he'd surprised him. The older wizard knew what to expect now, and he would undoubtedly have any number of spells that would be able to take Steven down.

If it was just Harry against Quirrell, he'd be dead.

"We don't have to beat you," Harry said. "Just keep you here long enough for Dumbledore to show up."

Quirrell scowled. He muttered a curse and it flew toward them. Harry flinched, but it bounced off, carving a deep gash in the stone.

He cast again, muttering another spell Harry hadn't had time to even learn the name of. Again the bubble held.

"How long can you keep this up?" he asked Steven, leaning toward him to whisper in his ear.

Steven shrugged. "I've never really used it against wizard magic before, except for a few tests by the Aurors at the ministry."

Quirrell glared at them for a moment, then glanced back at the mirror. "Is it inside the mirror? Should I break it?"

Harry pulled at Steven's arm, hoping to move the bubble so it would be in view of the mirror. What
he wanted most in the world currently was to keep the stone from Quirrell. Maybe if he could see himself doing it in the mirror he'd be able to figure out how it was done.

To his horror, he heard another voice speak.

"Use him...the boy, not the abomination."

It was the voice from his nightmares, the one he heard just before seeing the green light that had killed his mother.

Quirrell said, "He seems protected, master."

"Kill the abomination, and the shell will drop," the voice hissed. The voice almost seemed as though it was coming from under Quirrell's turban.

Quirrell nodded. He turned and pointed his wand at Steven.

"Avada Ked..." he began.

Harry shoved Steven to the floor, even as a sickly green light pierced the shell where his head had been. The shell vanished from around them, and Steven rolled out of the way.

"Abomination!" the voice screamed from beneath the turban. "Worse than even mudbloods."

Quirrell blasted at Steven again with a blast of green light, but Steven was far quicker than his size would indicate. Neville would have been dead from the first blast, but Steven dodged again and again.

It was only a matter of time, though. Harry could see that Steven was already tiring; while he had superhuman strength, he hadn't exactly been practicing athletics at school.

The only thing that was keeping Quirrell from being able to hit him was the distance between them. Harry could see on Steven's face that he would like to get closer to Quirrell, to hit him like he had before. The closer they got, though, the less time Steven had to dodge.

Harry glanced at the mirror; where he saw his reflection smile and drop a blood red stone in his pocket.

It hardly seemed helpful at the moment. He couldn't risk distracting Steven, and there was no way they'd be able to get out of the room without Quirrell at least blasting Steven in the back.

He seemed to think he still needed Harry, though, which meant he probably wouldn't try to kill him, at least not yet.

Harry grimaced. He doubted that his magic was good enough to get an experienced duelist like Quirrell, but Wizards were less used to physical attacks.

He moved carefully toward the mirror, then as Quirrell passed him, he turned and jumped on his back.

Harry put his hands over Quirrell's eyes and he heard Quirrell scream. He smelled something burning under his hands. Quirrell scrabbled at Harry's hands, his skin blistering whenever he touched them.

The turban slipped and fell, and not an inch away from Harry's face he could see a horrible, hideous face staring out at him from the back of Quirrell's head.
Harry screamed, letting go of Quirrell and falling backward onto the floor.

The face stared at him with a malevolent expression.

"Kill them all!" it screamed. "We will shrink the mirror and take it with us."

Quirrell turned and pointed his wand at Harry, who was still lying on the ground.

His face was blistered, and his eyes were swelling. It seemed almost impossible that he would even be able to see, but somehow he could.

There was a cold expression on his face as he pointed the wand down at Harry.

Steven was lunging at him from behind, but the face screamed a warning. Steven had summoned up some kind of shield.

According to him, this was the shield that had weathered everything his mother's people's technology had been able to come up with. When the enemy had released a doomsday weapon that had killed thousands of gems and had corrupted even more, this was the shield that had kept his mother and a few of her closest followers safe.

It was the closest thing his people had to an impenetrable object.

Quirrell swiveled his hips and said, "Avada Kedavra."

The green light lashed out. For a moment Harry hoped that Steven would somehow dodge, but he was too tired and now too close to avoid the beam.

It cut through the shield like it wasn't even there, and Steven dropped like a stone.

The shield winked out, and Steven lay horribly still.

Harry lay still, unable to move, horrified. It was over. He tried to get to his feet, to lunge out at Quirrell with whatever it was that had burned his skin, but the man stepped calmly back.

A scream of anguish and rage came from somewhere behind the wall of fire. Before Quirrell could respond, the first of the watermelon Steven's stepped through the flames.

They were on fire, but this wasn't their most horrible transformation. Their mouths opened in horrifying maws, looking like the most horrifying jack o lantern mouths Harry had sometimes seen from the bus in October before Halloween. He'd always spent the holiday in his cupboard, but he'd sometimes thought about those pumpkins, horribly mutilated.

These were worse than those, and they were burning.

The first of them reached Quirrell, and it jumped on top of him, its watermelon mouth lunging for his throat.

While it couldn't burn him like Harry had, it was still on fire in a conventional way. As more and more of the watermelon Stevens lunged through the wall of fire, Harry found himself scrabbling backwards toward the wall.

Quirrell's robes caught fire, and he began screaming horribly.

Mercifully, the screaming only seemed to go on for a couple of minutes. A moment after that, something seemed to rise from the pile of burning watermelons and human flesh. For a moment he
wondered if it was Quirrell's ghost, as it turned and stared at him malevolently before dissipating.

By the time Dumbledore arrived, the smell of burning watermelon and pork had made Harry retch. He doubted he'd ever be able to eat either one again.

Dumbledore took a grim look at the scene, and turned to look at Harry.

"Are you all right my boy?"

Harry stared sightlessly off into the distance. "He killed Steven."

Dumbledore was silent.

After a moment, Harry sighed. He pulled the stone out of his pocket and handed it to Dumbledore. "It doesn't seem worth it."

Glancing back at the body of his friend, he said, "We should keep a watch over his body. Steven thinks...he thought that his mother might come back if he ever died."

Dumbledore nodded. "I'm well aware of what he's said about his people's life cycle."

"He'd want one of his friends to be there to tell her..." Harry sighed and closed his eyes, suddenly as exhausted as he'd ever been in his life.

"What spell did Quirrell use," Dumbledore asked, rising and going over to Steven's body.

"Avada Kedavra," Harry said. "There's no coming back from that."

Dumbledore gave him a strange look. "You did."

"Well, I guess I'm just different from other people."

"From what he told me, young Mr. Universe here was different from anyone in two universes," Dumbledore said quietly.

He froze, and then a moment later pulled out his wand.

A couple of muttered incantations, and a moment later Steven's body was levitating.

"What's going on?"

"He's still alive," Dumbledore said. He muttered something under his breath. "With a little luck we can keep him that way."

**************

Harry sat in the corner and stared into nothingness. The fires had long since died away, and all that was left was the stench of burning fruit and other smells he was doing his best not to think about.

He'd been such a fool. He'd been convinced that he'd be able to stop a full grown adult wizard from stealing the stone, at least with Steven's help.

It had all seemed so clear, before they'd gone down the trap door. They'd save the stone and then everyone would know that he wasn't just the baby-who-lived.

His vanity had killed his friend.
Harry couldn't even look at Steven's body, lying on its side. There hadn't been any movement, so he assumed Steven had been wrong about his mother coming back.

In a way it was too bad. If she'd returned, at least part of Steven would have lived on.

Instead, it was all for nothing. He felt the stone in his pocket, its weight as heavy as the pain in his heart.

The flames on the far wall dimmed and died.

Professor Dumbledore stepped through the entryway, followed by Professors McGonagall and Snape.

"What happened here?" Dumbledore asked gently.

Harry was silent for a long moment. Finally he pulled the stone out of his pocket and handed it to Dumbledore.

It was cold comfort.

"Quirrell killed Steven," Harry said. He didn't look at them...couldn't look at them. "I tried to stop him, but the avada kedavra sliced right through his shield like it wasn't even there."

"What are these things?" McGonagall asked, staring at the pile of burned rinds covering Quirrell's body.

"Steven made guardians out of Watermelons," Harry said. "They went crazy after he died."

He stared at the wall for a long moment. "Quirrell was possessed by Voldemort. He was using the unicorn blood to keep himself alive until he could get the stone."

"I suspected as much," Dumbledore said. "Voldemort isn't gone; he's just going to try to keep returning to the world."

"If you knew, why didn't you do something?" Harry asked sharply. Steven had died because the headmaster hadn't kept the stone safe.

Dumbledore hesitated, only to be interrupted by Snape clearing his throat.

Snape crouched over Steven's body, then looked up. "You're certain it was the Avada Kedavra he used?"

Harry nodded. "I'll never forget it."

Snape sneered. "It would appear that you are no longer the only boy-who-lived. This boy is only unconscious."

Apparently Steven's shield had protected him from the Avada Kedavra, but only partially.

Over the next three days Harry had refused to leave Steven's side. He'd eavesdropped on the adult wizards as they'd talked with Poppy about Steven's prognosis.

Anyone other than Steven would have died anyway, despite the partial protection from his shield. Steven, however was at least as magic resistant as Hagrid, if not somewhat more so.
The fact that like Harry he'd been responsible for the downfall of one version of Voldemort didn't escape Harry, although it was apparently being covered up in the Wizarding paper.

The last thing Steven needed was the kind of publicity Harry had.

Harry was dozing in his chair, although sometimes when he slept he would find himself back in the chamber, staring at the body of Quirrell.

The last remaining Watermelon Steven's had taken up positions guarding the foot of Steven's bed. Harry had carefully positioned himself so that he was behind their line of sight.

They'd been simply odd before; weirdly eccentric if a little creepy. Now that he'd seen what they were capable of, Harry couldn't help but be creeped out by them.

Stiffening, the Watermelon Stevens moved in unison.

It wasn't for another twenty seconds that Steven heard the distinctive sound of a cane striking the tile floor.

The curtain was swept aside, and Harry looked up into the scowling face of Draco Malfoy's father, Lucius Malfoy.

"What are these...things still doing here?" He stared down at the watermelon Stevens before looking at Steven.

The two watermelon Steven's hissed and their mouths began to turn into slits.

Lucius pulled his wand and pointed them at the watermelons.

"I'm sure none of this is necessary Lucius," Dumbledore said from behind him. "They are simply protecting young Steven."

"They killed a professor at this school." Lucius Malfoy didn't take his eye off of either of the Watermelon Stevens, even as they took a step toward him.

"These particular creatures did not," Dumbledore said. "They were guarding young Ms Granger and Weasely as they came to warn the other members of the staff."

"I never agreed with letting this...thing attend school," Malfoy glanced at Harry. "I knew he would be a danger to everyone and now a man is dead."

"He was saving me," Harry said, speaking up finally. "They all were."

"You should never have been there in the first place. This is a school, not a goblin vault."

Harry stared at the older man, surprised that they were both in agreement about something for once.

"This boy needs to be in Azkaban." Malfoy said. "With all the other murderers."

He stepped forward, turning his wand toward Steven.

That was all the provocation the watermelons needed. They snarled and lunged toward Malfoy.

"Stop!"

Steven's voice from the bed was soft, but the Watermelons stopped in their tracks. A cutting curse
struck the ground in front of them, in the place they would have been if they hadn't stopped.

"Steven!" Harry said, finally feeling that everything was going to be right in the world.

The fact that Lucius Malfoy was scowling over his shoulder didn't matter at all.

In the end, Malfoy did have one triumph.

The Watermelon Stevens were deemed too dangerous to be allowed to continue to live in Hogwarts. Steven was forced to send them into the Forbidden Forest, with strict admonitions that he wasn't to create any more.

While the Slytherins thought they had the house cup locked in, Dumbledore awarded Harry sixty points and Steven one hundred and thirty points.

It was the first Hufflepuff house cup victory in more than eighty years.

Seeing the stunned look on the Hufflepuff faces had made it almost worth losing the cup to them. They hadn't know what to do. The thought that they might win the cup had never even occurred to them.

The Syltherins had been outraged, however.

That had made it even more palatable, and the Gryffindors had taken up cheering for the Hufflepuffs, led at first by Ron, to Harry's astonishment.

Exam results came in, and Harry and Ron had good marks. Surprisingly, despite his struggling Steven had some through with middling marks in his worst classes. He'd actually fourth in his class in potions and second in Herbology.

Life was finally good.

"Hurry up," Hermione said. "We're going to miss the train,"

Steven shrugged. "I'm just going back to the ministry."

Harry himself wasn't all that excited about going home. Life at the Dursleys had never been good; now that he'd learned that there was another kind of life, it was going to be even more intolerable.

"The time will fly," Hermione insisted.

It probably would, for her. From what Harry could tell, she actually had a happy home life, with good parents.

Ron frowned, looking out the window. "What're they doing here?"

An auror was walking through the courtyard heading in their direction, a grim look on his face. He was the same man who'd come to interview Harry and Steven about Quirrell's death. He'd talked to Ron and Hermione and other people. Flanking him were three other men who harry suspected were Aurors.

Harry couldn't remember the man's name; he felt a little embarrassed. After everything that had happened, he hadn't been focused on anything.

"What's happened?" Ron asked.
The man shook his head at Ron warningly before turning to Steven.

"There's been a development at the ministry," he said.

Harry had an uneasy feeling in his stomach. Had Malfoy somehow gotten the ministry to classify Steven as a dangerous creature?

"The men tasked with keeping an eye on your aunts were called away for an emergency. By the time they got back, the gems were gone."

"Whaat?" Steven asked, staggering backwards.

"There were reports of a short purple woman running through the ministry yelling your name. The aurors tried to catch up with her, but before they did she turned into a purple owl and followed the other owls out of the building. They suspect that she is carrying the others."

"Amethyst," Steven murmured. "She always was the first one to reform, even if she ended up with hands instead of feet because she rushed it."

He scowled. "She's going to be so worried."

"We're going to need your help to find her," the man said. "Ordinary spells aren't working to help track her, but we think we can send her an owl with a letter. If it's a letter from you, she might even believe it and turn herself in."

He glanced at Harry, Ron and Hermione. "I think the rest of you need to meet your train. The ministry has this well in hand."

Harry stared at the man for a moment. Something made him suspect that everything wasn't as under control as the man wanted to project. After all, if it had been under control, they wouldn't have lost track of the gems.

Still...they did need to catch their trains.

"I'll owl you," Hermione said. "Let us know what happens."

Steven nodded grimly before turning to the aurors behind him. He had family to find.

If Harry had had the opportunity to get one of his parents back, he wouldn't have been able to think about anything else either.

At least Steven had a chance of getting part of his family back.

Faced with going back to the Durselys, Harry felt guilty, but he envied him.

He couldn't wait for next year.
Amethyst

The world tasted wrong.

She should have expected it. The others had always said that each planet in the universe had its own flavor, but as she'd never known anything other than her own Earth she'd never understood.

The gems lived in a universe of energy; cosmic rays, solar winds, background radiation...the entire universe vibrated with power. Each gem sipped from that power; it sustained them and gave them the power to do practically anything.

Each of them experienced the power in a different way. For Rose it had been visual; she'd seen the entire universe as auras. It was part of what had first attracted her to humanity; she said their auras were beautiful; utterly unlike those of the non-sentient lifeforms below them.

For Pearl it was sound; the hum of the universe was part of what inspired her music.

For Sapphire and Ruby, and thus for Garnet, it was touch. They felt the world in a way that others couldn't comprehend.

Amethyst experienced the universe through taste.

At home, she'd never really noticed it as she'd never tasted anything else. Home had a familiar sort of taste.

This new world was...spicy. It had taken her a long time to learn to adjust to the new energies, and if she'd been in the habit of taking her time with her new form like the others it would have taken even longer.

As it was, she had no idea how long it had been. Steven was missing, and she wasn't sure if it was because something had happened to him, or just because of the passage of time. After all, she wasn't really all that clear about how fast humans aged. She hadn't spent much time around them until the last twenty years, and what she'd seen with Greg and Vidalia had showed her that humans aged at a frightening rate.

It had seemed like an eye blink since she and Vidalia had been spending time together, since Greg had been a young musician just out of Junior college. It seemed like only yesterday that Rose had vanished and Steven had taken her place.

The one thing she'd always envied about humans was their ability to forget. Although they didn't talk about it much, Pearl and Garnet still mourned for companions lost five hundred years before Amethyst emerged from her hole. For humans, it seemed like a year or maybe ten was all they needed.

Gems never forgot. Every memory was indelibly printed in their minds. Sometimes Amethyst wondered if that wasn't why corruption was the inevitable fate of every gem, if it wasn't simply the sheer weight of all the memories that didn't drive them insane.

The idea that Steven could have grown up, lived an entire human lifespan and died while waiting for them to reform horrified Amethyst. She couldn't even comfort herself with the idea that Rose had returned; if she had there was no way she'd have left them all in the hands of humans.
She looked around the quarry. It looked like it had been abandoned a long time ago, but she couldn't be sure. The humans back home had never flown on broomsticks. They hadn't shot beams of light out of small sticks and they certainly hadn't worn graduation gowns everywhere.

It would have horrified Pearl, but this place reminded Amethyst of the Kindergarten. She'd spent the first few hundred years of her life alone in one, and she felt safer in a place with good holes.

She sighed as she found a hole of the appropriate size. She slipped the others in the very back, where she could protect them.

Steven could be dead of old age or he could be trapped somewhere. Amethyst had no way of knowing, and it terrified her. She stared at the gems behind her, lying in the dirt and she wished they would hurry up.

Pearl would think of something, and Garnet would know how to do it. They worked best as a team. She wasn't much of a thinker; according to Peridot her kind had been created to be warriors. Point her at an enemy and she was happy to smash it.

This...this was too much.

She fidgeted as she waited for the others. Pearl always took a long time, but Ruby and Sapphire were somewhat quicker. They had to know that realigning their energies to this universe would take exponentially more time than they were used to.

It could be weeks before she saw anything from them.

She sighed and pretended to sleep. Eventually it turned into a real sleep. Even though her body didn't need sleep, mentally she felt exhausted.

---

A bird was pecking her on the nose.

Amethyst groggily opened her eyes and stared up at the owl standing in front of her.

"Go away," she said grumpily. She turned over.

It pecked her on the top of the head.

"Hey!" she said. Her eyes snapped open and she rolled over again. "I said stop!"

The bird stared at her balefully, then lifted its leg.

She scrambled back. She'd had bad experiences over the year involving birds and droppings. She was a bird a part of the time herself and she knew that pooping was something they had to do, but aiming was recreational.

"Go away!" she shouted irritably. She'd only been sleeping for three days. The others still hadn't woken up and soon she'd have to decide what to do on her own.

The bird stared at her and shook its foot impatiently.

"I don't speak bird!" she said irritably. Maybe the birds in this world were intelligent. For all she knew, this was some sort of police bird out to roust her out of her hole for being homeless.

If it was a police animal, she'd have expected a badge or something...
She looked and then blinked as she saw that there was a message tied around it's leg.

"Is that for me?"

The bird nodded.

Amethyst stared. She'd tried talking to birds for a thousand years back home and they'd never said anything to her. This one acted as though it knew what she was saying.

"Really?"

It scratched the ground impatiently, then shook the leg with the message at her.

Cautiously, she reached out and took the letter.

It was written on parchment. She hadn't seen that for a fair amount of time, even for her.

She froze as she saw the handwriting on the letter. It was from Steven!

"Hey Amethyst," the letter began. "It's been eight months since we came through the veil, and the people here have treated me well. They sent me to a school to learn how to do magic! I tried to get them to let me take you and the other gems with me, but they were worried about the other kids, since they haven't got to meet you yet. Anyway, the summer has just started, and I'd much rather spend it with you instead of back at the Ministry. The people there are a nice, but they aren't family. Write a reply on the back of this letter, and the bird can find me anywhere I am. I can't wait to see you."

It ended with a "Love, Steven."

There was a cartoon figure at the bottom of the page, presumably meant to represent Steven. It stared at her, then suddenly it smiled.

She dropped the paper.

He was alive and almost as young as he had been the last time she'd seen him!

Amethyst began gathering the others as she stared at the bird. It hooted inquisitively.

"Hold your horses," she said. She didn't have anything to write with, so she lengthened her finger into a pen.

In the movies they always forced a hostage to write a note at gunpoint, while the hostage tried to sneak a message inside to warn the people the message was to. Amethyst didn't see anything like that in the message from Steven, but then, she hadn't even learned to read until she was two thousand years old.

She wasn't the smartest of the gems, but she'd keep Steven safe or she'd die trying.

On the back of the note she wrote two words.

"I'm coming."

She handed the note to the owl who took it in one foot. It lifted its other foot with the palm out.

"I don't have any money," she said irritably. What did it want, a tip?
It shook its foot again.

She scowled, reaching into her pocket. She pulled out a dead mouse she'd found in the back of the cave. "I was planning on eating this later," she said, scowling.

The bird grabbed the rodent and snapped it up in one gulp. It looked at her for a moment with a superior look, then turned and set off.

It heard a sound from behind it and it turned its head.

It's eyes bugged out. Behind it was a purple dog with a helicopter rotor coming out of its back.

The bird began flying double time, as Amethyst, laughing and carefree at last followed behind in the form of Dog Copter.

Whoever had Steven had better have treated him well. If they hadn't, she'd teach them to never underestimate any gem, even if she was undersized and flawed.

If they'd hurt him, she'd make them pay.

"You don't have to do all this," Steven protested. "She's a hero."

The auror stared at him, one mechanical eye moving in many different directions. Steven struggled to recall his name...Moddy...no, Moody.

It seemed like an appropriate name for a man who seemed this paranoid.

"She nearly brought a wing of the ministry down with that whip of hers," Moody said. "I've examined the memories of the Ministry officials involved...she's fast."

"She's a friend!" Steven insisted. "If you try to trap her, she'll fight you. All she wants is to be back with me."

"I hear you beat a troll with a bathroom door," Moody said. "Any you aren't even full grown. What do you think she's going to be able to do?"

"You aren't listening!" Steven said. "She likes humans! One of her best friends is a human!"

Moody gave him a look, and Steven flushed. It was true that none of the gems really had much use for humans, but of them all Amethyst was the closest. She'd been friends with Vidalia, and at one time her and his dad had been friends.

"It wouldn't hurt to listen to the boy, Alastor."

The second auror in the room was tall and broad shouldered. His skin was the color of Garnet's, and he had a gold ring in his ear. Steven instinctively liked him. His name was weird...like Elvis...Kingsly something.

He actually sort of liked Moody, except for his refusal to listen.

"She's dangerous," Moody said.

"All the more reason to be cautious in dealing with her. If she is of no danger to the boy and only
dangerous to us if we get between her and the boy...then fighting her only puts good men at risk to no real benefit."

"So what would you have us do?"

"Let me talk to her," Steven said. "Explain to her that you guys are our friends."

The third auror stood at the window, staring outside. He had a pair of omnioculars and he said, "The bird is coming. It's being followed by...a purple flying dog."

They were in an old abandoned farmhouse. Apparently the Ministry thought that if there was going to be trouble, it shouldn't happen in one of their expensive buildings.

"She's a shapeshifter," Moody ground out. "And already a menace. What happens if the muggles see her? We'll be obliviating half of England!"

"We didn't have to hide back home," Steven rushed to assure him. "The Gems had been there so long people just...kind of didn't think anything about them. I'm sure she'll do better once we explain things."

The owl flew through the open window. It landed and held its foot out to Steven.

The note only said, "I'm coming."

"I think it's going to be all righ..." the Auror at the window began.

"Stupefy!"

Moody had surrounded the farmhouse with aurors under disillusionment charms. Steven had heard Moody give the order that no one was to attack without orders, but someone hadn't listened.

An explosion sounded outside, followed by the sound of twenty aurors shouting out spells. There were flashes of light, and a moment later the entire wall exploded outward.

An angry looking Amethyst stood outside, swinging her whip. She struck a tree, causing it to explode into wooden shrapnel. The aurors outside dove to the ground, forced to use shielding charms.

She turned and saw Steven. Her whip lashed out and a moment later Steven found himself yanked toward her. A normal human would have been badly injured, maybe even permanently. Even a wizard would have been hospitalized.

Steven though she turned a threw with her whip. As he flew through the air, he closed his eyes and sighed. It had been too much to hope for a peaceful meeting between her and the ministry.

She caught him even before he landed. A moment later she had him under one arm and she was dodging the blasts from the wizards. At this distance they weren't as accurate, but Steven still winced as he was hit in the leg with a spell and he felt it go numb.

"They're friends!" he yelled.

"Some friends," she grimaced as she was hit in the shoulder by a stray blast. She was fast enough that she'd been able to dodge all but a few of them. She didn't even slow down.

A moment later they were through a row of hedges and they'd found a highway.
The crack of air that accompanied apparitioning wizards caused Amethyst to abruptly zig zag. Luckily, it seemed that teleportation was a little disorienting. By the time the wizards had gotten their bearings, Amethyst was already half a mile down the road.

"What's with these guys?" she muttered as there were more flashes as wizards apparated ahead of them. "I don't want to have to hurt them, but I will."

Looking behind her, Steven could see at least half a dozen wizards on brooms. They were getting closer.

"Don't hurt them!" he said. "They're the good guys."

"Then tell them to leave me alone!" she said. She lashed out with her whip, grabbing a tree and uprooting it. She threw it behind her without looking.

The wizards behind them on brooms scattered.

On the road ahead of them a single familiar figure appeared. Unlike the others, he didn't seem to take any time at all to get his bearings. Instead he simply lifted his wand and there was a flash of light that exploded to the horizon.

Amethyst tripped and fell, rolling to a stop. She still didn't drop Steven.

"Dumbledore!" Steven said. "He's the headmaster of my school."

Dumbledore walked slowly toward Amethyst, his wand lifted to his throat. He spoke.

"Stand down."

"This is a Ministry matter," one of the lead aurors said. His voice sounded like the one that had cast the first Stupefy. "You have no authority here."

The other aurors were still half blinded by the flash, but Moody stepped forward and cuffed the younger auror on the back of the head. "He's the chief warlock of the Wizengamot. Have some respect."

Dumbledore stepped forward and said, "We seem to have gotten off to a bad start. My name is Albus Dumbledore, and I've been fortunate enough to have young Steven as a pupil at my school for the last several months."

Amethyst rose to her feet and looked at him suspiciously. "What about these guys?"

"They are...I suppose you would say they are the police officers of my kind," Dumbledore said. "It's their job to keep our people safe from monsters and evildoers. I understand from Steven that you would know something about that."

Amethyst glanced at Steven uncertainly.

"What do you all want with me?"

"I'd like to discuss your future in our world...that of yourself and your companions, whenever they should decide to revive themselves, and especially of young Steven."

Amethyst looked back at the aurors, many of whom had finally caught up with them. Finally, she sighed. "Fine...but I can't make any promises for the others. I'm not in charge."
"The boy has already killed one teacher, and he'd just a child. I've seen the reports...she's a menace."

"She's not a danger to children," Dumbledore said. He glanced back at Amethyst and Steven. "The wards wouldn't allow her inside if she was. If anything, I would think that she would make the children even safer."

Cornelius Fudge stared at Dumbledore angrily.

He glanced around the room at the other members of the board. Dumbledore somehow already had the votes to allow this, creature to stay on the grounds.

"She can't stay inside the castle," he said, knowing that he'd lost the main issue.

"One of our staff members, Rubeus Hagrid has agreed to help acclimate Miss Amethyst to the wizarding world."

That oaf? It would be like the blind leading the blind. As far as Fudge was concerned, this was a disaster of an idea. The creature belonged in a cell somewhere. Short of that, she should be in the Forbidden Forest.

As though he'd read Fudge's mind, Dumbledore said, "We've decided to build her a small dwelling on the outskirts of the Hogwarts grounds, near the Forbidden forest. She's agreed to help Hagrid to...contain some of the more dangerous creatures there."

Cornelius Fudge sniffed. It wasn't the worst idea. She'd been some sort of monster hunter in her old world, assuming the child could be believed. Keeping her busy fighting other monsters might not be the worst idea. There were packs of werewolves who could use a few lessons...

Really, there was a political upside. If the creature hurt some of the students, it would weaken Dumbledore and Fudge could remind everyone that he'd objected but had been overruled.

If the situation worked well, he could simply remain quiet about it and lose nothing.

All in all, there wasn't any real reason for him not to agree.

"All right," he said. "But I want my objection noted in the records."

The boy's face broke out in a huge grin. From what Fudge had heard, he was a little slow, although there had been the incident with the troll earlier in the year.

The Hufflepuff parents were solidly behind him, even if no one else was, so getting rid of him was no longer an option, even if he'd murdered a professor.

The life of a politician was sometimes trying.

Returning to Hogwarts every year after a summer at Spinner's End was always a chore, but at least the two weeks before the children returned was pleasant. The hallways were peaceful and quiet, and the potion's laboratories were free of explosions and other assorted disasters.

Severus Snape regarded this time as his haven, his way of relaxing before the chaos and unpleasantness that inevitably came with the school year.

Peace and quiet was a precious commodity. At times he liked to walk along the shore of the lake, enjoying the quiet stillness of the water. There were certain types of algae that he could collect from the banks that were useful in lucrative potions.
So when he heard an unusual cracking sound from the forest, he was concerned. It sounded a little like a Muggle firearm, which was concerning. If there were Muggles in the forest he had to get them out before they were eaten by any number of things, or before they accidentally shot someone.

No child had ever been shot at Hogwarts, although they had been burned, sliced, petrified, crushed, sauteed, transformed and been eaten by a number of monsters.

Muggles were a danger to themselves and others. Snape moved quickly toward the edge of the forest, pulling his wand from its holster but holding it down by his side. He stiffened as he heard the sounds of childish laughter.

No children were permitted in Hogwarts until the school year began. They certainly were not allowed in the Forbidden forest. It was forbidden for a reason.

Cautiously he slowed his pace.

He heard the sound of another small explosion and he began moving very quietly. It was possible that it was a hunter and his child, although that was seeming increasingly unlikely the closer he got to the source of the sound.

Peering around a large tree he stared.

There was a hut there that hadn't been there at the end of the school year. It looked as though a massive boulder, at least twenty foot on a side had been set on the ground and then hollowed out. The front was carved in a crude rendering of a woman with multiple arms.

Steven Universe was standing near the hut with a small purple woman who was holding a whip.

"I think you need to give her a little more of a smile," Steven was saying.

The woman scowled. "I lived there five thousand years. I know what it looked like."

She flicked the whip, and with a crack another piece of stone came off the sculpture.

"Pearl's just gonna complain," the woman said.

"She's not here now," Steve said. "And I'm sure she'll fix it the way she likes when she gets here, but you're the one who's gonna live here until then."

Snape stepped around the corner of the tree and asked, "What's going on here?"

Looking up at him, Steven's face broke out into a large grin. "Professor Snape!"

"Mr. Universe," Snape said stiffly. "I asked you a question."

"This is Amethyst. She's one of the gems, and she woke up!" Steven said. "Hagrid said I should just call her my aunt, but if I'm my own mother, wouldn't that make her my sister?"

Snape noticed an uncomfortable look pass over the woman's face at the mention of his mother. For a moment he allowed himself to wonder what it would be like to know someone for thousands of years, thinking that it would last forever and then lose them.

It sounded like a receipt for disaster. Snape could barely tolerate his fellow teachers for the school year, much less for millenia. It seemed impossible that they wouldn't eventually try to kill each other by the end of the first century.
"She's living here?" Snape asked.

"Dumbles set me up with this cool pad," Amethyst said. "I've been customizing it."

"I didn't think anyone lived here year round except Hagrid," Snape said. He could feel the beginning of a headache coming on.

He treasured his peace and quiet, and if there was one thing Steven Universe wasn't, it was quiet. Considering that he had to have learned the behaviors from somewhere, his aunt had to be even worse.

The whip vanished from the woman's hand with a gesture.

"So you're Snape," she said, sizing him up. "Steven says you work hard to keep all the kids safe."

"It's professor Snape," Snape said. "And yes."

"Don't you think safe is a little...boring?"

Something about the way she was standing screamed insolence. Her outfit was even worse. With one bare shoulder and wearing a monstrosity of a leotard, she looked like she should be on an exercise program on the telly or perhaps preparing for bed.

If she was a Hogwarts student he'd have taken house points. Undoubtedly she'd have been in Gryffindor, given her attitude toward danger. Snape suppressed a shudder.

The Weasely twins were going to love her.

"I'm sure the parents of the children of this institution would prefer boring," he said. He stared off into the distance, refusing to look at her ghastly outfit.

Unfortunately, over the past millenia Hogwarts had been anything but boring.

The thought that this woman, if she'd been born in this universe would have been old enough to have known the Hogwarts founders, or even Merlin himself was startling. There were ghosts in Hogwarts that old, but their memories, especially of the times before their deaths was suspect.

"They just need a little livening up," she said.

He glanced back at her and saw her grinning.

"Pearl's gonna love you," she continued. "All about rules and bein proper and all that. Sometimes you stick in the muds have to learn to stir things up once in a while."

"Rules exist for a reason," Snape said irritably. He could tell without looking that this woman wasn't intimidated by him.

"Yeah...to be broken!"

"We've been exploring the Forbidden forest all summer with Hagrid," Steven said cheerfully. He didn't seem to notice the tension between the two adults at all. "It's been a lot of fun."

Given that the boy had beaten a troll on his own, in the company of Hagrid and this woman he'd probably been as safe as a normal Hogwarts student in the Great Hall.

"So you've been living here...on school grounds," Snape said flatly.
"Oh no," Steven said. "This is just the entrance. We've been digging the Temple all summer, under the Forbidden forest."

For a moment Snape allowed himself to wonder about tree roots and the water table, but undoubtedly they'd found held from various staff members. Magic surmounted all sorts of Muggle obstacles.

The boy's body language was different from what he'd ever seen; it was more open and joyful than it had been when he had been alone in the world. If he'd worried about Steven being popular before, this was going to make it even worse.

"I will see you at the beginning of the school year," he said stiffly.

"You didn't tell me he was a big nerd," Amethyst said behind him, her voice pitched so that he could hear it.

"Amethyst!" Steven said. "He's one of my teachers."

The women was like the reincarnation of James Potter in a woman's body; the school year was going to be intolerable.

"An she likes my rock cakes,' Hagrid was saying enthusiastically.

From what Snape had heard, the woman literally ate garbage simply for the novelty of it. Rock cakes couldn't be much worse.

He'd complained, of course. Having a dangerous magical creature on the edge of the Hogwarts wards wasn't safe. He had no doubt that some of his Slytherins were going to complain to their parents, and the headache that would be was already giving him the beginning of a migraine.

Somehow the headmaster had decided to give her a job...as Hagrid's assistant.

Snape doubted that the woman even understood what a job was, much less had any sense of responsibility. He'd read some of the Ministry transcripts of the interviews about the boy and his aunts. Apparently the woman had been feral for the first centuries of her life. There was something feral about her still.

"She likes a good scrap too," Hagrid was saying. "Y'oughta see her...it's really something. Even Steven's not too bad in a scrap."

Trust Hagrid to have a crush on a creature who was literally a rock.

"She's agreed to help patrol the halls at night," Flitwick was saying. "Fewer shifts for the rest of us."

That was assuming she could be trusted not to simply turn into a cat and curl up somewhere and pretend to sleep.

In his opinion she was the one they should be watching out for.

"Whatcha doin?"

Only years of experience kept him from dropping the crushed firefly extract into the cauldron in front of him. Dropping it in now would lead to a a Longbottom-like explosion.
As soon as he was sure his hands were steady he looked up.

A ridiculous purple cat with a gem on its chest was laying on the table in front of the cauldron.

"I'm attempting not to cause an explosion that will cause the room to collapse," he said. "Startling me won't help."

She was silent for a moment then said, "What are you doin now?"

He stirred the potion carefully. "If I tell you, will you go away?"

"Probably not."

"I'm brewing a potion."

"So magic, huh?"

"Yes," he said shortly. Maybe she was like a real cat and she'd go away if she was bored.

"So why aren't you stirring it with your wand?"

He stared at her, outraged. "Wands are not necessary for potions, and no proper wizard would ever consider abusing their wand like that."

She was silent again for a moment.

"So what's the potion for?"

For the first time Snape found himself wishing he was brewing a headache cure instead of a firedrake brew. He was rapidly developing a migraine.

Maybe having the children back would be a blessing this year. At least it would give the blasted woman something else to vent her boredom on.

"Can I eat the cauldron when you're done with it?"

Snape sighed. It was going to be a long year.

Amethyst exploded out of the fireplace behind him, rolling to a stop. She looked ridiculous, covered in ashes and soot. She grinned up at him.

"Pearl's gonna hate this," she said.

"Well, it's no warp pad, but we wizards think it's kinda hot!" Steven said. He grinned back at her. It felt good to start making jokes again, even if it was only bad puns. Before she'd come back it had been like the humor had been completely leached out of him.

"So you're a wizard now, huh?" Amethyst said, rolling to an upright position. She looked around curiously.

"Well, kind of," Steven said. "I've got a wand and everything."

"Like they even let you use it. Might as well be a random stick for all the magic I've seen you do."
Amethyst scowled. "Ministry is a bunch of stick in the muds. They've got no sense of humor."

It had taken most of the summer for the Ministry to agree to let Amethyst have her freedom; she'd been legally confined to the grounds of Hogwarts and the Forbidden forest for a probationary period. Steven hadn't been sure, but he'd thought there were watchers making sure she didn't slip away.

Possibly it had all been for the best. After all, in Beach City Amethyst had had Pearl to keep her from getting too wild and crazy. Now she seemed unsure what to do. The idea of being the adult seemed to terrify her, and it almost seemed like she'd reverted and was acting more childish.

She stood up and ruffled his hair. Soot went flying.

"Show me around, little man."

"At least we've got money," Steven said.

It was the only thing that had made milking those acromantula worthwhile. That had been a sweaty, nasty job, but apparently the venom was valuable for potion ingredients. Steven had felt happier about milking the acromantula than at the thought that some wizard would go around and kill one just for its poison.

The acromantula hadn't agreed that they were saving their lives though. They'd actually seemed really put out about the whole thing.

"Better get it to the bank," Amethyst agreed. "If we leave it in the temple we'll never find it."

Amethyst had always been a pack rat, but it had impressed even Steven at just how fast she'd managed to fill the caverns beneath her hut with piles of junk. Since she wasn't allowed to leave the junk had to have come from Hogwarts, but Steven couldn't imagine where it was all coming from.

He had seen one of Professor Snape's monogrammed socks though...well, it wasn't his business.

"It was nice of Dumbledore to give us this bag," Steven said.

"He didn't want you looking like little Santa Claus going down the street." Amethyst chuckled. She changed into a purple bearded man.

"I think he's called Father Christmas over here...or maybe Krampus...I'm not sure," Steven said. "And he's skinny. I've got no idea what THAT'S about."

"Well, you know what they say about the food here..."

"Hey! I like the food here!" Steven said. "The house elves work really hard to make it."

Amethyst shrugged. "It's all fun going down as far as I'm concerned."

"You're going to love Bertie Bott's Every Flavor beans," Steven said. "They've got some that taste like dirt, earwax...even boogers."

"Sweet!" she said.

"Better drop this money off at the bank so we can buy some stuff," Steven said. "If we lose it, we might have to go milk some more giant spiders."
"Can we? It was kind of fun!" Amethyst said.

"Yeah...but afterward..."

"Oh, right..."

Showing Diagon alley to Amethyst was as much fun as Steven had hoped it would be. She jumped from one thing to the next. She wanted to try eating the bat spleens and eel eyes, the potion bottles and she even pretended she was going to eat a telescope.

Of course she was perfectly capable of actually eating a telescope, but mostly she was enjoying the alarmed looks of the store owner.

"You'd have thought I was going to eat his wand," she said.

"I think that was a magic telescope" Steven said. He grabbed her hand and pulled at it. At the rate they were going they wouldn't get to the bank before it closed, and they were less than half a block away.

As they reached the entrance to the bank, Steven whispered, "Don't turn into a goblin...they'll think you're mocking them."

"I will be," she said.

Steven frowned at her and pulled her inside.

Fortunately there wasn't a line; he doubted he'd have been able to keep Amethyst from some sort of trouble if they'd had to have waited a long time.

Stepping up to the nearest teller, he said, "I want to put some money in the bank."

Without looking up at him, the goblin growled, "Do you have an account here?"

"Uh...No?"

The goblin looked up impatiently. "You either do or you do not."

"Uh...not yet."

"Then you want new accounts," he said. He nodded in the direction of a goblin four seats down who looked even more irritable than this one.

Steven glanced at Amethyst and grimaced for real this time. She didn't always have a lot of patience. He hoped they didn't give them the runaround.

"Did you see the look on his face?" Amethyst couldn't stop grinning.

"I don't think they liked us much," Steven said glumly. He'd only managed to get his vault by promising not to bring Amethyst back with him the next time.

"We were trying to give them money," she said. "What's so hard about that?"

If it hadn't been for the number of galleons they'd brought with them, Steven had no doubt that he'd have been thrown out along with Amethyst.
"Let's go get candy," Steven said. "And then ice cream."

"Weren't we supposed to be buying books or some junk like that?"

Steven shrugged. "Who remembers?"

He paused. "Hey...there's Hagrid up ahead."

He'd been sent off to get Harry. They hadn't been allowed to go along on the premise that British society was more willing to accept an eleven foot tall man on the subway than a small purple woman.

Steven had tried to come up with a story about Amethyst being a Doctor Who actress, but the wizards had been adamant.

They rushed down the street, dodging passing wizards, only to see Hagrid duck into a bookstore where a long line of witches was streaming out the door.

By the time they got inside they saw two wizards punching each other in the middle of the store.

Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy were both staring at the men in horror.

"I didn't know they had Wrestling here!" Amethyst said. She turned into her Purple Puma form, suddenly two feet taller and considerably more hairy.

Steven shoved his way toward the two men and before anyone could react he'd grabbed both men by the robes and lifted them off their feet, separating them. He was so short he had to grab them by the belts.

"Stop," he said gently.

"Get your hands off me, Mudblood," the white haired wizard said. He pulled away from Steven and said, "But at least a mudblood is almost human. You can't even say that."

Steven finally recognized him as Lucius Malfoy.

He closed his eyes as he saw Amethyst standing scowling behind the man. This wasn't going to be pleasant.

"You two need to be more careful," Hagrid was saying. "Malfoy is a bad un, and you can't just go wrestling him in the middle of a store. He's sure to make trouble for ye later."

"I wasn't wrestling him," Steven protested. "I was keeping him from getting punched in the face."

"Did you see when I put him in a full nelson?" Amethyst asked excitedly.

The Weasely twins were staring at her like she was the holy grail, like Pearl had sometimes looked when she thought about Steven’s mother.

Ginny was distracted, staring into her pail of books.

"That's your aunt?" Ron asked, staring at her.
Hermione and Harry were also staring at her as they left the store.

"Uh...kind of," Steven said. "Or maybe my sister if I'm my mom...she's one of the gems."

"I'm the fun one," Amethyst said, finally switching out of her Purple Puma form.

"Hey, Amethyst...this is Hermione and Harry and Ron."

"You're the friends he's been telling me about all summer," Amethyst said. "The ones who are like me and Pearl and Garnet."

"I didn't say that," Steven complained.

"Sure you did," she said. "You got the smart one that likes rules, the serious one and the fun guy."

"I'm the fun guy?" Ron asked.

"You're clearly not the smart one," one of the twins said. Steven wasn't sure which one.

"Or the serious one."

"Actually, he's not even the fun brother," the first twin said again. "We're George and Fred Weasely."

"Just call us Forge," the second said.

"Nice to meet you," Amethyst said. "I hear you guys are the ones that had Snape stocking up on headache potions last year."

"I'm sure we aren't the only reason," one twin said modestly.

"He tripled his brewing since I showed up," Amethyst said, grinning. "He'd made up a bunch of antacid potions too, but I might have accidentally eaten them."

Steven grimaced. He'd been the first student in Hogwarts history to already be serving detention two weeks before school even started.

It was going to be an interesting year.
"So you were here all summer?" Hermione asked enviously. "With access to the libraries?"

"I didn't read a single book," Steven said.

Hermione stared at him, outraged. If it had been Ron she'd have expected it, but Steven liked to read for pleasure.

"Amethyst was back," he said defensively. "We spent the summer fighting monsters and milking acromantula and goofing off with Hagrid."

Steven's favorite fictional series didn't exist in this universe yet; his world was almost twenty five years ahead of Hermione's. Some of those books might never be written though.

"I hope you at least kept up with your homework," Hermione said. It astounded her sometimes just how little Steven seemed to worry about the important things. It might have been from the way he was raised; hardly any direction and allowed to do whatever he wanted.

Of course, from what she'd seen of her classmates, that same lack of concern wasn't unique to Steven. Sometimes she wondered if she'd have been better off in Ravenclaw. At least that house had its priorities straight.

Steven gave her a guilty look and turned quickly to his meal.

"I wonder where Harry and Ron are?" Hermione asked. "I looked for them on the train but I didn't see them."

"Harry was still staying with Ron, right?" Steven asked. "So they probably came together. Maybe they missed the train and they'll floo in."

"That'd be just like Ron to miss the train," Hermione said, scowling. "But I'd have thought Harry would be more careful."

"I'm sure they'll get here sooner or later," Steven said. "Everybody thinks Harry's pretty important, so it's not like they'll just forget about him."

Hermione nodded, but she couldn't help but worry. She suspected that Steven sometimes forgot just how vulnerable normal people were; anything could have happened. Even wizards could get hurt in automobile accidents, assuming they bothered to ride in them.

The doors to the great hall slammed open and Snape stepped through, his face both thunderously angry and curiously self satisfied. He moved quickly toward the professor's table at the front of the room, his robes billowing around him.

Hermione glanced at Steven, a feeling of dread in her stomach.

The dread intensified as she saw the thunderous expression on Professor McGonagall's face. The woman stood quickly, leaving her meal behind, and the two professors stormed out of the great hall.

The headmaster looked troubled.
Neither Harry nor Ron were at dinner that night.

"A flying car?" Steven asked enviously. "That would have been cool."

"It almost got us expelled," Harry said grimly.

Hermione stared at the two of them stiffly. If it had been anyone other than Harry they'd have been expelled the moment they landed on Hogwarts grounds. They'd been SEEN, by muggles. It was a massive violation of the statutes of secrecy.

"I've been on a spaceship," Steven said. "Twice actually. But I've never gotten to actually drive one."

"Didn't you tell me you'd driven an escape pod of some kind?" Hermione interrupted. She'd been interested in his universe, of course. She'd asked questions over the last year of tutoring him. The idea that his...aunt...Pearl had been able to build a functional space ship out of old junk had impressed her to no end. She was anxious to get to know her when she finished...gestating, or whatever it was that gems did while they healed.

"It was on the ground," Steven said dismissively. "Not flying."

"You drove a drill once, right?"

"That was IN the ground," Steven said. "I got eaten by a giant bird once, but I don't think that qualifies as actually flying."

Hermione sometimes wondered if Steven's stories were embellished. It seemed impossible that he'd been in space atop a column of the ocean for example. Steven was so honest though that he was impossible to disbelieve.

She'd still like to get hold of a pensieve some time and get a look at some of his memories. The ministry hadn't done so, which surprised her, although she supposed it was probably illegal to force it. She hadn't researched wizarding law nearly as well as she should; there were just so many other interesting things to look into and there was never enough time.

The owls came flying in with the mail.

It hardly seemed hygienic to Hermione, but she couldn't help but feel a little bit of excitement every time she saw it. She loved magic.

Ron's family owl landed on the table; it looked half dead.

She reached out and touched it gingerly.

"I've got healing spit!" Steven said.

"No!" Hermione said quickly. "He'd just tired. Look!"

The bird had a red envelope in it's beak.

"A howler," Ron said, his face suddenly pale.

Hermione stared at him. Beside him, Neville looked just as pale.

"What's a howler?" Steven asked.
Hermione was grateful. She hated the fact that wizardborn sometimes just knew things that muggleborns had to learn by hard experience. She had no idea what a howler was.

Steven, of course had no fear of looking stupid. He wasn't stupid, but he was as oblivious as Hagrid in some ways while being uncannily perceptive in others.

"You might as well get it over with," Neville said, shuddering. "It just gets worse the longer you wait."

Ron closed his eyes and then he opened the envelope. A moment later they all learned just what a howler was.

Hermione couldn't help but feel that both boys deserved it.

"I've never seen a tree be healed in just that way," Professor Lockhart said, looking mildly disturbed.

Steven was walking between Professor Sprout and Professor Lockhart.

"My mother had a way with plants," he said proudly. He was wiping his mouth with a handkerchief.

Hermione stared at them. They'd called Steven away to spit on a tree? Of course, from what she'd heard Harry and Ron had damaged the Whomping Willow pretty badly with their flying car.

"I didn't even have to restrain it," Professor Sprout was saying.

"If Professor Lockhart hadn't kept dropping me, we'd have gotten done twice as fast," Steven said.

"Just testing your reflexes, my boy," Lockhart said generously.

He smiled and Hermione felt a curious flutter in her stomach. He really was something to look at. She found herself staring at him as he spoke to Harry and she didn't even really hear a thing that he said. The disgusted look on Harry's face was odd, but who could understand the twisted minds of boys.

At least Hermione was above all that silliness.

She couldn't wait for Defense class.

They'd gotten almost half the Cornish Pixies back in their cages by the time Steven came by to ask them how the class had went.

His face brightened as he saw what they were doing, and a moment later he was darting around the room catching the Pixies in mid-air and shouting "Skillz!"

It had taken them ten minutes to catch half the pixies; with his help they caught the rest in less than a third of that time.

Hermione always found herself flabbergasted at how fast and agile he was. He looked like he ought to be as clumsy as Neville, but somehow he zipped through the air. He was just so fast...

If he could perform magic that quickly, he'd be a brilliant duelist. He already had the dodging part down beautifully.

Of course, after a summer of milking acromantula it wasn't surprising that he was fast. Acromantula
venom was terribly poisonous.

"So how was your first class?" Steven asked.

Ron gave him a dirty look. "You'll find out. Blighter doesn't know what he's talking about."

"This seems like great practice," Steven said. "If you can dodge a pixie you can probably dodge a spell."

"Well, we were the only ones who learned anything then," Harry said. "Everybody else left."

Hermione felt like defending Professor Lockhart, but the disgusted looks from the other two made her quiet down.

---

Hermione felt like a traitor sitting in the stands for the Hufflepuff tryouts. She should be supporting her own House, not the Hufflepuffs. However, she'd put so much work into helping Steven that she couldn't help but come out to support him.

Weirdly enough, the glances she was getting from the Hufflepuffs around her were not unwelcoming. Loyalty was a Hufflepuff trait, and everyone knew she was Steven's friend.

After what he'd done the year before, saving his entire year from the troll Steven could practically walk on water as far as the Hufflepuffs were concerned. It was inevitable that they'd push him into trying out, especially considering that it had been years since they'd won the cup.

Hermione leaned forward as they put Steven on a broom to try him out for beater.

She jumped as the bludger went crashing through the stands at the far end of the field leaving a hole. One of the older players repaired the stands with a spell.

"Heh, heh," Steven said uneasily. "I got a little excited."

His strength was soon apparent as a disadvantage as a chaser and keeper as well. He tried to control himself and he did fairly well at first, but he almost took a chaser's head off with a quaffle when he got excited.

Of course he barely seemed to notice it when he was hit by a bludger, which would be a massive advantage in any position.

It wasn't until they had the tryouts for seeker that he really shined, though.

"Skillz!" he shouted, holding up the golden snitch, much faster than any of the other players. Even better, if the beaters didn't have to protect him much that would mean they could concentrate more on protecting the other players.

Hufflepuff would actually have a chance this year.

Hermione only hoped that the competition didn't sour his friendship with Harry and Ron. Ron especially was a fanatic about Quidditch.

Still, with any luck this would be the biggest challenge they faced all year other than tests and homework.
It seemed to Harry that they hardly ever got to see Steven anymore. Since the school year started he'd been busy training to be the new Hufflepuff seeker, and much of his free time was spent with his aunt Amethyst and Hagrid.

Hermione still saw him of course; he still needed as much academic help as ever. But still, other than glimpses of him at meal times they hardly saw him.

Amethyst they saw more often; Harry often saw glimpses of a purple owl or a purple cat hiding in the rafters of various classes. Amethyst apparently took great joy in pranking the ghosts, especially Peeves, who despised her.

Most of the other residents of the castle took pleasure in seeing her get the best of Peeves. Harry had once even seen Snape's lip quirk into the beginning of a smirk.

Fortunately she'd scaled back on pranking Snape after Steven had had a talk with her about Potions class safety. The classes were dangerous enough without any added random variables.

She'd taken to calling Hermione "Lil Pearl."

Hermione had chosen to take that as a compliment, although Harry suspected that the gem didn't entirely mean it as one.

So Harry was a little excited to see Steven at the Bloody baron's Deathday party. At least it would be some small compensation for missing out on the Halloween feast.

As they stepped into the room Harry stopped involuntarily. There were hundreds of ghosts, most of whom he'd never seen before. Some were playing dreadful music on saws and others were dancing.

Their breaths were like a mist before them; it was cold here, cold like the grave.

Steven was somehow dancing with a female ghost, oblivious to the fact that his face barely reached her chest or that their hands were unable to touch. Unlike the other ghosts in the room, most of whom were in various stages of adulthood, this ghost looked young enough to be a student at Hogwarts.

A closer look revealed that she was wearing what looked like an outdated Hogwarts school uniform.

"Is that Myrtle Steven is dancing with?" Hermione asked from behind him. She stared at the couple dancing. "I've never seen her when she wasn't crying or complaining about something. She looks...almost happy."

"Myrtle?" Ron asked.

"She haunts the third floor bathroom. It's why it's always out of order...she keeps flooding the place when she has tantrums." Hermione frowned, biting her lip. "I never knew she could dance."

"Steven's been teaching her," a voice from behind them said. "Getting her ready for the big day."

Harry turned. A purple woman grinned at them.

"Amethyst," Hermione said, a little stiffly. "How are you enjoying the party?"

"It's a hoot," she said. "Lots more fun than regular birthdays. I've already been banned from the refreshment table."

A quick glanced showed that the table was covered with rotting food.
"You ate that?" Ron asked, gagging.

"I ate a five year old burrito once," Amethyst said. "This stuff barely rates."

The ghosts were flying through the food, almost as though they were trying to taste it.

"Nibbles?" Peeves asked from behind them. Harry turned and saw that the poltergeist was holding out a bowl of fungus covered nuts.

"Don't mind if I do," Amethyst said from behind him. She brushed between Harry and Hermione and before Peeves had time to react she somehow ate the entire thing, including the bowl and Peeves arm up to the elbow in a single gulp.

Peeves shrieked and flew away from her. She transformed into a dog with a helicopter blade coming out of its back and chased him around the room.

"I can't imagine what she thinks she's going to do if she catches him," Hermione said. "It's not like she can touch him."

Steven's voice came from Harry's right as he and Myrtle stepped off the dance floor. "Amethyst's body is made out of light and ghosts bodies are made out of something similar. She can actually partially affect them."

"It's the strangest thing having her touch you," Myrtle said. She looked like she was out of breath, which was strange considering that she didn't even need to breath. Maybe it was the excitement of dancing.

"She helped teach Myrtle to dance, since I can't actually touch her," Steven said.

"You both looked great out there," Harry said.

Myrtle beamed at him, and although objectively she was a plain girl with thick glasses, for just a moment she almost looked pretty.

Nearly headless Nick tried to make a speech, but the other fully headless ghosts were playing head hocky. Amethyst jumped in, although her head was attached to her body by a thin cord.

"I'm hungry," Ron said with another glance at the table full of rotten food. "And cold."

"Let's get out of here," Hermione said with a dismissive glance at Amethyst. She sniffed.

"It's been a lot of fun," Steven said to Myrtle. "We should dance again sometime."

"You're leaving already?" Myrtle's face scrunched up into a frown. "Ready to leave the minute your friends that are actually alive show up."

"Hey," Steven said gently. He reached up as though to pat her on the face. "We're friends. It's just that I still get cold and hungry."

She sniffed. "The party's not going to be any fun now that you're gone."

"You can dance now," Steven said. "I'll bet there's some ghosts that would love to dance with you."

"Nobody wants to dance with poor Myrtle," Myrtle began, only to stop as she felt a tap on her shoulder.
An elderly looking ghost wearing plate armor bowed to her and asked her something. She smiled for a second time and again she looked almost radiant.

They slipped away as she started dancing.

"I hate it when she gets like that," Steven said. "She was crying in the bathroom when she died and it's like she's been stuck that way ever since."

"Most ghosts are trapped in the emotional state they were at death," Hermione said. "Look at Professor Binns. It's amazing that you've actually gotten her this far."

"It's taken a lot of work, but it'll be worth it if she can be happy, even for a little while." Steven said.

Harry stopped in the middle of the hallway. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

His stomach clenched as he heard it again. "It's that voice again."

Steven stared at him. "What voice?"

Harry held up his hand. "Quiet!"

A moment later he was running up the stairs, the others chasing after him.

"It's going to kill someone," he said.

They charged across the whole second floor and even Steven was looking winded. As they turned around a final corridor, Harry heard Hermione gasp from behind him.

The writing was literally on the wall, in foot high letters shining in the torchlight.

"What's the chamber of Secrets?" Steven asked. "And who is the heir?"

For once even Hermione didn't know.

Ron froze, looking upward.

The body of a cat was hanging from a torch sconce. It was Mrs Norris.

"We don't want to be caught here," Ron said urgently. "Not at all."

Steven frowned. "We need to get her down. Maybe there's something I can do to help."

If they'd wanted to hide it was too late, as a moment later a crowd of students entered the hallway on both sides. People froze as they realized what they were seeing.

Draco Malfoy cackled. "Enemies of the heir beware! Mudbloods are next!"

"What happened to my cat? Mrs. Norris!"

Argus Filch pushed his way between the students.

"We need to get her down," Steven said to him urgently. "I have healing spit; we may be able to save her."

"Wingardium Leviosa," Hermione had her wand out and a moment later the body of the cat came
floating down.

The crowd grew silent as Steven licked his hand and then crouched by the body of the cat, petting her gently.

"Come on," he muttered, and the crowd around him grew silent.

The body remained motionless.

"What's going on here?" Professor Dumbledore's voice came from the back of the crowd. The crowd parted and a moment later he was standing over Steven and the cat.

"She won't wake up," Steven said.

There were tears in his eyes, and it occurred to Harry that many of his classmates would have been embarrassed to be seen crying over a cat, but it didn't seem to bother Steven at all. Even Draco didn't say anything, although the headmaster's presence might have been why.

Or maybe even Draco was smart enough not to antagonize someone able to tear a door off it's hinges.

"My office is closest," Lockhart murmured, and the headmaster nodded.

Hermione gestured with her wand, and the cat levitated before her. The crowd parted before them, and it reminded Harry a little of a funeral procession, the students staring in silence as their little group passed in front of them.

They reached the office of professor Lockhart.

Professor Lockhart said something; it didn't register with Harry, who was too busy staring at Steven, who looked almost as devastated as Filch.

Dumbledore leaned close to the cat, staring so intently that his nose almost touched it's fur.

"Why is her fur wet?"

"I tried to use my healing spit on her," Steven said. "It didn't work. I guess it can't heal the dead."

"She's not dead," Dumbledore said.

Both Steven and Filch looked up at him with dawning hope.

"She's been petrified," Dumbledore said.

I can't be sure how it was done," Dumbledore said. "This is dark magic."

"Ask them who did it," Filch said. He looked as though he was going to make an accusation, but he glanced at Steven, who hadn't stopped staring at the cat with a sad expression on his face. "They were there before anyone else. They had to have seen something."

"I'd be interested in knowing why they were in the upstairs corridor," Snape said. He'd slipped into the room while no one was looking. "Instead of at the feast with everyone else."

"We went Nearly headless Nick's deathday party," Hermione said. "Amethyst saw us there, and a lot of the ghosts."
"That corridor is a good ways away from the dungeons," Snape said. "Why not go to the feast, or perhaps back to your rooms."

"Tell them," Steven said without looking at Harry. "It's important."

Harry flushed. No one would believe him if he told the truth, but now Steven had put him on the spot.

"I heard a voice," he said. "It said it was going to kill someone."

"Did anyone else hear this voice?" Snape asked, leaning forward.

Everyone reluctantly shook their heads.

"We were with Harry all afternoon," Ron said. "He wouldn't have been able to do anything to Mrs. Norris."

"The voice lead us directly to her though," Steven said. "that means it has to be real, not just Harry being crazy."

"I've heard it before," Harry said. "Once when I was in Professor Lockhart's office."

The headmaster and Snape glanced at each other for a moment. Dumbledore said, "If you should hear this voice again, you must inform one of the teachers at once."

Harry nodded. It surprised him that even Snape seemed to be taking him seriously, and he was glad that he'd told. It was hard for him to trust adults, especially given his upbringing with the Dursley's. Bringing a problem to one of them would just have meant a beating.

Being independent was second nature when it was beaten into you.

Steven seemed to trust authority much more, and having seen how he interacted with Amethyst, his "aunt", Harry could see why.

Hopefully, this would all be taken care of soon enough. School was hard enough without homicidal voices running around petrifying people.

"Maybe it's something special about Harry," Amethyst said.

Hermione had been researching like mad over the past few days, while the rest of the school had gossiped about Mrs. Norris petrification.

She'd researched everything she could about mysterious voices, starting with malevolent ghosts, phantoms, phantasms and haunts. Then she'd moved onto creatures that petrified others; gorgons, medusas and the like, but nothing seemed to fit.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked. She'd been irritated that Hermione insisted on spending time with her, especially after she'd caught her trying to eat a book.

"Well, nobody else could hear it. Maybe Harry's got a special power? We gems have a lot of the same powers, but we also got our own special thing."

Hermione frowned. "There are a few powers that are unusual, only possessed by certain wizards, but they are either the result of extensive training, like being an animagus, or incredibly rare, like being a metamorphmagus."
"Hey Harry...can you talk to anything weird?" Amethyst asked.

"I think I'm doing that right now," Harry said, looking up from his book.

"Like can you see ghosts that other people can't, or talk to rocks or something."

He frowned. "I talked to a snake once at the zoo, but that's something everybody can do, right?"

Hermione gasped. "No it's not, Harry."

"You're a parseltongue?" Ron asked. He stared at Harry. "That's dark, mate, real dark."

"Why is it any darker talking to snakes than...badgers, or squirrels?"

"I can talk to squirrels," Amethyst said. At their look she shrugged. "Can't understand a thing they have to say though. They act like they don't know what I'm saying, but..."

Ignoring her, Ron said, "It's what Salazar Slytherin was able to do...it's why the snake is the slytherin symbol."

"You-know-who could do it too," Hermione said. She frowned. "You'd better not let anybody know about this, or the whole school will think you're the heir of slytherin."

Harry frowned, then nodded. He already had enough problems without adding to the rumor mill.

Hermione sat in the stands, waiting impatiently for the game to begin. She'd been working long hours on the polyjuice potions, which had involved ducking away from Steven for long periods. Luckily he was more involved with Amethyst and Hagrid these days, and Quiddich was taking more and more of his time, but he was beginning to get suspicious.

It wasn't that she didn't think that he'd be willing to help in their mission to infiltrate Slytherin, but she wasn't entirely sure how the potion would interact with his unique physiology. She didn't know how to modify the potion to take into account that he was partially made of light.

Of course, if he was anything like Amethyst it might work even better on him than on a normal human. Amethyst changed her shape at the drop of a hat.

She'd considered simply asking Amethyst to help, once she'd realized how complicated and work intensive the polyjuice potion was, but Amethyst was technically a member of the castle staff. Hermione didn't think that she'd tell anyone but Harry hadn't trusted her. Besides, she wasn't sure what spells she could use to turn Amethyst into a normal colored version of whatever she turned into.

The one time she'd brought up the subject of shapechanging to Steven, though, he'd begun to sweat and change the subject.

She'd tried to ask Amethyst, who'd just made some sort of obscure reference to something called catfingers, which Hermione supposed might be some kind of American food like Buffalo wings. Ron had been excited about those until she'd explained that they weren't made of actual buffalo, which even in the wizarding world did not have wings.

After all, Steven's world had foods her own didn't, like cookie cats and lion lickers. Of course, it was possible that those existed here in America and she simply hadn't heard of them. It wasn't like there was some sort of library book about obscure American brand names.

The noise of the crowd changed, and Hermione forced herself to pay attention. This was the first
game of the season; it had originally been scheduled between Gryffindor and Slytherin but there had been a last minute change.

Hufflepuff was up.

From the satisfied smirk on Snape's face, Hermione suspected that he'd had something to do with the substitution. No matter what happened, he'd win. Either Steven would win, which would mean that Harry lost, or Harry would win and the reverse would be true.

She wouldn't be surprised if he secretly hoped that Steven would somehow injure Harry.

The game began normally enough. Hufflepuff was much better this year than they had been the year before, although it was clear to Hermione that her house was better trained.

Steven was amazing. Seekers were generally the smallest and lightest players on the team. It helped them to fly faster and be more agile. As a result, they tended to get fouled more by the other players, who tended to be bigger and stronger.

That strategy wouldn't work at all with Steven. Despite his apparent girth, he was very small for his age. However, he was also very solid. He was hit in the shoulder by a flying bludger and barely seemed to notice.

The players knew better than to try to run into him. He'd once beaten a troll unconscious with a bathroom door. No one wanted to risk getting close to him for fear he'd accidentally hurt them.

While Hermione knew that Steven would never willingly hurt anyone, his team ruthlessly exploited this vulnerability.

Rather than seek out the snitch, Steven would fly in and disrupt plays the Gryffindores were attempting, even as he kept looking for the elusive object.

Harry, on the other hand seemed to be so busy fleeing from a bludger that he didn't have time to look for the snitch.

Hermione frowned. Bludgers were supposed to be opportunistic, going after everyone on the field more or less equally. This one had been following Harry pretty exclusively for a while now.

A moment later she realized that Harry was in trouble as he hung upside down to avoid the bludger. She felt a moment of deja vu. Quirrell had tried to kill Harry last year during a quidditch game.

Hermione looked around, but she didn't see anyone trying to hex the bludger, not openly at least.

His teammates closed in, trying to stop the bludger, but it kept on coming.

She could see the moment when Steven realized what was happening. He stiffened on his broom, and a moment later he was rocketing through the air.

Harry dived to avoid the bludger even as Steven soared. For a moment it looked as though they were going to crash, but a moment before the bludger would have hit Harry in the arm, Steven caught it.

"SKILLZ!"

Before the game could be temporarily stopped to deal with the bludger, both seekers caught sight of the snitch.
A moment later they were both off, with Steven having the added handicap of having a bludger in his left hand. It should have been moving around in all directions, but instead it didn't even move at all.

Harry was ahead of Steven for a moment, but Steven jumped off his broom, diving for the snitch while hanging onto the bludger, using it's own buoyancy to slow his fall.

Harry and Steven smashed into one another as they hit the ground with a sickening smack.

A moment later they both sat up, their hands both on the snitch.

It took several minutes for the judges to make a decision; in the end they decided to award the points to both teams.

Gryffindor was ten points ahead due to superior gameplay, but the Hufflepuffs had proven that they were no longer the team everyone could dismiss as being an automatic win.

The Hufflepuffs seemed almost as excited by their defeat as Hermione's housemates were by their victory. The points from this game might make the difference; Hufflepuff had been in last place for the past thirty years.

Of course, none of the other houses wanted to be behind them.

Still, for the moment everyone seemed to be fairly happy, with the sole exception of Snape, who had a sour look on his face as he stared at the inert bludger in his hand.

"It was this crazy house elf," Harry said in a hushed voice. "He was the one who set the bludger on me. He tried to keep me from getting on the train to Hogwarts, and he dropped a cake on the head of my uncle's boss's wife."

"He must be really mad about something," Steven said quietly.

Harry shook his head. They were waiting for the dueling club to start, but whoever was running it hadn't shown up yet. "He said he's trying to protect me."

"If that's how he protects you, I'd hate to see what he'd do if he's mad at you," Ron said. Unlike the others, his voice was louder, and some of the other students in the room turned to look at them.

Hermione hissed and nudged Ron in the arm. "Did he say what he wanted?"

"He's trying to get me to leave Hogwarts," Harry said. "He says there's some kind of plot against me and it's too dangerous."

"He's never been to this school, has he?" Ron said. "It's dangerous just being in potions class, much less when there are Cerberuses and Trolls wandering the halls."

Truthfully, any normal parent would probably pull their child from the school the moment they learned about the things that were going on there.

Harry's aunt and uncle probably wouldn't care if the school killed him, and Steven's guardians had apparently taken him out monster hunting all the time. Ron's parents were purebloods and presumably didn't know any better.
Hermione... Harry could only suppose that the Grangers weren't getting the full story from their daughter. From what he'd heard about them, they seemed like sensible people and they'd want to protect Hermione.

"The school would be much safer if dunderheads like you didn't act like fools in my class," Snape said unexpectedly, coming up from behind them.

"You're running this?" Harry asked.

While Snape would undoubtedly be biased, he at least knew what he was talking about. It was possible they might actually learn something.

Snape scowled. "I'm assisting today."

He stepped toward the center of the room without saying anything else.

"Maybe it's..." Harry began. His heart sank as he saw the other professor who stepped into the center of the room.

Lockhart smiled broadly. He gestured for everyone to gather around him, and then he said, "Welcome friends! The headmaster graciously allowed me to start this dueling club so that I could teach you to protect yourself as I have so often had to do so myself."

Harry groaned, and looked at Ron.

They both wondered if there was a way to sneak out of the room without being noticed. Harry hadn't wished for his invisibility cloak so much since the day Dobby had dropped cake on his uncle's bosses wife's head.

Hermione still looked a little star struck, and Steven seemed politely interested.

Lockhart droned on, undoubtedly more self serving bragging. Harry had trouble paying attention when the man spoke, as everything he said was an exaggeration or a lie.

His attention was caught as Lockhart and Snape faced each other. He glanced at Ron and grinned. This ought to be good.

The sight of Lockhart flying off the stage almost made up for having to listen to him. For a moment Harry could almost see what Steven saw in Snape.

Lockhart rose and began making excuses.

Harry grabbed Ron's sleeve and glanced at the door. For once Ron was on the same wavelength and they began edging their way back through the crowd.

"Mr. Potter," Snape's voice rang out across the room. Harry tensed and his momentary appreciation for the man evaporated. "I'd like you to pair with Mr. Malfoy."

Harry grimaced; there was no getting out of it now. Draco would accuse him of cowardice for the rest of their time at Hogwarts if he backed out now.

The two teachers assigned students to face off against each other. Steven, he was interested to note was paired with Gregory Goyle.

"Face your partners," Lockhart said. "Remember, we are not actually attempting to hurt anyone. When I count to three, use your charms to disarm your opponent."
"One, two..."

Draco’s spell hit Harry in the stomach. He’d jumped the count. Harry felt as though the breath had been forced from his body, and the pain was sharp but bearable. His wand arm still worked, though, and that was all he needed.

His spell hit Draco in the face.

Lockhart said something, but Harry ignored him, completely focused now on Draco in front of him.

Draco was angry and humiliated. He lashed out with a spell, but Harry managed to dodge. Harry was vaguely aware that the people around him were no longer casting spells.

He lashed out again, catching Draco in the foot.

Draco moved his wand, and a moment later something long and black came slithering out of it.

Everyone froze as the large black snake came slithering toward Harry. There were screams from all around him as the crowd backed away.

"I'll take care of it, Mr. Potter," Snape said lazily.

"No need," Lockhart said. He cast a spell and the snake went flying through the air.

A moment later it landed in front of Justin Finch-Fletchly. It hissed and looked enraged.

Harry opened his mouth to command the snake not to move, prejudice against parceltongues or not, but he saw Steven moving through the crowd quickly.

A moment later he was next to Justin, and he said, "No..."

A small pink globe surrounded the snake. It hissed and tried to lash through the orb, but nothing it did made a difference.

"Calm down," Steven said slowly. "It'll be all right."

He gestured, and a moment later the orb and the snake inside it vanished. Steven stared at the place where it had been with a thoughtful expression.

The hufflepuffs surrounded Steven, and Ron tugged on his sleeve.

He was right; it was time to leave.

It surprised Harry to see Hermione right behind them.

"I thought for a minute you were gonna give it away in front of the whole school," Ron said.

Hermione nodded grimly. "You know what everybody would think."

"What was it Steven did?" Harry asked, anxious to change the subject. He already had enough trouble without the whole school thinking he was some kind of monster.

Hermione shrugged. "It wasn't one of his normal shields. I don't know what that was."

"He shouldn't have been able to Apparate within Hogwarts," Harry said. "Unless he's like the house elves and doesn't follow the same rules."
"It was lucky he was there," Ron said soberly. "He really saved your bacon."

"I doubt he was even thinking about that," Hermione said. "I think he was just trying to save Justin."

For a moment Harry felt ashamed that he'd even hesitated. He should have been willing to sacrifice his reputation to help someone else. He'd just been relieved that he didn't have to.

Hermione's face was pale and horrified. "They just found Justin Finch-Fletchly and Nearly Headless Nick petrified."

"How do you petrify a ghost?" Ron asked, looking befuddled.

Harry felt as confused as Ron.

"Knowing Harry was a parseltongue helped my research," Hermione said. "Slytherin's monster has to be some variety of snake, one that can either kill or petrify creatures. That narrows it down a lot."

They were in the library huddled around one of the tables.

"There's only one kind of monster that it could be," Hermione continued. "A basilisk. It's a giant snake that can kill with a look. People that see its reflection are petrified instead."

"How do you kill it?" Ron asked.

Steven looked horrified.

"Easiest way is to let it hear the sound of a rooster crowing," Hermione said.

"Hagrid says someone's killing all the chickens," Steven said glumly. "He asked Amethyst if she was eating them whole. She swears she hasn't been."

"It's probably the heir killing them off," Harry said. "Whoever that might be."

Hermione had opened the book to show the picture inside of the basilisk and Harry winced.

"How does something like that get through the school without being noticed," Ron asked. According to this, the thing ought to be huge."

Steven was silent for a moment. "Do the bathrooms in Hogwarts use magic to flush, or are they normal plumbing?"

"It's normal plumbing," Hermione said. "You don't want to leave large scale waste disposal to magic."

"Peridot...she's another gem...she once tried to flush herself down the toilet. It didn't work, but if she was some kind of snake..."

"The pipes are in the walls," Harry said slowly. "And they go all over Hogwarts."

They stared at each other for a long moment, unsure of what to do. They were in a school with a killer monster in the walls, one that could show up at anytime, especially in the bathrooms.

There were times that going to public school sounded attractive.
Even at the best of times, Myrtle tended to be self absorbed and gloomy. Steven would have assumed that it was part of the ghostly existence, except that he'd met other ghosts at Hogwarts, and many of them were relatively cheerful.

He'd made a point of continuing to see her despite the dance lessons for the ball being over. Although he had a full schedule with classes and Quidditch lessons, he couldn't abandon someone he sometimes thought of as the loneliest ghost. None of Steven's friends liked Moaning Myrtle, not even Hermione, who sometimes reminded him so much of Connie that it made his chest hurt. It sometimes made him wonder how no one else could see what he could see.

When he looked at Snape or Myrtle, he saw someone in pain. They were good people deep down, but they lashed out because they didn't know how to deal with people in a better way.

Maybe it was because he'd been surrounded by pain for his entire life. His father had been grieving for his mother since the day she'd given up her form to create him. Pearl had been in love with her, along with a deep seated feeling of worthlessness because of what she was. Amethyst had hated herself, which was why she spent so much of her time in other forms.

Garnet had at least had her two selves to comfort each other, but they'd lost so many people over the centuries, and she'd known that she'd always be considered aberrant by her own people.

At first he'd been fooled; as a small child he hadn't known better, but as he'd gotten older he'd begun to see behind the cracks in the facade to the bitterness underneath. By the time Peridot had arrived he'd seen straight through her. She'd had a desperate need for approval, for importance, and she'd had some feelings of inferiority.

She'd tried to make herself artificially bigger as much to convince herself as anyone else using leg extenders and arm extenders.

So when he'd met the people here at Hogwarts, he'd immediately seen that they were all in pain. Harry had been raised by people who hated what he was. Hermione had been desperate to prove herself to people. Ron had been convinced that because his family was poor and he was the last and smallest male that he was inferior.

Neville had believed he was a squib and still thought that way sometimes, although the watermelon soldiers who now populated the Longbottom greenhouse helped a little.

Myrtle moaned because it was the only way she thought she could be heard. Yet the more she did it, the less anyone listened. She felt helpless and angry and it wasn't surprising that she sometimes lashed out, although Steven still didn't understand why she liked to hide in the toilets.

"It went right through my head," she was saying.

"It wasn't Peeves, was it?" Steven said. "I'll have Amethyst have a talk with him if it was."

Myrtle sniffed for a moment, then looked up at him. "I didn't see who it was, but I heard footsteps, so it was probably someone living."

"Then they probably didn't know you were there," Steven said. "Most living folks don't think about
things living in the toilet."

Ever since learning about the basilisk and how it traveled, he'd had trouble not thinking about how the thing traveled. He'd had nightmares about going to the bathroom and having an unpleasant surprise, which had made him rather ginger when doing his abolutions.

"Well, she tried to stuff that down the toilet."

There was a soggy notebook underneath the sink, doubtlessly washed out when Myrtle had made the toilet flood.

It was empty, which begged the question of why someone would try to flush it down the toilet instead of using it or throwing it in the trash.

It apparently belonged to T.M. Riddle, which was not a name Steven recognized. He'd made an effort to get to know everyone in all the classes, even the Slytherins, and none of them were named Riddle.

He pulled out his wand and quickly cast a couple of spells. After he'd almost ruined a couple of Hermione's valuable books she'd insisted on drilling him on cleaning and drying charms until he knew them in his sleep.

"I'll find whoever threw this at you," he said to Myrtle. "If they meant to do it, I'll have them say they're sorry."

"And if they didn't mean to do it? She asked archly.

"They should still be sorry, but not as sorry as if they'd meant it," Steven said.

Myrtle said slowly, "I thought a heard a girl crying when she ran away."

"See? She was already sorry."

Hermione had turned herself into a cat person.

Amethyst hadn't stopped laughing, but Steven's own experiences with turning into a cat monster made him both sympathetic and simultaneously horrified.

Some sort of potion accident had turned Hermione into a part cat creature. According to Hermione, she was going to be stuck like this for a while.

There was a reason Professor Snape was so irritable about potions. They could be dangerous.

Cat Hermione turned the book over in her hands. "This book was made in muggle London, so the owner was probably a muggleborn. The book itself is old.

She did something with her wand as she opened the book. She tried several different things but nothing worked.

"I can't find any hidden writing, but that doesn't mean there isn't any," she said. "There may be spells upper classmen learn that I haven't heard about yet."

"Is there any way to track down who threw it in the toilet?"

"Fingerprints?" Hermione said. She shrugged. "The wizarding world is more concerned with hiding
than investigating."

"You've already cleaned it, so there won't be any scent on it," she said. She lifted the book and sniffed. Apparently her cat nose was better than her human nose, but she shook her head.

"I'll bet if you carry it around and watch, you can see who gets upset. That's probably the one who threw it away."

It was the best plan he had. Fingerprints might be helpful, if he'd known the least thing about using them. But even if he had, Steven knew that he'd have to compare the fingerprints to all the suspects, which meant he'd have to compare the fingerprints of every female in Hogwarts. That was more than four hundred people, and he didn't have time considering his schedule.

So he'd started with his own house, as they were the easiest to access without rousing suspicion. No one had thought anything of the small book he was carrying around.

Next he'd tried the Ravenclaws, since they seemed to like books. Nothing there either.

After that, he'd spent time at breakfast with Harry and Ron. With Cat Hermione stuck in the infirmary, no one would suspect anything wrong with his comforting them.

He'd been watching for it, so he'd noticed when Ginny Weasely had paled when she'd seen the book.

After that, it was just a matter of finding a time when he could find her alone.

"Is this your book?" Steven asked quietly.

She stared at him, her eyes dark and haunted. Slowly she shook her head, but Steven wasn't convinced. There was something about the way that her eyes looked everywhere but the book that told him he was right.

"Why'd you throw it away?" he asked. He held the book out, and she took an unconscious step back.

Her eyes finally settled on the floor and she said, "It's bad."

"Bad?" he asked. He took a step toward her but lowered the book.

"You write in it, and it writes back."

Steven stared at the book, suddenly uneasy. He remembered an artifact that Garnet had insisted on destroying instead of just bubbling. It had been so dangerous that just taking a picture with his cell phone had resulted in her destroying it.

It had been powerful enough to turn a simple breakfast into something that had been dangerous. There were things he still couldn't eat for breakfast even after all this time.

If this book was something like that...

"What did it say?" He kept his voice gentle. If she thought he was judging her she'd stop talking.

"It pretends to be your friend at first," she said. "But the longer you talk to it, the more mean and hurtful things it starts saying."
She was silent for a long moment. "If you keep it long enough, you start losing time."

"Losing time?"

"You wake up places and don't remember how you got there. You find feathers or blood on you hands...and you know that you've done something horrible but you don't remember what."

Steven forced his expression to remain sympathetic. Was she saying she was the Heir of Slytherin, or rather that the book was, and that it was just working through her.

"It must have been hard to get rid of," he said.

She shuddered.

"This is something dark. We should take it to Snape or the Headmaster."

"You can't!" she said suddenly, desperately. "If Harry knew, he'd never..."

"Harry would understand," Steven said. "And if he doesn't, we'll make him understand."

He'd felt so smug about seeing everyone's pain, but he hadn't noticed Ginny's.

"The headmaster will know what to do," Steven said. "We'll go together."

There was a flickering as a form appeared between Steven and Ginny.

"That's not going to happen."

It looked like some kind of ghost, but more translucent and seemingly less real than most of the ghosts Steven had known.

"Who are you?"

"Tom Riddle," the figure said. He called out something in a loud hissing noise. "That's my book."

He was dressed in an old fashioned version of the Hogwarts uniform, and he looked as though he was about sixteen years old.

"It's earlier than I'd like, and I'm not sure where the girl got the strength to get rid of me, but this can be taken care of. Given another month and I'll be ready."

"What do you want with Ginny?" Steven asked.

"She's going to help me regain my true place in the world," the figure said. "A place where I can make the world safe for purebloods against abominations like you."

Ginny had gone still, her face blank and she was unmoving.

"She wrote about you, you know," the boy said. "She admired you, how you made friends so easily, and how you were always ready to protect your friends. As if there was any other measure of a man than strength."

"I'm strong," Steven said.

"You're not human, though. It's bad enough mating with a muggle, or even with a monster like a goblin or ogre. Your mother was just a rock. It's like a wizard mating with his wand...it's absurd."
"You sound a lot like Voldemort," Steven said.

The boy opened his mouth to respond, then looked up at something behind Steven. He smiled and then shrugged. "I'd tell you, but it's a moot point now."

Steven felt the breath of something big hit his back.

He could feel the floor vibrating beneath him as more and more of a heavy weight landed in the corridor behind him. It sounded massive, and the breath on his back was fetid.

The urge to look behind him was almost overwhelming, but to look backwards would be to die.

Steven lunged forward, passing through the specter of Riddle or Voldemort, or whoever he was. He plowed into Ginny, and as he did, he brought up his bubble.

Riddle hissed something, and a moment later Steven felt a sudden lurch as his bubble was shoved violently forward down the hall.

Ginny screamed, waking up confused and spinning wildly inside the bubble.

He closed his eyes and held on to her tightly as they spun. He was starting to feel sick, but he didn't dare open his eyes.

It was possible that seeing the basilisk through his bubble would mean that he was only petrified, but it might also be no help at all.

"Steven!"

He heard Amethyst's voice and he felt a moment of relief. Involuntarily he opened his eyes and he saw her look upward.

"Oh poop," she said. A moment later she poofed, her gem dropping to the ground.

In his shock and horror, Steven let his bubble drop and he and Ginny went flying. He managed to grab her and put himself between her and the wall, which he slammed into heavily.

The basilisk, weighing much more and unable to stop went flying past.

Ginny screamed again.

Steven grabbed her hand and pulled her behind him as he ran forward. Amethyst was already reforming, although she was distorted. Reforming so quickly wasn't healthy, but she knew this was an emergency.

"The eyes," he said as he ran past her.

"Right," she said.

A moment later he heard the slithering sound of the monster as it came back down the corridor, having somehow found a place to turn around. There was the explosive sound of her whips, and a roar of pain, which almost concealed the sound of her gem dropping to the ground again.

The moving staircase wasn't where it was supposed to be; there was just a drop off to Steven's left. It was too far to jump even for him; by this time he knew his limits. He might have risked it if it had been him alone, but with Ginny...
They had to do something about this quickly; if they didn't it was only a matter of time before students of teachers started showing up. People were going to be killed.

He lunged for a door to the side; maybe they could hide in a classroom.

The door slammed open and his heart sank as he saw a full class; Harry and Ron looked up at him. Hermione was still safe in the infirmary.

"What's the meaning of this?" Professor Flitwick squeaked.

Steven pulled Ginny through and slammed the door behind him. He closed his eyes and a moment later his shield appeared, solid and impenetrable.

The entire wall shuddered as something slammed into the door on the other side.

Steven leaned against the door.

"It's the basilisk," he said. "You need to get everybody out of here."

There weren't a lot of options, he thought as the wall shuddered again. There wasn't a fireplace here to floo anyone away, and no one could apparate...

"Professor," he said. "Can you help me?"

The diminutive professor nodded grimly and moved quickly through the classroom.

He said...something as he pulled out his wand. The door in front of Steven shimmered and changed, becoming thick and metal.

"It won't hold a basilisk for long," he said.

Steven heard some of his classmates screaming behind him.

He let his shield drop, then he turned and held out his hand to Ginny.

"Trust me," he said.

She stared at him for a moment, then nodded.

He bubbled her, and a moment later she was gone.

It was good that Amethyst had set up a room in the temple where they could bubble things, even if there was nothing in this universe that could go poof.

"Come on!" he shouted, gesturing toward his classmates.

There was a sound of explosions from outside; Amethyst was fighting again.

One by one the students moved forward, letting him bubble them. It was a close thing; a couple of years older and they'd have been too large for him to manage. Some of the larger ones strained his ability to its limit.

Harry insisted on staying, as did Professor Flitwick, who kept transfiguring the wall as it crumbled.

A moment later the wall exploded, and Steven placed a bubble around himself and his friends.

They exploded out the window.
For a moment he saw all of Hogwarts as they flew out the third floor window. A moment was all it took as they hit the ground and the bubble popped.

He looked up, and he saw the basilisk hissing.

Blood streamed from its eyes where Amethyst had used her whip. It lashed back and forth and Amethyst was nowhere to be seen.

Riddle's specter appeared beside Steven, reminding him that he still had the book shoved in his pocket. It pointed at him and hissed something in snake tongue.

The monster slithered down the side of the building. Its tongue lashed out, and Steven remembered from Ronaldo's blog that Snake people...and presumably snakes, didn't need eyes to detect their prey.

Flitwick was pulling himself to his feet beside Steven and he said, "Get out of here. I'll stop him."

Basilisks were known to be resistant to magic; they were wizard killers.

Steven shook his head and he summoned his shield.

"If we're going to fight, we'll do it together."

To his right, Harry was getting to his feet. Somehow, he was pulling a sword from the Sorting hat. Steven stared; he hadn't remembered Harry even having the hat and couldn't imagine why he would have, much less why he would keep a sword in the hat.

Maybe the hat was like Lion; maybe it showed up when you needed it and carried useful things inside.

"I hope you know how to use that," he said to Harry, who stared at him and shrugged helplessly.

A moment later the monster was upon them.

The teachers hadn't been able to keep the students from the windows, the sounds of explosions from right outside drawing everyone.

Amethyst had reappeared, and her whips explosively pulled chunks from the monster even as Professor Flitwick proved his skill as a duellist as he cast spell after spell on the creature.

Steven tried mostly to keep everyone safe; he lunged in between the creature and his friends time after time with his shield as it tried to get around him.

His training with Connie and Pearl had taught him how to be the shield.

Harry swung the sword again and again; it was obvious that he didn't know what he was doing and a couple of times Steven had to lunge to the side himself to keep from being hit.

However, he forced the snake to back off a couple of times as well.

It wasn't enough; Steven was getting tired.

The snake was dying, but it wasn't dying fast enough. Worse, it's venom was deadly. He suspected that it could burn right through Amethyst's gem if it ever got a hold of her, and that would be the end of her.

Apparently she thought the same thing; her whips lashed out and a moment later one of the creatures
fangs went flying through the air.

It screamed and lunged toward her. She was out of position and she wasn't going to be able to dodge.

Steven ran forward with his shield and shoved.

It was massive, but it whipped its head back in his direction and he knew suddenly that he wasn't going to be able to dodge this time.

It lunged, and Steven closed his eyes.

There was no pain.

He looked and saw Harry lying beside him, sword shoved into the roof of the creature's mouth.

The creature shuddered and a moment later the ground shook as all of its parts went suddenly limp.

"Are you all right?" Steven asked.

Harry nodded. Gingerly he pulled his arm from the basilisk's mouth. He stared at his arm for a moment then hissed and began pulling his robes over his head.

Drops of venom were dripping from the remains of the creature's fang, and they were quickly burning their way through Harry's shirt.

Professor Flitwick cast a spell, and the venom floated into the air in tiny bubbles.

"Don't get any of that on your skin," he said grimly.

A voice from behind them said, "It doesn't matter what you do; you're all dead."

Riddle was standing behind them over his book. It had apparently fallen out of Steven's pocket during the fight.

The ghostly figure grinned. "I'm immortal. Sooner or later I'm going to kill you all, and there is nothing you can do..."

It stopped speaking, pale.

Ginny Weasley was behind him, looking as though she'd run all the way from Amethyst's place. In her hand she held the basilisk's fang that Amethyst had knocked off.

She stared at the ghostly figure of the older boy and her face twisted into a grimace as she drove the fang deep into the book.

Tom screamed, flailing and whipping back and forth and a moment later he was gone.

"On the good side, at least they won't cancel Quidditch," Harry said.

Staring at the fifty foot long giant snake corpse, Steven wondered how Harry could worry about Quidditch at a time like this.

"I feel kind of bad," he said. "There should have been some other way to deal with it than killing it."
"It would have eaten you without a moment's thought," Snape said from behind them, "and then finished its meal with the entire Gryffindor class."

"Still," Steven said. He sighed.

"I wonder how they're going to get this out of here?" Harry said. At Steven's look he said, "It's resistant to magic."

Snape snorted. "I'm surprised you bothered to read about it at all."

"I pay attention to things that are trying to kill me," Harry said flatly.

"If that were true you'd pay much more attention in potions class to Mr. Longbottom," Snape said dryly.

"The spells bounced right off it," Steven said. "So how are they going to get it out of here?"

"A team from Gringott's will arrive later this afternoon," Snape said. "Basilisk parts are very valuable and the goblins will render them for a portion of the price."

"I'm keeping the fangs," Amethyst said from behind them, and Snape flinched.

"I'm sure that will be acceptable as part of the heroes' reward," Snape said. "In any case, the headmaster has requested the presence of Mr. Universe and Mr. Potter in his office."

"Buuusted..." Amethyst said.

"You are to help me guard this body."

She scowled.

Steven was surprised to see Ron's parents along with Draco's father and a house elf in Dumbledore's office.

Mrs. Weasely ran up to him and hugged him tightly.

"What's going on?" Steven asked, confused.

She didn't let go, only hugging him more tightly. "Thank you for saving my little girl."

"The book Ginny was using was a piece of very dark magic," Dumbledore said. "It was draining her life force to power Tom's ability to return to this world. If she'd continued to keep it she'd have surely died."

"She's the one who threw it away," Steven said. "I just asked her about it."

"It showed a remarkable force of will to reject the book," Dumbledore said, "But I suspect that it's allure would have been too much for her in the long run."

"Somebody would have helped her," he said uncomfortably. Ron's mother still hadn't let go of him.

"Anyone else would have just seen a book on the floor and not think anything about it." Dumbledore said. "I've spoken to Ginny and Myrtle."

"Where is Ginny?"
"She's being checked in the infirmary for any lingering effects of her connection to the diary. Even if there are not, in the days to come she may feel guilty for her role in this matter."

"It wasn't her fault," Steven said. "She was being controlled."

Someone had strangled all the roosters in Hogwarts and written messages on walls in their blood. It startled Steven to realize that it had to have been Ginny doing all that.

She'd been lucky that no one had actually died this time; that would have been a terrible burden on her conscience.

"She may need reminding of that in the days to come," Dumbledore said.

Steven nodded. He'd had a lifetime of dealing with people who had guilt and regrets.

"Harry," Dumbledore said. "I have to ask where you got this remarkable sword."

"Fawkes brought it to me," Harry said. "It was in the sorting hat."

Dumbledore held the sword out, and while Steven privately thought it wasn't as nice as his mother's sword, it seemed very nice.

"Godric Gryffindor's sword hasn't been seen in a thousand years," Dumbledore said. "It was meant for you, Harry."

There was a snorting sound from behind them.

Lucius Malfoy said, "There's nothing to prove that to be anything more than a well crafted forgery."

"I doubt that many wizards are keeping forgeries under their hats," Dumbledore said.

"You seem to keep many things under yours," Malfoy said. "There was talk that you'd have been asked to step down if there had been another incident at this school."

"It's fortunate that it has been resolved then," Dumbledore said mildly. He glanced at the Weaselys. "I'm sure Ginny is well enough to receive visitors."

Mrs. Weasely finally released Steven and said, "As far as I'm concerned, you are family. If you ever need anything...anything at all, don't be afraid to ask."

Steven nodded. He had a fine family of his own, but it never hurt to have friends.

The Weaselys left.

The house elf behind Malfoy was pointing at the remains of the diary on Dumbledore's desk and then at his master. He then would hit himself in the head.

Steven would have said something, but Harry gripped his arm tightly and shook his head.

"I doubt these boys have anything more useful to contribute," Malfoy said. "After all, there were a thousand witnesses to most of it."

"There was only one to how it started though," Harry said. "Do you want to know where Ginny got the diary from in the first place?"

"I'm sure I have no idea," Malfoy said.
"I do," Harry said. "You slipped it inside her old transfiguration book."

"Prove it."

"What about one of those sieve things?" Steven asked suddenly. "That you can pull memories right out of someone's head? The Ministry used them on me when they were deciding what to do with me."

"A pensieve?" Dumbledore asked.

"I'm sure that if you pulled the memories out of enough people's heads you could find someone who saw what happened," Steven said.

Dumbledore smiled at Steven and offered him a lemondrop.

"I'm sure that if any other incident like this occurs we might have to investigate more closely. Arthur Weasely in particular might be interested in following through with something like this."

Malfoy scowled and turned to leave.

For some reason Harry was pulling off his sock; after the battle they'd been in it was particularly dirty, with basilisk blood splattered on it.

He grabbed the remains of the diary and stuffed the sock into it, running after Malfoy.

"Have I told you what a remarkable pleasure it has been to have you as a student here?" Dumbledore asked. "Lemondrop?"

The Weaselys weren't the only family that wanted to thank him for saving their children. The pureblood Gryffindor families wanted to thank him for saving Harry's entire class.

Most of the Gryffindores thanked him in person; other than a scare with a snake they'd been perfectly safe inside Amethyst's temple, and several had been fascinated by what they'd seen there.

Steven didn't bother to tell them that what they'd seen was nothing compared to the temple back home. Amethyst didn't have the knowledge or the technology to create anything like what they'd once had. She suspected that Pearl might be able to come closer.

Quidditch resumed, and with Steven they were able to come second behind the Gryffindores, something the Hufflepuffs hadn't managed in twenty years.

His classmates were thrilled.

Hermione returned to normal, with not so much as a cat whisker out of place.

Finally the last day came, with the awarding of house points.

"I understand that it's time to award house points," Dumbledore said. "As it stands so far, Ravenclaw has four hundred seventy two points, Slytherin has five hundred twelve points, Hufflepuff has five hundred fifty and Gryffindor has six hundred."

His housemates murmured among themselves excitedly. Second place was more than they'd expected for the year; they'd have been happy with third.

"Recent events however have to be considered," Dumbledore said.
The murmuring around them began again. Dumbledore had done something like this last year too, snatching victory out of the jaws of Slytherin.

"For heroism in the face of overwhelming odds, I award Harry Potter one hundred points for Gryffindor."

The crowd was silent. Looking around, Steven saw no one who was willing to argue the point. Harry had fought a fifty foot magic resistant snake with a sword, and everyone had seen him to it.

"I award Steven Universe one hundred points for Hufflepuff," Dumbledore continued.

It didn't seem fair to Steven. What he'd done and what Harry had done couldn't be considered equal at all.

After all, he'd had his bubble and shield and his greater than human strength, while Harry had faced the monster with nothing more than a sword and courage.

Harry deserved more than Steven.

Steven glanced at his housemates. He'd protest, but it didn't seem worth it. The extra points didn't seem to make any difference anyway.

"I award Ginny Weasely ten points for Gryffindor," Dumbledore said. "For strength of will in the face of dark magic."

"Finally," Dumbledore said. "I award Steven Universe seventy points for saving the members of yet another house, for a second year in a row."

Some of his classmates were faster at doing math in their heads than Steven and they gasped out loud.

It took a moment for Steven to realize what had happened. For the first time in fifty years the Hufflepuffs had not simply come in last or even come in second. They'd actually won the house cup altogether.

He was dazed as his housemates cheered.

For once, no one except some of the Slytherins looked like they minded.
The summer had been eventful, even if Harry hadn't heard from his friends. Ron had tried to call him on the telephone, but that had turned into a disaster and it had been only the first of many.

He'd been lucky to avoid prison. Blowing up his aunt should have landed him in chains in front of the Wizengamot, but it hadn't. Instead, somehow he'd gotten away without even a warning. He suspected it had something to do with his fame.

He was the boy-who-lived, the one...no, now one of two survivors of the Avada Kedavra curse. It was interesting that both of them had been attacked by Voldemort, even if it had just been as a wraith out of the back of Quirrel's head for Steven.

It might have been because both he and Steven were in consideration for Order of Merlin Medals, first class, as was Professor Flitwick. There had been enough witnesses and enough grateful parents that Harry suspected that political pressure of some kind was involved.

In any case, it meant that he got to spend the rest of the summer at the Leaky Cauldron, which was a vast improvement over spending a single moment more with the Dursleys.

The knock at the door startled him. As far as he knew, hardly anyone knew he was here.

Cautiously he approached the door. He held his wand low to his side. There had been reports of an escaped murderer, and although the Leaky Cauldron was mostly safe, it was always better to be cautious.

Opening the door, he stared.

Steven Universe grinned at him and waved.

He seemed shorter than he had even just a few months ago. It took Harry a moment to realize that it was because he'd grown.

Steven, on the other hand hadn't grown at all in the more than two years since he'd known him. It was starting to become obvious; he still looked like a first year.

"How'd you find me?" Harry asked, stepping aside and gesturing for Steven to come in.

"Amethyst was eavesdropping," Steven said. He shrugged. "It helps when you can turn into a cat or a bat."

The gem was still purple, no matter what shape she turned. Someone had been sloppy and not paying attention.

Steven stepped into the room, followed by Amethyst and a strange creature Harry didn't know. She was even more strange looking than Amethyst, if that was possible. She had lime green skin and yellow hair. She wore a transparent visor over her eyes and a green uniform with a V-neck and stars on her chest and knees.

"This place is even more primitive than the last place we visited!" the woman said. "I know humans have better technology; I saw personal transport vehicles on the way here."
"These people use magic instead of technology," Steven said. "Magic interferes with technology, so they do things the old way."

"We'll just have to see about that," the woman grumbled. "Stupid primitive clods."

"This is Peridot," Steven said.

Harry frowned. "This is one of your...aunts?"

Steven shook his head. "She didn't show up later, but she's one of the crystal gems now."

The woman was moving around the room, staring at the fireplace, then at Hedwig's cage and then at the pitcher of water by the bed. She poured some of it on the floor.

"We weren't sure she was going to make it," Steven said in a low voice. "I'm glad she did, though."

"There's not anything of use here," she said. "How am I going to do anything without a usable supply of parts?"

"You'll have to go into Muggle London for anything like that," Harry said. "Wizards don't know a thing about machines."

Considering that Ron hadn't even been able to work a telephone in a socially acceptable manner, and his father was obsessed with all things Muggle, it was an understatement.

"We'll find a good junkyard," Amethyst said. "I bought a couple of wizard's tents, and we can fill them up and bring all the stuff home."

"At least magic is good for something," Peridot sniffed. "It'll be a thousand years before human technology is capable of building dimensionally transendent structures."

"Don't touch that," Harry said absently. The woman was still moving around the room, getting into everything.

"Why no..."

The Monster book of Monsters took that moment to clamp itself onto her hand and refused to let go.

The next two minutes was chaos as the green woman ran around the room screaming followed closely by the book. Amethyst didn't help at all, just laughing uproariously even as Steven chased the book that was chasing the woman.

Finally it settled down when Steven captured the book.

"See? All it needs is a little love and affection," he said, rubbing it's spine.

The book popped open placidly, and Harry could swear that he almost heard it purr.

Peridot, on the other hand was hiding behind Harry and was trembling.

"I hate magic!" she yelled.

"Peri..." Amethyst called from behind them both.

Harry looked behind him and saw Peridot doing the same.
Amethyst had shapeshifted herself into a purple copy of the Monster Book of Monsters. "I'm gonna get yah!"

The chase was on again. This time Steven ignored them both as he carefully closed the book and put it back on the table.

"They've been like this ever since Peridot came back a couple of weeks ago," Steven said. "I think Amethyst is so happy to have at least one other gem to play with that she's overcompensating."

"Have you heard from Ron or Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Hermione's on vacation in France," Steven said. "But she's sent me some letters. She keeps trying to get me to spend my summer reading instead of fighting monsters."

"Still milking Acromantula?"

"No!" Steven said excitedly. He leaned forward. "Me and Amethyst got hired by Gringotts to help fight mutant skeletons in Egypt. They'd grown all sorts of weird heads. It was almost like being back home and fighting gem monsters except that these were kind of weak. They were magic resistant though."

"That's where Ron and his family went," Harry said. "Did you get to see them?"

"Just the one brother that works for Gringotts. Bill's really cool." Harry said. "We had to go home before Ron and his family got there, on account of Peridot coming back. The headmaster had Fawkes watching over the gems while we were gone."

"So why are you here?"

"I don't have an owl," Steven said. "I could have used one of the school owls, but I remembered that your relatives hate magic."

"They're the smart ones!" Peridot shouted. For some reason she was jumping on his bed followed by Amethyst.

"I didn't want to get you in trouble, so I waited to get you your birthday present until now."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a box, which grew in size until it was the size of a hatbox.

"You can get them enspelled to do that," Steven said. "Amethyst thought it was really cool."

Harry looked for a place to start unwrapping the box but Steven stopped him.

"You don't have to untie that," Steven said. "It's just a box made to look like I spent a lot of time unwrapping it."

For some reason he looked sad as he said that.

Harry pulled the top of the box open.

"What's this?"

Inside was a coat; it was vividly green, a color that was all too familiar to Harry.

"Is this?"
Steven nodded. "Gringotts spent half the summer cutting the basilisk into parts. They split the money from the sale of it three ways between you, me and Professor Flitwick."

Harry stared at him. That must be why the money in his vault had suddenly doubled over the summer. He'd always been so careful with his spending, worried that the money wouldn't last throughout his school career, and it had only been a few days before when he'd checked his vault.

He'd almost been afraid to ask the goblins what had happened.

"I didn't want the basilisk to die," Steven said uncomfortably. "And this seems kind of ghoulish, but they say this is just as good as dragonhide at reflecting spells. Considering how many people you have that want to kill you..."

Dragonhide was incredibly expensive; Harry couldn't even imagine how much more expensive basilisk skin must be. After all, basilisks were rarer than dragons and even harder to kill.

"It'll grow with you," Steven said. "It's hard to enchant it, but not impossible, and they started with a coat for a full sized man and shrunk it smaller to fit."

Harry pulled the coat out of the box. It was surprisingly heavy and thick.

"This is too much," Harry said.

"You're my friend and people want to hurt you," Steven said. He looked troubled. "Amethyst has been hearing rumors...she won't tell me everything, but I figure it's better safe than sorry."

"Did you get one for yourself?" Harry asked.

Steven shook his head. "It just seems wrong to cut something up like that. I got it for you because I want you to keep living, but I'll be fine without one."

Harry slipped the coat on, and it fit perfectly.

"How does it look?"

"It kind of makes you look like a Slytherin," Steven said. He grinned suddenly. "Draco is going to be jealous that you look more Slytherin than he does."

Considering that even his father was unlikely to get Draco a coat like this one, that was an understatement.

"It's a wonderful gift," Harry said.

Harry could only hope that he wouldn't need a coat like this one, but in his heart he knew. It wouldn't be Hogwarts if it didn't try to kill Harry at least once during the year.

He just hoped he didn't need it very soon.

It had been less than two weeks since Steven had given his belated birthday present, and in that time Harry had learned things that he hadn't wanted to know.

A deranged maniac had escaped the Wizarding prison, and most people thought that he was planning to kill Harry. Molly Weasely had wanted to keep him in the dark, but Ron's father had told him. Harry was happy that he had. There was no way he could protect himself without knowing that he was in danger.
Of course, given his past experiences in Hogwarts, any time he was at school was a time he was in danger. After all, at least one quarter of the school hated him, and Voldemort had showed that the protections at Hogwarts were laughable.

It was enough to make him consider dropping out of school, but that would mean living with the Dursleys full time, which was the only thing worse than facing Voldemort.

Additionally, he wasn't sure how the blood wards on his aunt and uncle's house worked, but he was reasonably certain they didn't cover Muggle public schools. The last thing he needed was to get a lot of helpless Muggle children hurt because he was afraid.

So he was here, on the train to Hogwarts. At least Steven was here.

"It's kind of weird, really," Steven said. "I'm actually living on the grounds and I still have to take the train from London to go to class. It's the same with the kids from Hogsmeade. They could just walk to school if they wanted to."

"I think the headmaster just has a sense for the dramatic," Harry said irritably. "It would spoil the whole thing with the carts with invisible horses and boats and all that if children were just showing up willy nilly."

"They aren't invisible," Steven said. "I can see them just fine."

"Me too," Harry said. "Listen, we need to find Ron and Hermione and find someplace to talk."

Steven stared at him for a moment, but seeing something in his expression he nodded.

It didn't take long to find them; Ron had a huge family of people with outrageous red hair and Hermione was always wherever Ron was. In short order he'd gathered them and they'd found the only semi-empty coach.

The sleeping man there had to be a professor, but none of them bothered to wake him.

"There's a killer escaped from Azkaban," Harry said shortly. "Everybody says he's out to kill me. He betrayed my parents and killed one of their best friends and a whole lot of Muggles."

"What?" Ron asked, staring at him stupidly.

Hermione and Steven didn't seem nearly as slow on the uptake, probably because Hermione was smart, and Steven already knew something about it through Amethyst.

Steven nodded grimly. "It's Sirius Black. Amethyst heard the school staff talking about it."

"I've seen stories about him in the Muggle newspapers," Hermione gasped.

"Ron's parents are worried that I might go after him," Harry said. "They warned me off."

"You'd have to be barmy," Ron gasped.

"Besides," Steven said. "It's not like you'd have to go after him if he's coming to you."

"Steven!" Hermione said reprovingly. She glanced at Harry and said, "I'm sure the adults will keep Harry perfectly safe."

They all looked at each other and then chuckled uneasily. Even Hermione looked a little embarrassed at what she'd just said. The adult track record in protecting Harry wasn't good.
"I'll protect you," Steven said. "Amethyst too, and maybe even Peridot."

"You can depend on us too, mate" Ron said, although both he and Hermione looked anxious.

There was a sound from Harry's luggage. Harry reached into his bags and pulled out a spinning, whirling device that was glowing.

"I've been meaning to ask you about this," Harry said.

"It's a pocket Sneakoscope," Ron said. "It's supposed to light up if anybody is doing anything untrustworthy nearby, but it's been acting up lately. I should have paid for a more expensive model."

"You live with the twins," Steven said. "Aren't they pretty much always doing something untrustworthy?"

Ron frowned. "That's a good point...but we still ought to get it checked out. There's a store in Hogsmeade that should be able to help."

"Put it away," Hermione whispered, looking back at the sleeping professor. "Or it'll wake him up."

Harry nodded and stuffed it deep into his bags so that his clothes muffled the sound almost completely.

"Dervish and Bangs," Steven said. "They're pretty good."

"You know about Hogsmeade?"

"Amethyst has been taking me sometimes," Steven said. "It's not off limits during the summer. Besides, I've been old enough to go since first year, I just never wanted to."

"What? Steven? Just how old are you?"

"I'll be seventeen in February."

Harry stared at his friend. He looked barely eleven and he hadn't aged in all the time he knew him.

"But...how?"

"I don't age like a regular human being," Steven said shortly.

"You're supposed to be eleven when you go to Hogwarts," Hermione said.

"The quill put my name in the book," Steven said, shrugging. "And I didn't know any magic. I hadn't even been in a real school before. What were they going to do, put me in fourth year classes when I didn't know anything?"

"You aren't going to age at all?" Hermione asked.

"The gems never age," Steven said. "But I'm not really like them. Nobody knows how it's going to work with me."

"So when we graduate you'll still be a little kid?" Ron asked, staring.

"It used to bother me," Steven said. "But with Connie gone there's nobody to really grow up for, I guess."
"Still," Ron said. "That's going to make it hard with the...girls."

He flushed and looked at Hermione.

"I can look older if I want to," Steven said.

"Really?" Hermione asked.

Steven closed his eyes for a moment, and then his body began to glow a little. A moment later his body changed.

Harry stared at his friend; beside him he could see Hermione staring as well.

His friend looked every bit of sixteen, although his robes were ridiculously right around his arms and the hem left a ridiculous amount of his calves showing.

His jeans were tight around his calves.

"Can't get any older then this without ripping my clothes," Steven said.

"Why don't you look like this all the time, mate?" Ron asked. "You'd be brilliant as a beater."

"He's already brilliant as a seeker," Hermione said. "He'd hurt someone as a beater." She was staring at Steven with an expression Harry hadn't seen since Gilderoy Lockhart's class.

"I can only hold this for a few hours," Steven said. "Or I end up turning into a baby. Trust me, being a baby with an adult mind is not something you want to do twice."

Ron stared at him, and Steven sighed.

"Somebody still has to change you."

"Into what?" Ron asked.

Hermione whispered in his ear and Ron flushed. He said, "Right, mate."

Steven glowed and a moment later he was back to himself.

"I think I'm only as old as I feel," Steven said. He looked uncomfortable. "So hopefully someday..."

Harry nodded. He knew what it felt like to be a freak, to be considered abnormal and have people want to stare at him for something he had no control over.

"You may be old enough to go to Hogsmeade," Harry said. "But I'm not going to get to go."

"What? Why?" Ron asked.

"With an escaped criminal on the loose, there's no way the school will allow him to leave," Hermione said.

"Also, the Dursleys refused to sign my permission slip."

The four of them stared at each other grimly.

The presence of the sleeping professor was useful; it kept other people from interrupting as much as they normally would.
Even Malfoy turned away quickly when he saw the professor sleeping.

Hours passed and Harry enjoyed being with his friends again after a summer filled with nothing but his relatives, at least before his time at the Leaky Cauldron.

The train began stopping and Hermione frowned. "We can't be there yet."

She glanced at Steven, and the way she looked at him was different in a way Harry couldn't understand.

"Maybe we've broken down," Ron said.

Harry got up and opened the door to the hallway outside. People were looking out of their compartments and there was a low murmur of voices.

Neville staggered toward their compartment.

"What's going on?" he asked.

He looked uneasy.

"I'll go ask the conductor," Hermione said, but Steven put his hand on her arm and shook his head.

"I don't like this," he said.

The professor had woken up by this point, and he pulled his wand. It was suddenly lit by an unearthly glow.

"Stay here," he said.

Before anyone could protest, the door to the cabin opened, and on the other side was a cloaked figure.

"I...I don't understand. You have to leave?" Connie was staring at him, looking bewildered.

"It's the only way," Steven said. He grimaced. "We've been over it a thousand times and this is the only thing that will keep everybody safe."

"There's got to be another way!" she said. "You can't just give up."

"As long as we're here they'll keep coming," Steven said. "And as long as the Earth has any use to them, humanity will be in danger."

"We'll fight!" Connie said. "Humans aren't worthless."

"You haven't seen what I've..." Steven shook his head. "This isn't about that. It's already started...soon this place will be poison to the gems and me too."

She was quiet, staring at him. "Take me with you."

He stared at her, his mouth open. "What about your parents? Your family? You have people who love you."

"I don't care," she said. "I just want to be with you."
Steven closed his eyes for a moment, then said, "No human can survive where we're going. I can't even take my dad."

She started crying and he could feel his heart breaking.

Steven blinked, and he was back in the present. The cloaked creature in front of them was at least a foot taller than Garnet, and the room was deathly cold. It's breath rattled within the cloak, and its hands were bony and clawlike.

It was breathing in, as though it was drawing the life from the room.

Harry had fallen to the ground beside him, unconscious.

Steven grimaced as he felt a wave of sadness roll over him. He'd never see his father again. He'd never know what he'd had with Connie ever again in his life. They'd been part of one another and now that she was gone, he was less than whole.

He'd never be happy again, and his life didn't have a purpose. He wasn't even a real wizard. He was just existing, hoping that Garnet and Pearl would come back to him.

They might never come back. Garnet had been the closest when the thing was detonated. She'd assured them that she was the only one who was fast enough and strong enough to survive. No human could have activated the thing, and even from the distance she'd been at she'd been mortally wounded.

It occurred to him, not for the first time that Garnet might have lied. She might have sacrificed herself, sacrificed Ruby and Sapphire for the human race.

The thought of losing her ripped the hole in his heart open a little wider.

Even Pearl, who'd saved Ruby and Sapphire's gems had been exposed enough that she might never recover.

Steven stared at the creature in front of him and gritted his teeth. This wasn't like him; his life had been happy in his last world and it was happy in this one. It was this creature that was making him think about these things again, and it was this creature that was hurting his friends.

His mother's shield formed in front of him, and he charged.

The creature wasn't incorporeal at least, he though as the creature scrabbled at the edges of the shield. He shoved it across the passage and a moment later through the window.

It wasn't hurt at all; it simply floated outside, pulling at his happiness.

Steven started as he felt a hand on his shoulder. The Professor who'd been asleep was now awake, and his wand was held out before him.

"None of us has Sirius Black," the professor said. "Go!"

The creature ignored him, simply floating outside the window.

"Expecto Patronum," the professor said.

His wand flared with light, and a wolf exploded from it, running out into the air.

The creature shrieked and a moment later it was gone.
"Are you all right?" the man asked.

"I'll be fine," Steven said. He shuddered for a moment. "I'm worried about Harry though."

Harry, fortunately was already waking up.

"What happened?"

The professor was already breaking an enormous slab of chocolate into pieces. He handed a piece to Harry, followed by giving one to everyone else. "Eat it; it'll help."

"Did you hear the screaming?" Harry asked.

The others looked at him like he was crazy, but Steven stared at him thoughtfully. He'd been forced back to one of his worst memories, the day he'd made Connie cry.

It could have been any of a number of memories; Lion dying, Lapis being lost, being forced to leave his father. Instead it had been that one.

He suspected that if Pearl had been here it would have been the loss of his mother.

Whatever memory Harry had had to relive, it couldn't have been anything good. From what he'd learned over the past two years, Harry hadn't had many good memories. He'd had plenty over the past two years alone, much less a childhood that sounded like an incomprehensible nightmare.

Harry's childhood was as alien to Steven's experience as that of the gems, and they didn't actually even have childhoods.

He blinked and realized that the others had been explaining what had happened to Harry.

"I've never seen anyone manhandle a dementor like that," the professor murmured to Steven.

"It didn't do any good," Steven said. He tightened his fists. "There wasn't anything I could do that would have made any difference."

"Dementors aren't ordinary creatures," the professor said. "They aren't alive or dead, and they're impossible to kill."

"How did you send it away then?"

"Advanced magic," the professor said. He broke off another piece of the chocolate and handed it to Steven before taking one for himself.

"I'm Professor Lupin by the way," the man said. He bit into the chocolate.

He glanced over at the rest of the group, who were huddled around Harry.

"We'll be at Hogwarts in ten minutes," he said. "Are you all right Harry?"

Harry was huddled in on himself, but he nodded and took a bite of his chocolate. Unconsciously Steven followed suit and he was surprised to find that he started feeling better almost immediately.

They were all silent for the rest of the trip; no one seemed to feel much like talking.

They arrived at Hogwarts without incident, and they rode in the carriages. Harry seemed surprised to see the Thestrels, although Steven had been careful to bring treats for them. He'd helped Hagrid care
for them over the summer after all and he knew all about them.

The others couldn't see them at all, which didn't surprise Steven. Harry had seen Quirrell die, and before that had seen his mother.

Steven had seen more deaths than that, of course.

Draco taunted Harry about fainting, which Steven thought was unfair. He put one hand on Harry's arm and shook his head.

It wasn't as though Draco had been particularly brave in the Forbidden forest, after all. Harry had faced down a basilisk in front of the entire school armed only with a sword. No one should be able to question his bravery.

Draco, though always seemed to be looking for any sign of weakness.

Getting called away from the sorting by Professor McGonagall was surprising, although Steven privately thought it was a good idea to have Harry looked over. Falling unconscious couldn't be a good sign, no matter what had caused it.

Learning that the dementors had been set to guard the school was more than upsetting; Steven hoped that amethyst and Peridot had been warned. He resolved to try to find them at the first opportunity.

He knew a little more about dementors than most children in his year; Hagrid had been to Azkaban and had told him and Amethyst a little about them.

They stole happiness away, leaving only the bad memories.

He couldn't imagine what leaving someone like Amethyst, with thousands of years of bad memories to the dementors would do. Of course, she'd had thousands of years of good memories, which might more than make up for it.

Still, Amethyst's sadness was always just under the surface. She didn't like herself, and Steven worried that the dementors would be particularly dangerous for her.

They arrived back at the great hall to find that they'd missed the sorting entirely.

Dumbledore rose and warned the students about the dementors; as though they already didn't know from their time on the train. They were going to be stationed at every entrance to the school and they couldn't be fooled by invisibility cloaks or other tricks.

He announced Professor Lupin and also that Hagrid was going to be teaching Care of Magical Creatures.

Steven had known about this for much of the summer, of course. Hagrid had been excited about the new responsibilities and had celebrated with them. He enjoyed the stunned looks on his friends' faces, though.

This was going to be a school year to remember for all of them.

Steven only hoped it was less eventful than the previous years.
"You aren't taking divination?" Ron asked Steven.

Steven took a bite of toast and shook his head. "I'm taking music class instead."

He ignored Draco, who was trying to taunt Harry about his fainting the night before. It wasn't as if Draco had been particularly brave about the whole thing after all.

"You already know how to play," Ron said.

"Garnet has future vision," Steven said. "From what I hear it's a lot better than the wizard version."

"Oh?"

"Hagrid says you have to have the sight for divination to work anyway, and Seers are almost as rare as Metamorphmaguses."

"Well, maybe you have the sight," Ron said. "You never know until you try."

"It's not like there's just one future anyway," Steven said. At the looks from the others he hastened to explain. "Garnet shared her future vision with me a few times, and what I learned was that there are a whole lot of futures. Some are just more likely than others."

"How do you explain prophecies then?" Hermione asked.

"I predict that Ron is going to eat the last piece of bacon," Harry said, finally ignoring Draco's jibes in the background.

Ron grinned and grabbed the last piece of bacon.

"Did that happen because it was going to happen, or because I said it was going to happen?"

"Ron was always going to grab for that piece," Hermione said. She rolled her eyes. "You didn't have to be a seer to see that."

"But he grabbed that piece right then because of what he heard me say," Harry said.

"If you spend too much time worrying about the future, it'll drive you crazy," Steven said. He looked down at his plate. He knew from experience. "You start thinking about all the ways things can go wrong and kill you, and then you just..."

He gestured into the air.

"Freeze up?" Hermione asked.

Steven nodded. "So I'm going to music class. It sounds like a lot more fun anyway than trying to figure out what's going to happen."

"She said Harry's going to die!" Hermione told Steven. "Professor McGonagall said the divination professor always predicts somebody is going to die, but still."
"Well, he's the most likely candidate," Amethyst's voice came from under the table.

"Amethyst!" Hermione said, scandalized. "Harry's right here."

"What?" she said. She was in cat form and she leaped up onto an empty spot on the bench in between Steven and Ron. "He's already had professors try to kill him multiple times, fought a cool basilisk and had potions class with Longbottom."

Ignoring her, Ron said, "You didn't actually see a great black dog anywhere, did you Harry?"

Harry nodded. "At the Dursley's, the night I left."

Ron dropped his fork. "That's bad. Real bad. My uncle saw a grim once and he was dead the next day."

"It was probably a stray," Hermione said.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Ron said. "Grims scare the pants off most wizards."

"Hey Ron," Amethyst said.

He looked over his shoulder at her. She'd taken the form of a giant purple dog with huge teeth. He shrieked and fell off the bench.

"Still got your pants on," she said.

"Where's Peridot?" Steven said, hoping to distract everyone from being so gloomy. He'd had a great time in Music class.

"She's pestering Snape about the nature of magic," Amethyst said. She grinned. "I told her he was the best authority."

"This doesn't even make sense!" Peridot said.

Snape forced himself to keep his expression neutral as he stirred the potion the three required times. He'd learned from experience with Amethyst that showing his irritation only prodded her to further outrages.

She'd have been in Gryffindor if she'd been allowed in the school at all as a student. Gryffindors were all about fame and recognition. They wanted to be admired more than anything else. A Gryffindor would rather lose and look noble than win ignominiously.

"None of these ingredients make sense at all!" Peridot complained. "Are you just throwing random things in the pot?"

"This isn't muggle chemistry," Snape reminded her for the fifth time. "This is magic."

"And what is that, exactly?" Peridot asked. "I keep asking everybody, but nobody has been able to give me a clear answer."

"You've seen wizards perform magic," Snape said, carefully turning the heat down on the potion. "And the results are all around you in this castle. The paintings on the walls, the staircases..."

"Even normal humans have technology that could do those things," Peridot said dismissively. "Much less old style gem tech. Modern gem tech can do a lot more."
"I presume that would require resources you don't have," Snape said.

"I could build a giant robot and smash this entire castle!" Peridot said. "Out of old muggle parts. I've done it before."

"Assuming it would work within Hogwarts magical field, why would you want to?" Snape asked. The smaller gem slumped. "I wouldn't. Peace and love on the planet earth...I know."

"Why are you bothering me about this?"

"If I can just figure out what magic is, then maybe I can get technology to work here."

"Why would you want that?" Snape asked.

"Wouldn't you like central heating down here in the dungeons? Maybe some electric lights so you can actually see what you're doing?"

Snape frowned. The purebloods would scream bloody murder, but there had been winters when he'd been forced to wear double pairs of socks. Also, cold hands were more likely to make mistakes, and temperature variations sometimes made a difference in potion preparations.

"You should talk to Professor Flitwick," he said. "I'm busy. If he can't help you, then you should take it up with the headmaster."

It would serve the Headmaster right for letting the annoying creatures infest the school in the first place, and if her research bore fruit, his students might actually be able to see their ingredients well enough to avoid any explosions.

Either way, the infuriating gnome of a woman would be out of his hair.

"Sometimes I think you lot don't actually know what magic is at all!" Peridot scowled. "You're all a bunch of monkeys playing with napalm."

As she left he allowed himself to scowl. She had to be right all the time; the woman would have been a Ravenclaw absolutely.

They didn't care if they won as long as they were right.

He wondered if there would be a hufflepuff among the Universe boy's other 'aunts,' or if he was the only one.

Hufflepuffs didn't care if they won as long as they had friends.

Nobody had their priorities straight. Winning meant life, losing was death. Fame, being right, even friendship didn't mean a thing if the people you cared about died.

Someone had to keep their eye on the prize.

"What are you doing here, Steven?" Hermione asked. "I thought we were having Care of Magical creatures with the Slytherins?"

"I've got a free period and Hagrid said I could be his assistant," Steven said. He grinned. "I already know what he's got to show you today, and it sounds like fun!"

"How do you like your music class?" she asked as they walked down the slope toward Hagrid's hut.
"It's great!" Steven said. "It's all about wizard music, which is a lot different than muggle music. Since I can already play, the professor has me helping some of the others. If they get good enough, we might start up a band."

Hermione smiled slightly. It might be interesting to see what a mixed group of pure bloods and muggleborns might come up with for music.

Harry jogged up behind them, slightly out of breath. "It hasn't started yet, has it?"

"Why are you out of breath?"

"That little green woman kept asking me about my scar and about the nature of magic, like I'd know!"

"Peridot?" Steven asked.

"She was on her way to see the Headmaster. Apparently her session with Flitwick didn't go that well."

Steven sighed. "She's determined to find a way to make technology work around magic."

Hermione brightened. "It'd be helpful to be able to use computers at school."

Ron looked confused. Disturbingly, so did Harry.

"They're machines that save you a lot of work when you write papers," Hermione said. "And you can play games on them."

She'd had a computer at home since she was eight. Of course, as dentists her parents were well off. Harry hadn't had that kind of background.

Before Ron could respond, Hagrid's hut came into view.

Draco was already there with Crabbe and Goyle. As soon as they saw Harry, Draco said something to the other two that made them laugh.

Beside her Harry stiffened.

"Follow me," Hagrid said as they came into view. Apparently they were the last to arrive, although they were on time.

Five minutes later they were standing around a corral.

"Everybody gather round the fence there," Hagrid said. "First thing ye'll want to do is open your books."

"How?" Draco called out loudly.

"How what?" Hagrid asked.

"How do we open our books?" Draco sneered, then faltered as Harry stood with his book open. Hermione and Steven and Ron had done the same.

"You've got to stroke them," Harry said, grinning. "On the spine. I'm sure that being nice to anything isn't something you're familiar with, but it works great."
"It's good practice for working with the magical creatures," Steven said. "I think most creatures treat you the way you treat them, and having a book that will bite you if you don't treat it right helps remind you of that every time you open it."

Draco scowled and looked like he was going to say something, but then he quieted and simply opened his books.

Hagrid looked at Steven with a look of gratitude.

Hermione found herself looking at him as well. He really was thoughtful.

"All right, ye've got yer books. Now I've got to go get em."

Hagrid wandered off and shortly afterwards he returned. Hermione gasped and stared.

Hippogriffs; their first lesson was hippogriffs.

"Beautiful aren't they?" Hagrid asked.

They were certainly something. With the hindquarters of horses and front parts of giant eagles, the dozen hippogriffs were strange and unusual to say the least.

"If yeh want ter get a little closer..." Hagrid said.

No one seemed enthusiastic about the prospect. The creatures giant beaks looked like they could rip a human in half with a single bite. Their glowing orange eyes looked malevolent.

Steven was already by the fence, but of course he would be. He was like Hagrid, with less to fear than a normal person.

Harry forced himself to step forward. Beside him Hermione and Ron followed suit.

"Firs thing yeh want ter know about hippogriffs is that they're proud." Hagrid said, "Easily offended...don't never offend a hippogriff, cause it might be the last thing ye do."

Draco wasn't paying attention. He was muttering to Crabbe and Goyle. Steven gave him a sharp look.

Hagrid showed them how to deal with the hippogriffs...bow, then wait for them to bow back. He warned them...if the hippogriff didn't bow back off.

Steven demonstrated, bowing to the hippogriff and waiting for its response before walking up to pet the creature.

He'd done this before; it was obvious. Living and working with Hagrid for the summer, he'd probably seen all the creatures Hagrid had to offer. Harry wondered if he would get extra credit for working as Hagrid's assistant.

From what he'd seen, Steven had a way with animals. They seemed to respond to him. Hedwig never nipped at him, and Crookshanks adored him. Even Mrs. Norris didn't seem to dislike him as much as she did the rest of the student body.

"Who's next?"

Steven had made it look easy, but everyone knew he wasn't normal. Reluctantly Harry stepped forward.
He tried to copy what he's seen Steven do. Being told not to blink made his eyes itch, and he felt sweat beading on his neck. For a moment it looked as though the hippogriff wasn't going to bow back, but in the end it did.

He patted its beak several times, cautiously. Even after seeing Steven do it, it seemed foolish to put his hand next to the mouth of a creature that could swallow his entire arm as an appetizer. The creature seemed to enjoy it, though, and after a bit Harry felt himself relaxing.

"I reckon he might let ye ride him," Hagrid said.

The feeling in Harry's gut returned, redoubled. He glanced at Malfoy, who looked like he'd just gotten a surprise birthday present. If Harry backed out, he'd have even more fodder to taunt him with for the rest of the school year. If he fell off the creature, Malfoy would be even more happy.

At the look on Harry's face, Steven said "I've done it lots of times; it's great!"

Harry cursed to himself. Sometimes having a semi-indestructible friend was more trouble than it was worth. Despite his misgivings, Harry let himself be coaxed into climbing on top of the creature's back between its wings.

It wasn't anything like a broom; it was weird and uncomfortable, and Harry was glad when the short flight was over.

The rest of the class cautiously entered the paddock, and Hagrid untied the hippogriffs one by one. Soon people were bowing nervously to hippogriffs all over the corral.

Steven was standing near Malfoy; he was watching him closely. However, Draco had managed to get the hippogriff to bow to him and was now patting his beak.

Steven visibly started to relax just as Draco said, "This is easy...it had to be if Potter could do it. I bet you aren't dangerous at all, are you?"

The hippogriff lashed out, but there was already a pink bubble surrounding Draco and Steven. Steven grabbed Draco by the scruff of the neck and they backed away from the angry creature as Hagrid hurried to restrain it.

The bubble dropped and Steven dropped Draco to the ground.

The other hippogriffs were unsettled and the rest of the class moved cautiously away.

"That's why you always respect a hippogriff," Steven said, standing over Draco. "It's really not a bad idea with any animal, really."

Draco stared up at him, speechless from his close call.

"Most Muggle animals can't understand you, and they might hurt you if they get scared or hungry, Some Wizarding animals CAN understand you..."

Steven shook his head. "It doesn't hurt to be nice, and not being nice might really hurt."

Hagrid seemed flushed at the near disaster, but with Steven's help he got the rest of the lesson back on track.

The rest of the class seemed much more cautious in dealing with the creatures.

That Draco would complain to his father was a given, but as no harm had come to him, it didn't seem
like anything would come of it.

The whole incident had left Draco in a sour mood and he'd redoubled his attempts to taunt Harry. He'd managed to ignore him, which only led to Draco making cryptic remarks that Harry didn't understand.

Their first class with Professor Lupin was instructive, although Harry was happy that he hadn't faced the boggart. He didn't particularly want everyone to see his greatest fear, whatever it might be. Professor Lupin obviously thought it would be Voldemort, but Harry suspected it might be a dementor. Worse, it might be Uncle Vernon with a fist raised, which would tell his classmates far more than he wanted them to know.

Steven had Lupin's class the day after theirs; the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had class together. As it occurred during a free period, Harry and Hermione decided to wait on Steven to get out of class so they could go to lunch.

Harry and Hermione froze as a hideous crashing sound came from the room the Hufflepuff class was being held in. It sounded like something was slamming into the walls; the paintings shook and Harry could hear them complaining loudly at the mistreatment.

He pulled his wand, and Hermione followed his lead.

As they cautiously approached the classroom, the door exploded, with Steven flying out of it to slam into the wall on the other side.

A huge orange woman spilled out of the hallway after him. She was almost as tall as Hagrid, but seemed much more dangerous. She moved almost like a humanoid tiger, except that her expression was filled with an insane sort of hate.

"You!" she screamed.

Steven stared up at her, dazed. His face looked oddly swollen, as though he'd been struck several times.

"Hey!" Harry yelled. He cast a stinging hex against the woman, but it didn't seem to do anything.

Hermione beside him cast a curse that he didn't recognize, but it didn't have any more effect. It reminded Harry of Flitwick fighting the basilisk, with most of his spells bouncing off its spell resistant hide.

The woman began to shift and grow, quickly outstripping Hagrid, growing to more than twice Steven's height. She changed from orange to yellow, and now her features became thin and angular. The hatred in the eyes remained the same, however.

"Abomination!" Her voice was different now; more strident. "You won't have a chance to poison this world. We'll drink it dry..."

Lupin's voice came from the classroom. "Riddikulus..."

His voice sounded rather hoarse and shocked.

A moment later the woman changed shape again. Where she'd been was four gemstones lying on the ground, shattered.
It came to Harry in a flash. It was the Boggart!

"Riddikulus!" he shouted.

Hermione realized it the moment she did. She cast the spell as well.

The boggart had been confused in the classroom with the Gryffindors; it hadn't known whose fear to manifest. Now, though it seemed focused on Steven with an unerring precision.

It changed form again. Now it was Harry and Hermione and Hagrid lying on the floor, dead, along with a sunburned heavyset man with a beard and a thin Indian girl.

A look of anger flashed across Steven's face, and he stood up. He shook his head and pulled out his wand. "Riddikulus!"

Now their bodies were in sleeping bags with prancing ponies and their faces had been painted like clowns.

The thing finally switched to a white orb as the professor staggered out of the room. He drove it back into the wardrobe.

Harry glanced cautiously into the room. The students inside, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw alike were on the floor, their hands covering their heads.

The walls were cracked. It looked like a bomb had gone off in the room, although the students looked relatively unhurt. They looked shocked, though.

"I don't understand why it focused on him like that," Professor Lupin was saying. "I've never seen a boggart respond that way. It was as though none of the rest of us even existed."

"Young Steven is the survivor of a rather serious war," Dumbledore said. "I would imagine that his fears were rather more vivid and intense than the imagined schoolroom fears of a group of youngsters."

"It was so fast...so powerful," Lupin said. "Boggarts are supposed to be pale imitations of the things they copy. Where did it get that kind of power?"

"That was a pale imitation," Steven said somberly, staring at his hands. "Why do you think we had to poison our entire world to beat them?"

Snape stood at the back of the room and he directed a significant look toward the Headmaster, who nodded slightly.

He'd always maintained that the gems were dangerous. The gems that had already manifested were the weakest of the gems, from Steven's report. He couldn't imagine how powerful the greatest of Steven's "aunts" was going to be.

Worse, what if he was right and there were counterparts to the gems native to their own dimension? They could be facing an invasion that neither Muggle nor Wizardkind had any ability to fight.

A single gem could take down a castle the size of Hogwarts. What could an army of them do?

"I think it might be advisable to be cautious in assigning Steven for any demonstrations, at least in the near future," Dumbledore said firmly.
No one disagreed.

After the incident with the boggart, Lupin's classes continued to be exciting and interesting. Fortunately, there were no more incidents, and everything went smoothly. Almost everyone agreed that he was the best defense professor in ages, and except for a few detractors in Slytherin everyone else was impressed.

The school year, for once was relatively uneventful. Ron and Hermione were fighting because Crookshanks kept attacking Ron's rat, but Harry did his best to stay out of it. Sometimes he envied Steven, who lived in the dormitories of another House and didn't have to listen to Ron's continual complaining.

Harry was forbidden visits to Hogsmeade. He had a serial murderer after him, and even if he hadn't, his aunt and uncle had refused to sign his permission slip.

It was frustrating to watch his friends leaving, but Harry knew better than to complain.

Even Steven left with the others, leaving Harry to wander the castle alone.

Harry took the opportunity to speak with Lupin, who reassured him that he hadn't overlooked him with the boggart because he thought he couldn't handle it. He'd been attempting to save the class from seeing Voldemort.

"If I'd known more about Steven's background, I'd have never allowed him to face the boggart," Lupin said ruefully.

Apparently the professor had been spending some time with Steven since the incident with the boggart in an effort to learn all he could about him.

Of course, with classes and Quidditch practice and working to start his own band, Steven didn't have a lot of time for anyone. He still studied with Hermione, although Hermione said he wasn't needing her help nearly as much as he had in previous years.

She seemed a little wistful when she said it.

Snape came to deliver a potion to Lupin, followed by an arguing Amethyst and Peridot. The look of exasperation on the man's face was almost enough to make his presence worth Harry's while.

His friends returned with enough stories about Hogsmeade to make Harry envious. Their pockets were filled with candy as well. Steven carefully shared his with Harry, reasoning that Amethyst would likely eat anything he had left over anyway.

He walked with them on their way back to their tower. They stopped; there was a crowd surrounding the entrance to Gryffindor tower.

It soon became apparent that the Fat Lady's picture had been slashed to pieces, and according to Peeves, it had been done by Sirius Black!

Sleeping on the floor on sleeping bags in the Great Hall wasn't a hardship for Harry; he'd spent most of his life sleeping on the floor in a cupboard. The muggles seemed to take it well enough, other than their fear of the mass murdering serial killer wandering the halls of Hogwarts.

It was the purebloods who seemed to have the most trouble with it. They were used to the
conveniences of modern life. From what he'd heard from Ron, even camping was done in wizarding
tents that had all the conveniences of home.

Black wasn't found, and everything went relatively back to normal the next day.

Still, everyone was on edge after that. Teachers found excuses to escort Harry everywhere and even
Steven and Amethyst had taken to following him around. Steven admitted that he'd been asked to do
so by the Headmaster, although he said he'd have done it anyway.

The attack seemed like the only thing anyone could talk about, and all Harry wanted was to try to not
think about it. Becoming obsessed with something he couldn't control would only lead to his
becoming fearful of everything. He couldn't go around worrying about every shadow, every
footstep, or every stray noise. He'd never be able to do anything.

Steven told him about his own experiences with future vision, about becoming obsessed about how
everything could kill him. It seemed odd that someone as seemingly invulnerable as Steven could be
frozen by the fear of doing anything, but it made him feel a lot better.

All he could do was to try to be ready for whatever came.

Quiddich was his escape, and he threw himself into practicing ever harder.

It was a surprise then, to discover that instead of Slytherin they were facing Hufflepuff for their next
game.

"Malfoy faked an injury," Wood said, gritting his teeth.

It was obvious why; nobody wanted to play in the kind of weather they were facing. Quidditch
wasn't called off for weather, but without a seeker, the game couldn't end.

It was such a Slytherin thing to do that Harry couldn't even bring up the energy to care.

"This isn't going to be easy," Wood said. "They've got Diggory and Universe."

"This kind of weather might work in our favor," Fred Weasely said. "Universe doesn't weigh much;
the wind will be blowing him all over the place."

Steven hadn't grown in two years while Harry had. Normally being small was an advantage as a
seeker, as it made it easier to fly fast and to be agile. With the kind of winds they were seeing
outside, Harry's extra weight would be an advantage.

"It doesn't matter how strong he is," George said. "There's only so much the broom can do, and his
broom isn't as good as Harry's."

"He's fast, though," Wood said. "And Diggory is good too."

"We can take them." Harry was confident. The Hufflepuffs had become a team to be reckoned with
over the past two years, but the Gryffindor team had been working just as hard. For once the weather
might even give them an advantage.

Steven could have afforded a better broom, given his Acromantula and Basilisk money, but from a
sense of fair play, he'd chosen not to buy one.

Harry wasn't as picky. Steven was already superhuman. Harry would take every advantage he could get.
The wind was bad enough that it was hard to even walk onto the field. The Slytherins were in the stands under umbrellas and Harry could see Malfoy smirking, although the sound of the wind was loud enough that he couldn't hear the crowd at all.

It was horrible weather; within five minutes of taking to the air Harry was cold and miserable. The rain on his glasses made it hard to see, and he could barely tell if the people he was almost running into were on his team, or the other.

It was getting harder and harder to hold his broom; his hands were freezing and feeling numb. Twice he was almost unseated by a bludger.

When the whistle blew for a time out, Harry was happy to drop to the ground, even for a short period.

"We're up twenty points," Wood said. The wind hadn't bothered Steven nearly as much as they'd hoped, and he'd been interfering in their game. "But if somebody doesn't find the snitch we'll be here all night."

"I can't see," Harry said. He rubbed at his glasses with hands that were numb.

"Here, let me," Hermione said. She cast a quick spell on his glasses. "It repels water."

"That's brilliant!" Harry said.

Anything that would get them off the field and into the warm castle quicker was more than welcome. He could have kissed Hermione in that moment, and in the minutes that followed as he took to the air again, it made all the difference.

A flash of lightning showed an enormous shaggy black dog silhouetted against the sky, sitting at the top of an empty row of seats. Harry felt himself slipping, his broom dropping as he stared.

Another flash of light and the dog was gone.

Steven flashed by him, and Harry turned; he saw the snitch and headed toward it. Steven had a lead and he was lighter, but he was struggling against the wind more than Harry. Furthermore, Harry's broom was faster.

He started closing the distance between them, but then he felt that something was wrong. He continued to struggle against the wind, but the wind stopped howling. The world became silent, as though Harry had suddenly become deaf.

He felt a sudden wave of cold; not the unpleasant, normal cold he'd been suffering through for the entire game, but something deeper. This was uncannily familiar and it took Harry a moment to realize what it was.

"Oh no," he had time to say.

He had time to see Steven grabbing the snitch, then another flash of lightning illuminated the horror below.

There were almost one hundred Dementors on the field looking up at him, almost as though they were waiting to devour his soul.

He heard the sound of screaming in his mind, and a moment later he felt himself slipping off his broom.
"That was the scariest thing I've ever seen."

"It's a good thing Steven is so fast," the next voice said. "I didn't think a school broom could move like that."

"He jumped the last thirty feet." It was Hermione's voice. "Wrapped them both in a bubble. I almost think he was more worried about the dementors than the fall."

Harry blinked and opened his eyes. "We lost, I guess."

If he hadn't lost other games to the Hufflepuffs it would have stung more, but Steven had taught him that there was more to life than winning.

Not that winning wasn't better, of course. It just wasn't the only thing.

"Steven tried to ask for a rematch," Ron said. "Diggory backed him up, but the teachers wouldn't allow it."

"They won fair and square," Harry said. He grimaced; he still felt cold.

Ron and Hermione looked like drowned rats.

"Where's Steven?"

"He's talking to the Headmaster."

"I've never seen him so angry," Hermione said in a small voice. "He ran out onto the field and silver stuff shot out of his wand, driving the dementors away."

"Did anybody get my broom?"

Hermione looked down, looking sick. "When you fell off your broom, it got blown away. Steven was too busy trying to save you, and I doubt even he would have been fast enough."

"It blew into the whomping willow," Ron said. He looked sick.

He held up what was left of Harry's beloved broom.

All that was left was splinters.

He had to find a way to deal with his weakness against dementors. If he didn't, it might get him killed. It might even be worse than that. He might have his soul ripped from his body and devoured.

At least Voldemort was only likely to kill and torture him.

He had to learn whatever spell it was Lupin and Dumbledore used to repel them; his soul depended on it.

Because Steven had kept Harry from actually hitting the ground, instead of keeping him over the weekend, Madam Pomfrey only kept him overnight. Harry was grateful; he'd always hated sitting in a hospital bed, especially when he had things to do.
The headmaster undoubtedly was too busy to teach Harry what he needed to know. Harry suspected that even if he did have time he wouldn't want Harry mucking around with advanced magics.

He'd approach Lupin first; if he refused then he'd go to Flitwick and then McGonagall. If he had to he'd have Hermione find the spell and he'd learn it on his own. He couldn't depend on adults to protect him; he had to learn to protect himself.

To his surprise, Steven was in Lupin's office when he arrived. Lupin looked ill. He was gaunt and he looked as though he hadn't slept in three days. His eyes kept flicking toward the window, even though it was still early morning and there was nothing to see outside.

Maybe he just wanted to smell the rain.

"I wanted to speak to you about the dementors," Harry said.

Lupin looked at him for a moment. "I heard about what happened. I'm sorry. I suppose they are the reason you fell."

Harry nodded. "I don't know why they affect me like that...why am I so..."

"It has nothing to do with weakness," Lupin said. "The dementors affect you worse than others because there are horrors in your past that others don't share."

"Steven's lived through horrors," Harry objected. "He's been through a war, lost people...even seen people killed. Why doesn't it affect him?"

"It does," Steven said somberly. He stared down at his hands. "Every time I get around those things I relive all the worst moments of my life."

"You don't pass out."

"Dementors drain hope and happiness out of the air around them," Lupin said. "If it's left to feed long enough it'll drain every good feeling and every happy memory out of you...you'll be left with only the worst experiences of your life."

"My life...my old life was nothing but happiness before the war," Steven said. "I've got enough good memories from my dad and Connie and the gems to sustain me for a long time."

It struck Harry suddenly why he was so susceptible. Steven had a lifetime of good memories, but Harry's hadn't begun until he'd come to Hogwarts. Even those had been interspersed with moments of terror and classes with Snape.

His good memories could fit into a thimble.

It was humiliating that even Malfoy had enough good memories to keep him from passing out, but Harry was left to scramble to find any at all.

"When they get near me."

"I can hear Voldemort murdering my mum."

Lupin's hands tightened.

"Why did they have to come to the match anyway?" Harry asked.

"They're getting hungry," Lupin said. He glanced at the sky outside again and said "Dumbledore isn't letting them feed. The large crowd on the Quidditch field, the excitement...it must have tasted like fear to them and drawn them like moths to a flame."
"It's going to keep happening," Harry said. "And sooner or later they're going to get to me."

It sounded a little paranoid the moment he said it, but Harry knew in his bones that it was true. Fortunately, Lupin didn't look as skeptical as Harry had feared.

"I need a way to defend myself," Harry said. "Before there's a Quidditch game where Steven isn't already on a broom and I break my neck."

"Me too," Steven said. He clenched his fists. "I need to be able to protect my friends, and these things don't seem like the kind of things you can just punch until they give up."

"I'm no expert on fighting dementors," Lupin protested. He lifted his hands.

"You were able to drive the dementor from the train," Harry said.

"That was one dementor," Lupin said. "There are defenses you can use, but they become more difficult the more dementors you are facing."

"The headmaster drove a hundred of them away," Steven said.

"He's the most powerful wizard in the world," Lupin said. "Arguably"

"Still...any defense against them would be better than none."

Lupin stared at them both for a moment then nodded. "It'll have to wait until next term; this is a bad time to have taken ill and I'm behind in my work."

Harry nodded. He glanced at Steven and they shared a look. It would have to do.

The thought of finally being able to protect himself from Dementors and never having to hear his mother being murdered again kept Harry's spirits up over the next six weeks.

Steven had an unlucky break and the Ravenclaws managed to beat the Hufflepuffs when their seeker had spotted the snitch behind another player and had been willing to plow into that player to get it. Steven had probably been worrying about hurting the player.

In any case, this put Gryffindor back in the running to win the house cup. While nobody begrudged the Hufflepuffs their recent wins, nobody wanted them to win the cup for the third year running. The Slytherins had even been known to say that it hurt the school's reputation.

They noticeably didn't say it when a Hufflepuff was around. The Hufflepuffs had gotten noticeably braver since Steven had joined. Whether it was because they believed he would be there to protect them, or simply because they'd regained their house pride nobody knew.

Incidents of bullying Hufflepuffs had dropped noticeably even since Harry was a first year. There were occasionally Slytherins who tried it, but rarely more than once.

Two weeks before the end of the semester the others were allowed to go to Hogsmeade, which Harry was not excited about. Being the only third year left behind was less than exciting.

Steven, however agreed to stay behind with him.

"I can go anytime," he said. "Besides, I've been helping Professor Lupin to grade papers and he's caught up."
"You mean he's ready to teach us?" Harry asked, excited.

Steven nodded. "I've been talking to him. He gets stressed out sometimes around the end of the month and he likes it if I play music for him."

Harry could hardly keep his excitement under control. He and Steven slipped past the Weasley twins and headed straight for Lupin's office.

"What's that?" Harry asked.

Lupin was hauling a large box which he placed on his desk.

"Another boggart," he said.

Steven took an involuntary step back.

"Don't worry," Lupin said. "I've spent a lot of time studying what happened with you and the boggart, and there is a spell I can use to make you invisible to it."

"So it won't turn into Jasper or...anyone else," Steven said.

Lupin nodded. "I tried it on myself and I actually got to see what the boggart looked like when nobody is around. Also, with most of the students away at Hogsmeade, it should minimize the damage if anything does go wrong."

"What does the boggart look like when it's alone?" Harry asked.

Lupin shook his head. "It's actually hard to describe; maybe I'll show you sometime when we have the time."

"So..." Harry began.

"What I'm going to teach the both of you is advanced magic...beyond OWL level...it's called a patronus charm."

"How does it work?" Steven asked.

"Well, it kind of conjures up the opposite of a dementor...a patronus that serves as a guardian and a shield between you and the dementor."

"I've always been good at shields," Steven murmured.

"It's a projection created from the kind of things a dementor feeds on...hope, happiness...the will to survive. But it can't feel despair so the dementors can't hurt it. I have to warn you that it might be too advanced for either of you."

"What does it look like?" Harry asked.

He'd been unconscious both times when patronuses had been cast around him, so he had no idea what they were supposed to look like.

"It's individual to the wizard who casts it."

"How does it work?"

"It's an incantation that will work only if you concentrate with all of your might on a single happy
memory." Lupin said. "And it's one thing to cast it in the classroom. It's another thing when you're facing a dementor."

"Ok," Harry said. It wasn't going to be easy to find one; certainly nothing in his aunt and uncle's house. Maybe the first time he got on a broom.

"The incantation is this...expecto patronum. Focus on your happiest memory and cast the spell."

He heard Lupin casting a spell on Steven. Harry closed his eyes. The feeling of flight. Being finally free of everything, including gravity.

"Expecto patronum," he said.

White light shot out from his wand. It looked like a silvery gas.

"Something happened!" he said. "Did you see that?"

Steven nodded.

"It's your turn," Lupin said to Steven.

"My first dance with Connie," he heard Steven mutter. "Fusion."

Steven closed his eyes and then opened them. "Expecto patronum!"

The light that came from his wand was brighter than Harry's; considering how much happier he'd always been than Harry it wasn't a surprise.

What was surprising was that it kept getting brighter and brighter, almost blinding so that Harry had to put his hand over his eyes.

Finally it was over.

"That must have been...some memory," Lupin said.

Harry had always tried not to be jealous of Steven. He'd never had a mother and he'd lost his father and all his friends and his entire world. He might never age and might stay a child for the rest of his life.

But he couldn't help but feel a sharp sting of envy; whatever memory had prompted this was apparently so joyful and so happy that it had overshadowed the memory of flying. Harry had always thought that flying was the ultimate in happiness, but now...

He couldn't imagine being that happy, and that made him feel a little bitter.

When would he get to feel that kind of joy?
Once Lupin released the boggart, casting the patronus stopped being easy. Harry couldn't do it at all and Steven’s patronus dimmed to a flickering thing that kept the boggart at bay but didn't drive it back.

Each time they tried again, Harry heard more and more of his mother’s death. Only the thought that this might help him never have to hear it again kept him from throwing his wand down and giving up. The thought that this might be the last time he ever heard his mother was something he had to put out of his mind entirely.

Finally, on their last try Harry managed to conjure a patronus and drive the boggart back into it's chest.

Steven had managed it three tries earlier and was now resting. He looked haggard. Despite the brightness of his patronus, it was hard to cast when the chill of the dementor was leeching away all happiness.

Real dementors would be worse, and if there were more than one...it was hard to imagine managing to draw up a good memory in the middle of all that darkness.

It occurred to Harry that the real reason that the spell was advanced wasn't that it was hard to cast; both he and Steven, mere third years had managed to cast it on the first try. The problem was that casting it in the face of real adversity was going to take a lot more than classroom practice.

"We're going to have to do this a lot, aren't we?" Steven asked glumly.

"We can stop." Lupin said, looking at them intently. "It's possible that you are both too young for something like this, and nobody would think any less of either of you for giving up."

Harry looked at Steven, who looked back at him. They both shook their heads,

"We can't give up," Harry said. "It's life or death."

Lupin nodded. "All right. Let's begin again."

Ron and Hermione came back from Hogsmeade acting strange. They glanced at him multiple times and had furious whispered arguments when they thought he wasn't looking.

Harry was exhausted and drained from the Patronum practice and he couldn't find the energy to care.

That night, however, after lights out, Ron revealed that he and Hermione had overheard the professors talking about how Sirius Black had been the one who had betrayed his parents to Voldemort. He'd been their secret keeper.

Hermione had wanted to keep it from Harry, for fear that he'd go after Black. That was why she and Ron had been arguing throughout much of the evening.

Harry promised Ron that he wouldn't do anything foolish like go after Black right away.

Considering that Black seemed to be doing everything he could to get to Harry, Harry suspected that
he wouldn't have to.

Steven wouldn't approve, probably, and neither would Hermione, but Harry fully intended to enact vengeance when he got a chance. Knowing his luck, it would happen before the school year was out.

All he had to do was watch and wait.

Faster than he'd expected, the winter holidays arrived. Ron and Hermione stayed at school, supposedly to catch up with work, but Harry knew it was really because they were worried about him.

Steven, of course, lived on the school grounds.

Without Quidditch or classes to interfere, Steven had more time to spend with the rest of them, although he still had time to work with his band.

Harry, Hermione and Ron got to listen to the band for the first time. It was composed of Steven, a fifth year Ravenclaw playing bass, a fourth year Hufflepuff playing the piano and strangely, a sullen looking sixth year Slytherin playing drums.

They were actually good, although it was strange to hear Steven playing a guitar instead of his ukelele.

According to Steven they were still looking for a vocalist. Most Ravenclaws were too focused on school to want to join and most Gryffindores were too focused on Quidditch. None of the other Slytherins wanted to be involved with a half human abomination like Steven at all.

Christmas came, and with it presents. He received another sweater from Molly Weasely. From Steven he received a book about how to use a sword, along with a promise to teach him more in person later.

Harry wouldn't have thought much of the gift, but after his experience the year before, knowing more about how to fight with anything was a gift worth having. Basilisks weren't the only spell resistant monsters out there. Inevitably, monsters that were spell resistant tended to be wizard killers.

It was the broomstick he received that caused the most trouble. It was a beauty; the most expensive broomstick on the market. Given their money from the basilisk, Steven could have afforded it, or Flitwick, but both of them swore they didn't give it to him.

Flitwick in fact insisted on keeping the broom for fear that it was a trap, cursed by Sirius Black as a way of getting to him.

Steven and Hermione were both adamant that it was for the best that it be checked out, but Harry had really wanted that broom. He needed a new one anyway.

Ron and Hermione fought more over Crookshanks obsession with eating Scabbers. Ron actually kicked Crookshanks, which led to Hermione not talking to Ron for days.

Hermione seemed to be spending a lot more time with Steven than she had in the past, even without studying being involved.

There were times when Harry would catch them after hours in the Gryffindor common room talking in low voices, Steven playing his guitar quietly.
The holiday ended faster than he would have wanted it to, with Hermione and Ron still angry with each other, and Harry still without a broom.

Worse, the Patronus lessons weren't going as well as Harry had hoped. He could manage a silvery cloud, but all it did was drain him of energy. He couldn't drive the boggart-dementor away, only hold it at bay.

Steven was doing better, although he too had only managed to create a silvery mist. According to Lupin, properly performed, the spell should create a corporeal animal that would charge the dementors and drive them away.

Hearing that the dementors could actually eat a person's soul had almost made Steven physically ill. It hadn't bothered Harry as much; after all, there were some people who deserved it as far as he was concerned.

The blood trail was pretty definitive. Scabbers was dead, and Crookshanks was the culprit. Hermione denied it, of course, and this enraged Ron to no end. They'd been fighting for the entire school year over their respective pets, and no it was at an end.

Ron wasn't speaking to Hermione, and this placed Harry and Steven in a difficult position.

It was easier for Steven; he had the excuse of his band and Quidditch and he didn't have to spend all that much time with Ron. When Ron tried to get him on his side, Steven was carefully noncommittal.

Harry, though was living in the same room as Ron, and yet he had to face Hermione from across the breakfast table every morning.

Hermione refused to even consider apologizing, although she did start spending more time away. She would sometimes go to listen to Steven's band practice, and she would spend much of the rest of her time studying obsessively.

Fortunately, Steven had talked her out of Muggle studies and into dropping divination. She'd been determined to take an impossible load at the first of the year, but she was much more relaxed now.

Still, the bad blood between Hermione and Ron remained.

Eventually he was given back his Nimbus, which proved free of all hexes, curses and other magical traps. It was just in time for the first game of the season.

For once Amethyst and Peridot chose to attend, even though Steven wasn't playing. As Harry played, he could see Steven and Lupin animatedly explaining the rules of the game to Peridot and Amethyst. The smaller green gem seemed to be complaining and gesturing wildly, but Harry couldn't hear what they were saying.

It wasn't until late in the game that he looked down and saw three dementors looking up at him.

His wand was out before he could even think, and he was shouting "Expecto Patronum!"

A huge blast of white light, bigger than anything Steven had produced in the classroom blasted out of his wand, sending the three figures flying.

Harry was so excited that he was barely aware of having caught the snitch.

Ignoring the people congratulating him, he dropped down to where Lupin and Steven were waiting.
"I didn't feel anything at all!" he said excitedly.

"That's because those weren't real dementors," Steven said.

He nodded in the direction of the three figures on the field. Draco and his two cronies were being grabbed by Professor McGonagall. Punishment was going to be sure and swift.

"Good reflexes though," Steven said. "When it actually happens, looks like you'll be ready."

It had been good to see Ron happy for once, although Hermione hadn't participated in the festivities. She'd gone off to do something with Steven and his aunts instead.

Although it hadn't been real, the experience with Draco made Harry feel a little more confident about his progress with the patronum spell. All the work he and Steven had been doing was going to make a difference.

Harry went to bed confident that this night, at least would be free of the nightmares that had been plaguing him since starting the patronus training.

If he'd been learning alone, he suspected that he might not have been as driven. Facing the darkness alone was hard and unforgiving. Having Steven there made him push himself harder, and he suspected that Steven pushed himself harder because Harry was there.

They both pushed Lupin to teach them longer than they probably should. Harry had told no one of the nightmares, although Ron knew, of course. Sleeping in a bed a few feet away from someone else, you knew everything about them.

Normally it was Harry's voice that woke Ron.

Tonight it was the other way around. Harry's eyes snapped open, and he rolled over to the side. He pushed aside his bed curtains just in time to see a silhouette standing over Ron's bed.

He grabbed for his wand and his glasses, but by the time he had both, the figure was gone. He cast a luminos to be sure, and what he saw chilled him to the bone.

Ron's bed curtains were slashed and torn. Black had tried to murder Harry and had simply gotten the wrong bed.

Nowhere was safe.

Harry rolled out of bed, his wand out and ready.

His mind went over the limited number of attack spells that he knew and he cursed at himself for not learning more of them and more quickly. Black was a full grown wizard, and even if he didn't have a wand, he had a knife.

"Are you all right, Ron?" Harry asked, his eyes scanning for any sign of the intruder.

"Bloody 'ell no. Sirius Black almost got me with a knife!" Ron's face was pale and his expression was terrified.

The light from the end of Harry's wand illuminated the room in shadows as he carefully moved around Ron's bed.

Their other roommates were groggily turning on the lights, muttering in confusion.
Seeing no one else in the room, Harry reached the dormitory door and paused. Black had a knife and he could be waiting on the other side of the door. He'd watched enough Muggle horror movies through the gaps in the boards of his cupboard to know that this was where the killer would be waiting behind the door.

Someone would rush down to warn the others, and they'd be the first to die.

He grimaced and shoved the door open. There was no one visible in the staircase below, so he sprinted down it hoping to catch up with Black before he escaped again.

The confused voices that were rising in his wake didn't bother him. All he cared about was getting to Black.

Black had killed his parents. He'd murdered an untold number of Muggles and all the pain in Harry's life...living with the Dursleys, everything was his fault, his responsibility.

For a moment he thought he saw a shadow moving low and fast. It didn't seem human. Before he could go after it he ran into Percy, who stopped him from moving any further.

After that there was chaos.

Harry didn't bother to listen to the denials or the accusations. He could see people's body language, and it told him all he needed to know. The sudden realization of danger, the weak kneed feeling of fear. It was all there.

The only surprise was that Neville Longbottom had written down all the passwords and had lost them, leaving everyone vulnerable to being murdered.

All Harry could think was that he'd had his chance at Black and he'd lost it.

He tried to focus on that, because the other thought, that Black could have murdered him in his sleep was much too frightening to contemplate.

Being more vigilant and faster was the only way he'd be able to survive.

No one slept the rest of the night, waiting huddled in the common room as they waited for the teachers to search the castle yet again.

George and Fred pulled him into an unused classroom the next morning.

"Our little brother almost got murdered last night," Fred said, or maybe it was George. The other brother finished the sentence. "And while we like to give him a hard time, we love little Ronnikins."

"Black was after me," Harry said. "I know."

"The sooner they catch him, the sooner we can get back to business," one of the brothers said. "That's why we're offering you this."

"It hurts us to give it to you, but you need it more than we do," one brother said,

"Matter of life and death after all," the other said. "Besides, mum would kill us if somebody killed you and there was something we could have done."
"What is it?" Harry asked.

"It's the secret to our success," George said. "We found it in Filch's office."

"Take a look," Fred said. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

The parchment he was holding was blank, but moments later words appeared, followed by a map of the castle. There were dots on the map, and they were moving.

Harry stared, flabbergasted.

"Is that what I think it is?"

The twins nodded in unison. "It's got everybody in Hogwarts. We've been looking for Black all morning, but haven't found him."

"The chamber of secrets isn't on this map," Harry pointed out.

After the debacle last year, Amethyst had spent part of the summer exploring the plumbing until she'd found the chamber of secrets. It had caused a stir, as Wizarding historians had clamored for the chance to explore Slytherin's lair abandoned for a thousand years and left untouched.

Amethyst had only been upset that there hadn't been any basilisk's eggs to eat; if there had been she claimed she'd have made an omelet.

"If one part of the castle isn't on the map, there might be others," Harry said. "For all we know, he might actually be hiding in the chamber."

He studied the map closely, scanning for Black's name.

He paused on one unfamiliar name.

"Do either of you know a Peter Pettigrew?" Harry asked.

George stared at Fred, and they both shook their heads.

"He's not one of the teachers, and there aren't any students by that name," Fred said. "We should know; we've pranked everybody."

"The name seems familiar for some reason," Harry said.

"Why don't we look into the matter," both brothers said at once.

With a glance, they were all in agreement. They left the classroom, uneasily passing the new watch trolls guarding the Gryffindor common room. The lady sat uneasily in her slashed picture, staring suspiciously out at everyone.

Steven wouldn't be visiting their common room anytime soon.

Security was being beefed up in other ways. Filch was boarding up windows and doors. Amethyst was patrolling the halls more diligently.

Even Peridot seemed to be trying to help, building what looked like overly complicated but purely mechanical contraptions at key points throughout the castle. Supposedly these would help capture Black if he could be driven into them.
As they passed through one hall they could hear Professor McGonagall telling Peridot that students still had to actually use the hall during the day.

Seeing Malfoy hanging upside down in a net twenty feet up in the air made Harry feel suddenly better.

They passed through more halls, and Harry saw Ron surrounded by a group of other students. Undoubtedly he was telling his story for the twentieth time this morning. He seemed to enjoy his newfound fame.

Harry couldn't begrudge that; being almost murdered made for a great story later. It didn't make up for being almost killed in the first place, of course.

"He's in Hagrid's hut," Harry said. He stopped. "I don't think we're allowed to go there."

"When did you ever listen to what was allowed?" George asked.

"I can get you there," Amethyst's voice came from behind them. She looked over Harry's shoulder. "Nice map."

"Um..." George said.

Amethyst was in a strange position. She was a semi-official part of the castle staff, but she didn't act like any of the others.

"I'm taking Steven to see Hagrid anyway," Amethyst said. "You might as well come along."

Steven joined them shortly afterward, and they headed down the grassy slopes toward Hagrid's hut. For once there weren't a mass of students wandering around; there was no one in sight. Everyone had been restricted to the castle for the day without an official escort.

"'Arry!" Hagrid seemed surprised to see them.

Harry glanced inside; other than Fang, he didn't see anybody else. A quick look at the map showed a Peter Pettigrew inside.

"Do you have anybody in there with you?" Harry asked.

Hagrid shook his massive head, then stepped aside to let them in.

"I don't think this thing is working," Harry said. He glanced at the map again, then took five steps forward. There still was no one obviously there.

It occurred to Harry that he might not be the only person in the world to have an invisibility cloak. He slowly reached into his pocket to pull out his wand.

"It's good to see you again, Hagrid," Harry said loudly.

At least Hagrid's floor was dusty. If there was someone invisible, they might leave a trail.

"It's good ter see you again," Hagrid said, a perplexed look on his face. Harry could tell that Hagrid wanted to ask questions, but he shook his head slightly.

It was only as he stepped forward again, staring at the floor where Pettigrew was supposedly standing that he saw something small.
It was Scabbers!

"Stupify," Harry shouted. Light blazed from his wand, and the rat jumped, before laying stunned on the floor.

Harry bent down and carefully grabbed the rat.

"Ron's going to be so happy that his rat's not dead," Harry said. "And he's been calling him by the wrong name all these years."

"Oh?" George asked. "It was brother Percy who named the thing."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Apparently his real name is Peter Pettigrew."

Hagrid stared at him for a moment, then down at the rat in his hand. He looked up at Harry again. An odd expression appeared on his face, one that Harry couldn't decipher through all the hair on his beard.

Harry glanced back at the others; no one else seemed to know anything about whatever it was that was bothering Hagrid.

"We've got ter see the 'eadmaster," Hagrid said firmly. He looked at George and Fred. "Can one of you boys make a cage the rat can't get out of?"

Fred and George grinned and said, "Usually we're the rats trying to get out of the cage, so we know how to make them."

A moment later they'd transfigured one of Hagrid's rock cakes into a serviceable cage for the rat. Even if the spell reverted, the rock cakes were so hard that they'd make a perfectly adequate cage on their own. It would take even a rat days to gnaw its way out of one.

Hagrid grabbed him by the shoulder, holding it uncomfortably tight.

Harry couldn't help but wonder if he was in trouble. He'd found Ron's rat and as far as he knew he hadn't done anything wrong, but in his experience, adults didn't need much justification to assign blame.

The cage in his hands felt oddly heavy for some reason, not just with weight but with portents for the future.

Hagrid kept muttering to himself in a way that was vaguely frightening to Harry as they made their way up the slope in the direction of the castle. His strides were so wide that Harry had a little trouble keeping up with him.

He glanced back at the others trailing them. They were a mismatched group; redheaded twins, purple woman, and Steven Universe.

None of them seemed to have any clue as to what Hagrid seemed to think was so urgent.

Pushing the door to the entrance hall open with one hand, Hagrid held it open for the rest of them, letting it swing shut behind them.

Standing in the middle of the hall, Snape looked as though he had been waiting for them.
"Apparently some students don't believe that the rules apply to them," he said, looking directly at Harry. "Even when the rules are specifically for their own safety."

"We need ter see the 'eadmaster right away," Hagrid said. "Show 'im the rat, Harry."

Harry lifted the cage, and Snape glanced at it once and then looked away.

"What am I supposed to be looking at? Has Mr. Weasely's pet rat finally gotten the mange?"

"Look at 'is foot," Hagrid said. "Close like."

Snape glanced again dismissively, but something seemed to catch his attention. The blood seemed to drain from his face as he leaned forward to look more closely.

"Are you certain?" he asked, looking up at Hagrid.

The bigger man shook his head. "Only one way ter be fer sure."

Snape nodded stiffly, his face suddenly and carefully expressionless. He stepped aside, and as the group began to make its way toward the Headmaster's office, he followed along behind them.

They reached the Headmaster's office faster than Harry would have expected. He still didn't understand what was happening, but at least some of the adults did.

"Cockroach clusters," Amethyst said, stepping forward when it turned out that Hagrid didn't know the Headmaster's password.

It wasn't surprising; harry doubted that Hagrid had many opportunities to visit the Headmaster in his office, but Amethyst was everywhere, especially wherever she wasn't wanted.

A moment later they were moving up the stairs.

Dumbledore looked up from his desk, his eyes widening as he saw Hagrid followed by the rest of them. It was an eclectic group and there weren't many reasons for this particular group to be in the same room together at the same time.

"Good morning, Harry," Dumbledore said. "I see that you've brought me a rat."

Harry carefully set the cage down on the floor. He massaged the shoulder Hagrid had been gripping him by and he said, "It's Ron's rat, sir. Hagrid seems to think there's something important about it."

"Boy's got a map," Hagrid said. "Named the rat as Peter Pettigrew."

Dumbledore glanced down at the cage and then said, "Peter Pettigrew is dead."

"That's whut the papers say," Hagrid said. "But Pettigrew was always a slippery bas...fella."

Snape stood at the back of the room and said nothing. He simply stared at the entire proceeding with an intensity that was unusual even for him.

Harry glanced back at him and wondered why he was even here. He hadn't found the rat, even if he understood whatever the significance was of it being misnamed.

"It's easily sorted," Dumbledore said. He pulled his wand and pointed it at the cage, which fell apart.

Before the rat inside could bolt, he cast a second spell, and the rat's form began to twist and change.
The man who emerged was very short, hardly taller than Harry. He had thin colorless hair with a bald spot on top. He had a pointed nose and thin, watery eyes.

"Hello Peter," Dumbledore said mildly. For once there was no twinkle in his eye. "You look very healthy for a man who was supposed to be dead."

"I was in hiding," Pettigrew said. "from that maniac Black."

"I see," Dumbledore looked at the small man, who looked like he was ready to run away at any moment.

"He may be telling the truth," Snape said. "After all, Black attacked Weasely's bed, not Potter's. He must have known about a certain rat's predilection for sleeping in the beds of young boys."

Harry could hear the twins gasp behind him. Somehow the full impact of having a grown man sleeping in the bed of not one but two of their brothers hadn't occurred to them until this very moment.

Harry closed his eyes. Ron was going to be humiliated. The slytherins would have a field day, and would taunt him about it mercilessly.

"If I don't keep moving, he'll get to me," Pettigrew said. He started edging toward the stairs.

Amethyst was standing behind him and she put one hand on his shoulder. "I don't think so, bud."

He tried to wrench himself away, but Amethyst had a grip like iron when she wanted, and he couldn't move at all.

"Hogwarts is one of the safest places on the planet," Dumbledore said.

The irony of that statement made Harry want to giggle helplessly. He glanced back at the twins, who smirked, even though they looked a little pale.

Pettigrew had been a passive observer for the last three years and he knew how safe Hogwarts really was just as well as Harry did.

His form began to twist in Amethyst's hands as he tried to turn back into a rat, but she was too quick. She grabbed the rat by the back of the neck and looked up at Dumbledore.

"There will be many people who will be interested in his testimony as to what really happened leading up to the Potter's deaths," Dumbledore said. "We need to keep him safe for his own good."

Harry's eyes widened. This was THAT Peter Pettigrew? His parent's friend who'd supposedly been murdered by Sirius Black?

Dumbledore stunned the rat with a single spell.

"I suppose I get to be the one to tell Lupin," Snape said. His voice had a strange tone of anticipation.

"Yes, yes," Dumbledore said absently as he stared at the rat.

"It occurs to me that this would be a perfect opportunity to lay a trap for Black," Snape said. "Catch two rats in one trap."

Dumbledore looked up and said, "It would be good to have the threat to the student body over with, at least for this year."
"I'll see to it," Snape said. There was something about his smirk that made Harry feel uneasy.

"If Peter is alive, then Sirius is innocent!" Lupin insisted.

Although Snape had dismissed them, Harry had hurried to follow him. If this was about Pettigrew, then this was about his parents.

Snape had been so intent on delivering his message to Lupin that he hadn't looked behind him or noticed that he was being followed at all. Or perhaps he had and simply hadn't cared. The twins had left, presumably to talk to Ron to soften the blow to his reputation.

That left Steven, Harry and Amethyst hiding behind the door. Amethyst, had stretched her ear and one eye so that it slipped under the door, which had been left open just a crack. Harry and Steven were left listening at the door.

For safety sake, they were all huddled under Harry's invisibility cloak. Amethyst didn't seem surprised by it; whether this was because Steven had told her, or because she'd spied on him using it at some point Harry didn't know.

"Pettigrew insists he was simply in hiding," Snape said. "From a man intent on murdering him."

"He wants to murder him for framing him," Lupin insisted stubbornly.

"Murder comes easily to all of you, doesn't it?" Snape said suddenly. "Even as a schoolboy Black was capable of murder. It shouldn't have come as a surprise that he graduated to mass murder later."

"He never would have let it get that far," Lupin said. "James stopped him, but he'd have stopped it himself a little later."

"You have a great deal of faith in a convicted mass murderer. Potter at least had the sense to save his own skin by saving me, but Black was never able to resist going too far."

"He never even got a trial!" Lupin said angrily. "You know that as well as I do."

"He helped kill Lily." Snape's voice was suddenly quiet. "What he did to me was one thing. For what he did to Lily...I'm going to see him Kissed."

Amethyst's eye and ear snapped back into place a moment before the door opened.

Snape glanced in their direction and Harry held his breath, hoping they hadn't been noticed. Snape hesitated, as though he had some sense that something was there, but after a moment he moved down the hallway.

Harry's mind whirled. He didn't know what to think.

Lupin seemed certain that Black was innocent, but he didn't have any kind of real proof. From what Harry had heard, Lupin had been friends with both Black and Pettigrew and his father. Why would he automatically believe Black over his other friend?

Maybe he just wanted to believe that his friend was innocent. That seemed to be what Snape believed, and while Harry didn't much like Snape, he respected his intelligence.

On the other hand, if Black was actually innocent, letting him be Kissed would be horrible.

Harry gestured for Steven and Amethyst to move. They needed to get out of the hall before someone bumped into them and his cloak was discovered.
"Boys come in here," Lupin said from inside his office. "you too, Amethyst."

Harry froze in his tracks. He glanced at Steven and Amethyst, then pulled the cloak off, quickly wrapping it and stuffing it in his pocket.

Nobody knew what had really happened the night his parents had died except the people who had made it happen. Lupin knew more of it than most, and that was knowledge Harry needed.

He took a deep breath and then opened the door. He needed answers, and he was going to get them.

"He doesn't have any proof," Ron said. "He just wants to believe that his friend is innocent."

They'd spoken with Professor Lupin for nearly thirty minutes before Harry had left. He'd gone to Ron and Hermione, his head reeling from everything he'd learned.

His father and Sirius Black had bullied Snape? Snape had loved his mother? He'd pressed Lupin on the matter despite his reluctance to talk about it because he had to know.

Snape hated Black with a passion and wasn't going to believe anything that pointed toward his innocence. He wanted Black to pay. Given that he'd always resented Harry for his father's bullying, Snape couldn't be trusted to be objective.

"If there is any possibility that he is innocent, you can't let him be Kissed," Hermione said firmly.

"He admitted to doing it," Harry said tiredly. "That's part of the reason he never got a trial."

He wanted someone to pay, but he wanted the right person to pay. Lupin suspected Pettigrew. Snape and the rest of the world suspected Black. Harry didn't know what to think.

"From what everybody said, he went a little crazy," Steven said slowly. "He might have just been blaming himself."

"Guilt can make you say and do crazy things," Amethyst said. She stared at the table. "We gems never interfered in human matters much, but what's right is right."

"He should be captured," Harry said finally. "One way or the other. But he should get his trial."

"At the very least, if he gets Kissed, nobody will ever know what really happened," Hermione said.

For once they were all in agreement.

The first step in Snape's plan was to make sure Pettigrew's return made it to all the newspapers. Snape suspected that Black was hiding in Hogsmeade, or at the very least somewhere where he could spy on the students.

Knowing Pettigrew was found would draw him out.

Then they'd lure him into a trap. Peridot was helping, gleefully, to construct a mechanical trap. As it was outside the bounds of Hogwarts, she was able to build something that was also electronic and wouldn't be affected by the wards.

Amethyst told Harry they were keeping it all hush hush. They were using magic to keep even her from seeing what they were doing, and Peridot refused to talk about it. Apparently Snape had
promised to help her in her research on the nature of magic.

Apparently, Peridot came from a culture where orders were obeyed and freedom was unusual. She was new to the idea of thinking for herself. She also didn't know enough about humans to understand what was happening.

Harry tried to talk to the Headmaster about it, but he was constantly away in a series of meetings. Apparently capturing Sirius Black was a matter of grave concern for the Ministry. Dumbledore was doing what Lupin called damage control.

It frustrated Harry to be left out of everything. If the Ministry was right, Black had been the one responsible for killing his parents and for upending his life forever. Shouldn't he have some sort of say in what was going to happen, or at least be informed?

He saw a purple haired girl showing up and going into Snape's office. Harry could have sworn he saw her hair changing color. She looked young enough to still be in Hogwarts, although certainly a seventh year.

Harry even considered going to the press. The only thought that stopped him was the thought that Lupin might be wrong. If he inadvertently caused his parents' killer to go free, he'd never be able to live with himself.

He and Hermione and Ron argued about it over and over. Ron was always in favor of vengeance, but Hermione's responses were always more thoughtful. She was deeply uncomfortable with the idea of anyone being Kissed, feeling that outright killing someone would be more merciful.

Steven was gone more often than not. The new restrictions made it harder for him to enter the common rooms of the other Houses. While he did still study with Hermione in the library and attend Patronus lessons with Harry, his time seemed to be more and more taken up with other things.

He always argued for mercy, when they could get him to speak. It didn't surprise Harry; it was just who he was. Although they didn't speak with each other that often about it, the times they did slowly began to change Harry's opinion.

He didn't belong in a world where old enemies became friends, but part of him was strangely attracted to that world. He was tired of everyone trying to kill him. He didn't want to be forced to kill anyone else. The idea of mercy against someone like Voldemort seemed impossible.

Still, it was a nice dream.

"They're gonna let it slip that they're moving Pettigrew," Amethyst said. "But it won't really be him. It'll be some girl who can change her looks."

"He'd never fall for that; they could just apparate or send Pettigrew by Floo network," Harry said.

"The Floo thing can be intercepted," Amethyst said. "It's not as secure as warp pads."

"Supposedly they'll be taking him to the edge of the wards to apparate out because the Headmaster has refused to allow them to apparate directly from Hogwarts," Lupin said quietly.

"It'll be an open secret where they're taking him so that Peridot can set up her trap."

"What do you know about it?" Harry asked.
"Knowing Perry, it could be anything from a giant robot to a laser cage. She's limited by earth equipment, but she can do a lot with what she's got."

"They don't know he's an animagus," Lupin said. "Like Peter, but Snape has to suspect."

He still hadn't explained why so many of Harry's father's friends were animagi, and Harry didn't ask. From what he'd gathered, his father and his friends had been a little like the Weasely twins, except meaner. If the Weasely's could learn how to transform themselves, they'd probably jump at the chance.

It made Harry wonder if Lupin himself was an animagi. The man didn't volunteer any information, although he seemed to worry more and more about the timing of the trap. He seemed to be growing more and more impatient as the end of the month grew closer.

Harry didn't understand the delay. If Snape wanted Black so bad, he was taking his time about arranging for it. It was almost like he was waiting for...something.

Amethyst finally came with the news they'd been waiting for. The plan was going to happen; finding out about it was easy as they'd asked Amethyst to spread the word to some of the ghosts and others who were suspected to be either loose lipped or on Black's side.

Unfortunately, Lupin suddenly wanted to back out.

"We can't do it alone," Harry protested. "Without an adult, we'll be sitting ducks out there."

"I can't," Lupin said. He looked haggard and sick. "Not tonight."

Harry wanted to protest again, but Hermione pulled him aside and whispered in his ear. Harry stiffened, then stared at Lupin, shocked.

"Of course you'd figure it out," Lupin said sadly. "What gave it away?"

"You get sick every month around the full moon," she said. "And Harry told me about your greatest fear being a white orb. Snape is brewing Wolfsbane potion for you, isn't he?"

"He waited for the full moon so I couldn't interfere," Lupin said. He closed his eyes. "If Sirius gets Kissed because of what I am...I'll never forgive myself."

Harry nodded grimly.

"We'll have to warn Sirius without being caught by the Aurors," Harry said. "We've got the cloak and the map, but that's not going to be enough."

"We've got Amethyst," Hermione said.

"She's going to have to be careful," Harry said. "From what I hear, a lot of wizards didn't want her to be here in the first place. If she gets seen, Steven might get taken away from her. She might even get thrown in Azkaban herself."

Harry had seen the wizarding opinion of non-humans. Even half-humans like Steven, Flitwick and Hagrid were looked down on. Amethyst wasn't human at all, and she wouldn't have a lot of rights.

Still; they had to do something.

Huddling beneath the cloak, Harry, Hermione, Ron and Steven stayed very still. Amethyst was on
the ground in the form of a squirrel. In the darkness, purple looked a lot like black, so she was relatively safe.

The auror team closely surrounded Pettigrew, or at least the girl who looked like Pettigrew as they made their way slowly toward the edge of the Hogwarts wards.

It seemed like a small team; only four men and Snape, but any larger and Black might not try anything.

Harry illuminated his wand dimly and stared at the map, glad that they'd covered the bottom of the cloak in brush but hoping that the light wasn't obvious nonetheless.

Black was already here; Harry couldn't see him, but he was concealed somehow.

"We've got to warn him!" Harry said.

It was soon apparent that it was too late. Light blazed across the clearing from concealed lamps even as Black burst into sight.

He looked insane; he was disheveled and the look in his eye was crazed.

He was fast, though. He stunned two of the aurors before they could even react, and the third went down shortly afterwards.

The remaining Auror and Snape weren't so easily taken however. They left Pettigrew supposedly in manacles dropped to the ground while they split apart, dividing Black's focus. While he dealt with one, the other would get him from the other side.

Snape cast a spell, and blood spouted from Black's arm, even as he stunned the remaining Auror.

Black ignored the injury to his left arm, simply walking straight forward. He staggered, but his wand lashed out anyway.

Snape went flying into the air, and he cursed. A moment later, Black managed to stun him as well. He set him on the ground with surprising gentleness.

He hadn't cast a single killing curse, Harry noted.

Black's expression was dark as he stalked forward. "Did you think you could get away with it, Peter? Betraying everyone we loved? They were our friends!"

Pettigrew said nothing, just staring up at him.

"How much did Voldemort pay you?" Black continued. "What could possibly be worth the lives of Lily and James?"

Pettigrew suddenly lashed out with a concealed wand, but Black easily sidestepped it.

A quick spell and the wand went flying through the air to land in his fist. "You always were a tricky sort," Sirius said.

"I'll send you some roomates," he said. "In hell. Avada..."

Pettigrew was cowering, but a moment later the sound of shots echoed throughout the clearing.

Darts filled the air, striking Black in the back. He stared at Pettigrew, his wand slipping from
suddenly boneless hands.

Wild, maniacal laughter echoed across the clearing.

The ground shook as something stepped into the clearing. It was at least twice as tall as the Gryffindor watch trolls, and it was made out of junk.

Peridot sat where the head should be, and she was cackling.

"Wizards zero, technology one!"

Amethyst sighed. "She's going to have an ego about this. We'd better go grab him while the wizards are still out."

Peridot was still cackling when her voice caught and suddenly stopped. The giant machine trembled for a moment, and then suddenly fell forward.

"Wingardium leviosa!" Steven shouted.

Black's body slid out from the path the machine was falling. It fell with a crash, and Harry could see Peridot in the cockpit. It looked like she was having some kind of a seizure.

"Guys," Amethyst said uneasily.

A moment later she too slid to the ground.

The chill the suddenly filled the air and the sudden sound of his mother's screaming in his mind explained why.

Dementors floated in the distance, coming closer and closer. There wasn't one dementor or even ten of them.

All one hundred dementors were coming toward them. They hadn't fed in months, and suddenly here was a banquet; not just Black but the unconscious wizards.

Harry pulled out his wand, but in his heart he knew it was hopeless.
Patronus

Harry's fingers felt numb as he grabbed his wand.

"Expecto Patronum," he said weakly.

Silvery light whispered from his wand, but he knew it wouldn't be enough. The silvery glow flickered weakly against the approaching darkness.

"Think happy thoughts," he said to Ron and Hermione. It wouldn't be enough, but he had to do something.

Steven was on the ground checking on Amethyst, who'd reverted to her normal form. She was moaning something about not being good enough.

"Expecto patronum, expecto patronum, EXPECTO PATRONUM," Harry shouted.

Hermione dropped to the ground next to him. Ron fell shortly afterwards. The wall of death flowing toward them never stopped.

They reached the aurors and Snape and some of them broke off from the crowd. They surrounded the men and the girl. They hesitated for a moment, as though deciding which of them was going to do the honors. A moment later five of them lifted the men and the girl into the air. They began pulling their hoods back.

Harry's fear redoubled itself as some of other dementors reached the limits of his spell. It stopped them, but only just, and they tried to move around it.

Beside him, he could feel Steven standing suddenly.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Steven shouted.

The dementors holding the aurors hesitated, turning to look at Steven even as the wind stopped. Everything was suddenly, unnaturally silent.

"You've hurt too many people," Steven said. "I'm not going to let you hurt anybody else."

There was something odd happening; Steven's stomach was glowing inside his shirt, a glow that grew brighter and brighter as Steven pulled out his wand.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Steven shouted.

Blazing light erupted from his wand, blinding Harry for a moment before it coalesced into something else.

It was large and white and it glowed in the darkness. It looked back at them, and for a moment Harry felt himself trembling a little.

"Lion," Steven whispered next to Harry.

The glowing white lion roared, and when it did, the dementors blew away, knocked back by its power.
It roared again at the dementors holding the aurors, and they too vanished, dropping the men. They were gone as though they'd never existed, blasted away by a creature unlike anything Harry had ever seen before.

Harry stared, flabbergasted. This wasn't anything like the corporeal patronuses Lupin had described. This was something entirely different.

"Lion, Lion, Lion!" Steven shouted. He ran forward to hug the creature, and there were tears in his eyes.

Harry doubted any wizard in the world had ever hugged his own Patronus, but Steven didn't seem to care.

Amethyst woke beside him.

"Lion?" she asked, staring at Steven and the creature he was now holding.

Hermione woke next, followed by Ron.

"What happened," she asked. Looking up, she saw Steven. "Is that Lion? I thought he was dead…and pink."

The aurors were already starting to stir.

Harry walked over to them and stunned all of them again, taking particular pleasure in stunning Snape. It wouldn't last long, but they needed to get Black out of the area, or he'd be Kissed the moment the Ministry could find a dementor.

"We need to get him out of here," he said to Steven, nodding toward Black.

There was no telling how long whatever tranquilizers Peridot had used would last, but they had to do something.

Steven nodded and grabbed the unconscious man, slinging him across the lion's back.

"You guys want a ride?" he asked.

Harry hesitated. The patronus didn't look fully tamed; there was a certain wildness about its expression that he didn't like.

Still, with Hermione taking Steven's hand and pulling up onto the creatures back, he didn't want to look like he was afraid.

He allowed himself to be pulled up onto the creature's back. It didn't seem like there would be enough room, but Steven slipped impossibly into the creature's mane so that half of his body vanished inside.

Ron pulled up last, helped on by Harry.

Peridot woke, and stared at them.

Amethyst changed into an owl and flew over to her, whispering in her ear. It looked like they were arguing quietly.

"Take us home, Lion," Steven said.
Before Harry could see how the argument ended, the lion was moving.

It was strange feeling muscled bunch under him that couldn't actually be muscle, even though his experience with the gems suggested that that was all they were.

The lion roared again, and suddenly a portal appeared before them.

They passed through it, and unlike apportation, which felt like being squeezed through a small tube, or floo travel, which was strange in its own way, this was painless.

A moment later they were inside a large cavern.

It was lit by gently glowing crystals carefully set in various places, and there were huge piles of junk set everywhere.

Steven slid out of the lion's mane and he carefully pulled Black from the creature's back.

Harry slid off the creature and helped Hermione and Ron down. He turned and found the creature staring at him, its face only inches away from his own.

Steven was crying again, and he embraced the creature.

He held it until it finally vanished.

Sirius woke, his body aching in places it had never ached before.

He hadn't been Kissed yet, which was an unexpected blessing, but he didn't know where he was, and he couldn't move. It took him a moment to realize that he was tied to a chair.

A small creature with lime green skin was standing before him, shining some sort of Muggle light in his eyes. She was blonde, and he struggled to remember if he could recognize her species. It had been at least fifteen years since his classes in Hogwarts and he had no idea. She certainly wasn't a goblin or any kind of creature he recognized.

The light in his eyes contrasted with the darkness beyond so that he could see nothing outside the circle of light.

"He's awake," she said. She looked off to the side and said "I told you I didn't use too many tranquilizers. Wizards are tougher than ordinary humans."

Tranquilizers? From what Sirius recalled, too many tranquilizers could kill.

"Where am I?" he asked. His throat was dry and his lips were cracked. His time in Azkaban had made him used to physical deprivations, but he was thirstier than he could remember being. It might be a side effect of whatever Muggle chemicals were flowing through his body.

There was a strange taste in his mouth, one he couldn't identify.

"We're asking the questions here!" the small woman said. She leaned forward, "And if you don't answer them truthfully, we've got ways to make you talk."

There was a sound of whispering to the side, and the woman said, "And then we'll give you to Snape."

He shuddered involuntarily. Snape had no reason to love him and every reason to hate him, and from
every report he wasn't kind even to the people that he liked.

"What do you want to know?"

"Why did you betray the Potters?"

"I didn't," he said wearily. "I loved them."

"You were their secret keeper," the woman said. "And Voldemort found them."

"Everybody thought I was the keeper," Sirius said. He laughed bitterly. "I always thought I was cleverer than everybody else, so I thought switching places with Peter was the perfect trick on everybody."

"You admitted to the crime," the woman said, her eyes squinting suspiciously. "Why would you say you'd killed them if you didn't?"

"I DID kill them," Sirius insisted. "The moment I suggested Peter as the secret keeper, I was signing their death warrants."

A purple woman stepped into view. "So why didn't you run?"

She too was of no species he'd ever seen. However, in his explorations of Hogwarts he'd heard rumors of a purple woman.

"I deserved Azkaban. My friends were dead, and it was my fault."

"You escaped, though," the woman said, glancing off to the side. There more whispering, although Sirius couldn't make out what was being said.

"Why now?"

"I saw a picture in the paper of a family on holiday. There was a rat in the picture, missing a toe. I knew it was Peter, and I knew I had to escape."

"Is that enough?" the purple woman asked.

The whispering must have been affirmative, because a moment later the purple woman reached up at shut off the lamp.

Sirius blinked, suddenly blinded as his eyes struggled to regain their nightsight.

As his vision returned he realized that he was in a cavern somewhere, and that there was a distressing amount of junk gathered in huge piles scattered everywhere.

"I told you I could be scary," the small green woman was saying proudly to the purple woman. The purple woman was rolling her eyes.

Stepping into his field of vision was a young boy, smaller and thinner than he could ever recall being in his marauder days. He was the spitting image of his father.

Sirius had only seen him from a distance, but he'd have known him anywhere.

He blinked. "Harry?"

"It's OK," Harry said. "Let him go."
Sirius felt hands working the ropes around his wrists. He slowly pulled them around to his front and rubbed them.

Harry pulled out a vial. "I'm sorry we had to use this, but we had to be sure."

Veritaserum. It had to be.

"Lupin gave it to us," Harry said. "We tested it on ourselves just in case he was trying to trick us."

Harry looked suddenly embarrassed, and Sirius wondered what secret's he'd been forced to reveal until the sip of veritaserum he'd taken had worn off.

How many secrets could a boy his age possibly have? From what Sirius had heard he wasn't a prankster like his father had been, and he wasn't involved in anything deep and dark.

"Veritaserum doesn't always work," Sirius forced himself to say. "There are tricks of the mind you can use to defeat it."

"Do you know those tricks?"

"No," Sirius said. "But if I did, I could be lying."

"You wouldn't tell us about it if you were lying."

Sirius stared at the boy and wondered if he'd ever been this naive. If the boy had already known about occlumency then he'd have been suspicious. During the war, Sirius had learned more than he wanted about how to gain people's trust.

There was something in the boy's expression; dawning hope, fear...this was a boy who had been hurt over and over and didn't trust that things could ever be better. He still wasn't so lost as to have given up hope.

He could only hope that he didn't betray this boy's trust.

---

With everyone gone, it was eerily quiet. Sirius had spent a lot of time in caves lately, but never in one of this size. It was clear that it wasn't natural, but he couldn't tell what kind of tools had been used to make it.

According to Amethyst, the purple woman he was starting to recognize as a kindred spirit, they were under the forbidden forest. They were outside the Hogwarts wards, although part of the cavern was inside them. Furthermore, there was enough earth and stone over his head to shield him from the senses of the dementors.

They'd left him his wand, a gesture of trust that meant more to him than he could say, even if it wasn't actually his own wand. He'd have to go out of the country to have a new wand made that was attuned to him. Ollivander wasn't likely to overlook the Ministry propaganda.

It was maddening not knowing what was happening up above. There was no proof that his accusations were true, but he hoped that Peter at least faced an inquiry. Hopefully Remus could at least bring up enough questions to get him held.

There was a pool near one wall, where luminescent water dripped from the wall and created a black expanse of water the size of his old room at Hogwarts. According to the boy Steven the water was
fresh and good to drink.

The piles of junk scattered here and there had been carefully placed far away from the pool, leaving a gap of at least a hundred feet surrounding it. Most likely they didn't want any of the junk to contaminate the water, so it wouldn't hurt the boy.

Sirius approached the water, thirsty, and as he looked down into its depths he noticed a strange glow. Something seemed to be rising through the waters, glowing with a white glow.

It emerged from the water, and it took Sirius a moment to realize that it was a pearl. It was huge; at least two inches in diameter, and it was glowing with an inner light.

It floated slowly into the air and he took a step backward, reaching for his wand. He didn't want to offend his hosts, but he'd known Hagrid when he was younger, and what that man considered dangerous wasn't at all what the rest of the world did.

His hosts might be similar. He didn't really know them all that well, and while Harry's trust in them was encouraging, he really didn't know Harry. He couldn't simply assume that Harry would be a clone of his father, or even of his mother.

The light within the gem flared and grew into a white glowing silhouette. It flashed through a number of similar shapes before finally settling onto something new.

A woman floated in midair. She was slender and willowy, with pale, cream colored skin. Her features were sharp and clever and she was dressed like a ballerina.

Even in the Wizarding world, a floating ballerina emerging from a gemstone wasn't something one saw everyday.

The pearl was still there, on her forehead.

She simply floated for a long moment before opening her eyes.

They were unnaturally blue, eyes as blue as the sky on a perfect day. They were the kind of eyes a man could vanish into and never emerge from. The fact that her hair was peach pink and rose into a ridiculous style didn't matter in the least.

That it had been twelve years since he'd been around a human looking woman might play into his fascination, but Sirius had to admit that he'd always favored women with blue eyes.

The woman looked ecstatic for a moment, then she blinked. She was falling a moment later, but she spun in mid-air, flipping forwards seemingly in defiance of physics. She landed lightly at the edge of the water and before he could react, she'd pulled a spear from her forehead.

It touched his throat and he held himself carefully still.

"Where are Steven and the others?" she asked.

There was a look of panic on her face as she looked around and didn't see what she'd perhaps expected to see, or rather who.

"I'm not certain who you are talking about," Sirius said. "But this seems to be the residence of a purple woman and her green friend."

"Amethyst," Pearl breathed. She relaxed slightly. "If this is Amethyst's home, what are you doing
"I'm her guest," Sirius replied. "I don't know how she brought me here, but she did so at the behest of my godson and his schoolmates."

"Schoolmates?" the woman asked. "I can't have been gone that long then."

She looked around for the first place, then sniffed. "I should have known this place was Amethyst's. She keeps it like this just to irritate me."

"If you don't mind," Sirius said carefully, "Perhaps you could lower the spear."

"Maybe you should lower your...stick..." the woman said. She sounded confused, as though she had no idea what a wand was. Considering that she's appeared in a blaze of magical light, she couldn't be a muggle.

Sirius carefully slipped his wand back into his pocket and the woman's spear vanished.

"I'd better go find Amethyst," she said. "And I can't just leave you here. I only have your word that you're supposed to be here. For all I know, you could be some kind of a thief."

"I'm no thief, madam," Sirius said. He bristled. Of course, considering that he'd been on the run, with his hair shaggy and wild he probably looked like much worse than a thief.

But if he allowed her to pull him to the surface he'd be captured, then Kissed.

"But I am in hiding. Your Amethyst has offered me sanctuary, and if you reveal my location, I will have my soul devoured."

The woman hesitated, then said. "Maybe you'd better tell me a little more."

"If I may, madam," Sirius said. He slowly pulled out his wand, then turning deliberately away from her, he conjured a table and two chairs. They were only temporary constructs, transfigured from detritus nearby, but they'd do.

He glanced back at the woman, who was looking at his wand with a little more respect. "We really do need to talk."

"I hope he's all right," Steven said. "We had to leave him for a long time."

"It couldn't be helped," Amethyst said. "Snape was watching all of us like hawks, me especially. I think he still resents the time I switched his usual hair tonic with that stuff the Weasely Twins made."

"That was pretty funny," Steven admitted. "His hair was pink for three days and it was magicked so it looked normal to him."

"He'd had it out for me since then," Amethyst sighed. "Dude can't take a joke."

"I think he wasn't treated very nice when he was my age," Steven said. "Maybe you should be a little nicer to him."

"If he didn't keep trying to get people's souls sucked out, I might consider it," Amethyst said.

"You think he's OK to be in there with Pearl and Ruby and Sapphire?"
"Dumbledore put the strongest spells on the pool he could think of, and he's got pretty big mojo from what people say," Amethyst said. "Besides, I had Peri put some other traps on it. If he tries to get in, we'll know about it."

"You've added more piles since the summer," Steven said. The piles of junk around him were an ever growing project of Amethyst's.

"I've gotta have something to do when I'm bored," she said. "Besides, I found this room in the castle that's got piles of stuff way bigger than this."

They were both silent for a moment. Neither wanted to admit that they were stalling. Telling Sirius Black that Peter Pettigrew had already spoken to Ministry officials, who had chosen to believe his version of the story wasn't something either one of them wanted to do.

They couldn't simply wait until Harry got back either. He and Hermione and Ron were being watched very carefully.

It might be quite some time before Harry could return here, although at least Dumbledore had managed to push forward the story that Black had been after Pettigrew and not Harry. Pettigrew had been escorted off the premises, and the Dementors had been recalled to Azkaban.

The sound of male laughter rang out, and Steven and Amethyst stared at each other. There had been rumors that Azkaban had driven Sirius Black crazy. Even if he was innocent that didn't mean that the rumors weren't true.

Laughing loudly to oneself wasn't a good sign.

They approached more cautiously, but as they rounded the last pile of junk, Steven stopped.

"Pearl! Pearl!"

Sirius Black and Pearl looked up from a table where to all appearances they seemed to be enjoying a spot of tea. Sirius was sipping his tea while Pearl seemed to be only smelling hers.

Pearl looked up and there was a look of profound relief on her face as she sprang to her feet.

Steven rushed up and hugged her tightly.

"I didn't know how long it had been," Pearl said. She hesitated, then rested her chin on the top of his head and closed her eyes. "I was worried that you might already be grown up."

"It's been three years," Steven said. "It felt like forever."

After a long moment, Pearl pulled away. "What's this I hear about you going to magic school?"

Stephen grinned up at her. "Let me show you what I've learned."

"Well, at least Dumbledore managed to let me keep my position until the end of the school year," Professor Lupin said. "He said it was impossible to get anyone else this late in the term."

Snape hadn't taken the escape of Sirius Black at all well. He'd been convinced that Lupin had somehow orchestrated the escape despite knowing that he'd been unable to help anyone on the night of the full moon.
"You've been the best Defense professor we've ever had," Harry said. He scowled. Lupin was the only defense professor they'd ever had who'd actually taught them anything worthwhile. It was frustrating.

"It's so lame," Amethyst said. "So you have to be a wolf a few nights a month; I can be a wolf whenever I want."

"Nobody is asking you to teach either," Pearl said. She sniffed. "Although I have to question the judgment of any institution that hires you to help clean things up."

"I beat up on monsters and keep the kids in line," Amethyst said. She snickered. "I leave the cleaning to the house elves."

They were all in Amethyst's temple, except for Sirius Black. Black had fled, not wanting to cause trouble for the gems should Snape manage to convince the aurors to search the temple.

"I had to threaten the house elves to keep them from cleaning my piles," Amethyst said. "You'll be glad I did; if they ever got in here, you'd never get to do any cleaning again."

The gems seemed to be ignoring Harry, Hermione and Lupin. Of course, it had been a while since they'd seen each other, but it was almost as though in Pearl's eyes humans didn't rate.

Steven did, though.

His face almost glowed as he talked to Pearl excitedly. It occurred to Harry that this was the happiest that he'd ever seen Steven. It was almost as though Steven was shedding a layer of gloom and despair with each member of his family who was restored to him.

Given that he'd left his father behind, and the girl Connie, Harry doubted that he'd ever get to see a Steven as happy as he'd been in his old world.

Hermione was holding Steven by the arm and listening as Amethyst and Pearl bantered back and forth.

Peridot was sulking because Snape was refusing to help her in her research since her plan had failed to capture Black.

He'd been convinced that Harry'd had something to do with Black's escape, but he'd been unable to prove anything. Part of Harry had wanted to smirk at him, but he'd wisely protested his innocence.

Harry couldn't help but feel content, though. Although there were still two more months of classes, so far it genuinely looked like no one wanted to kill him this year. That was a vast improvement over previous years.

Furthermore, he now had a godfather. Even if he couldn't see Sirius Black right away, at least he now had family who didn't hate him. The feeling of actually being wanted by someone was new and unique. It left him understanding Steven's glow a little.

Was this what happiness felt like?

He had nothing to compare it to, but it had to be.

The pale woman walking up the stairs with Steven Universe was unfamiliar to Aurora Sinestra. It was unusual for an adult she didn't know to be in Hogwarts, much less at the top of the Astronomy
tower at midnight.

The way Steven was chattering at her suggested that the woman wasn't any sort of danger.

"Professor Sinestra!" Steven said. "This is Pearl!"

Sinestra blinked. This was another one of Steven's "aunts?" The luminescent Pearl on her forehead should have clued her in.

"She's the one who taught me all about the stars,' Steven said.

"Steven's been excited to show me all of his classes," Pearl said. She sniffed. "This seems much more appropriate than that horrible chemistry class in the basement."

"It's potions in the dungeon," Steven said.

From his expression, having Pearl in Snape's classroom hadn't gone well at all. Sinestra was sure she'd hear about it from the school gossip mill.

Still, looking at the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw faces around her, she realized that class had to go on.

"Today we are studying the moon," she said, clearing her throat. "With the revelation that one of our own professors is the victim of an unfortunate lunar based affliction, it's been suggested that we move lunar studies up a bit."

"I've been there," Steven said.

"You haven't been to the moon here," Pearl corrected him. "You've been to the one back home."

"It's pretty much the same thing," Steven said. "Except there's no gem base here. Amethyst helped me check."

Sinestra cleared her throat. "Only twelve muggles are known to have stepped foot on Earth's moon, and it is the only celestial body yet to be directly visited by men."

"Why can't someone apparate up there?" asked a pureblood Hufflepuff.

The Ravenclaws rolled their eyes but didn't bother to make fun of her, even as her muggleborn housemates looked embarrassed.

"Only the strongest wizards can apparate even to the other side of the planet," Sinestra said. "The distance to the moon is twenty times as far."

"Dumbledore could do it," one Hufflepuff said loyally.

A Ravenclaw finally had to speak up. "And what would he do when he got there? Explode from a lack of air?"

"I don't know where humans ever got a silly idea like that," Pearl said. "Your skin would swell up like a sausage, and the moisture on your tongue would burn away, but you'd be unconscious long before you noticed the radiation burns, and you'd suffocate before you'd freeze."

"It wouldn't be a good idea," Sinestra summarized.

The purebloods in the class looked slightly sick, although the muggleborns seemed fascinated.
"Have you really been on the moon?" one Ravenclaw girl asked.

"Not the one in this universe," Pearl said. "Although Steven is right; it looks much the same as ours."

A light appeared from the gem on her forehead, blossoming into a stark moonscape. Despite herself, Sinestra found herself leaning forward. This wasn't an area seen in any of the muggle photographs she'd studied.

"Humans call this the dark side of the moon, although its really no darker than any other part," Pearl began. "There's water on the moon if you know where to look, and this crater happened to have a particularly high concentration...it's useful for construction and saves the bother of carting water up from the planet."

Sinestra didn't say a word for the rest of the lesson, especially after Pearl showed them all how to find the tenth planet in the solar system.

Within the week she was officially working as an assistant to Sinestra teaching Astronomy. Unofficially, Sinestra was learning from her. Pearl had been to other worlds; other galaxies even. Furthermore, she'd spent the last six thousand years staring up at the sky studying it both in longing and in fear of what might be coming.

People had barely been learning how to write when this woman had started skywatching. Sinestra had emphasized to Dumbledore that it would be criminal to let that kind of expertise go to waste, especially as the woman was willing to work for free.

Only the fact that parents expected an accredited wizard to teach each course kept her from fearing for her job.

At least she wasn't having the kind of trouble Remus Lupin was. The Slytherins had staged a walk out at being forced to be taught by a werewolf, although it hadn't lasted long.

The man outwardly seemed unruffled, although it had to have bothered him. She admired his courage under the pressure he had to have been under. Weeks of howlers from parents and pressure from the Ministry had to be draining.

Most likely by the end of the year he'd be grateful to be rid of the post.

Exam week fell and still no one tried to kill Harry.

He managed to turn a teapot into an adequate turtle, although he heard Steven worrying that turning back into a teapot was hurting the turtle. Hermione tried to explain to him that it wasn't a real turtle, but Steven seemed dubious.

Considering that his "aunts" bodies were really made out of light, Steven's concept of real might be a little different than everyone else's.

The Astronomy exam went well. Even if Steven's "aunt" liked to go on and on, she was able to illustrate things in ways that made Astronomy class interesting. The idea that she'd actually been to some of the places they talked about was fascinating.

His other exams went well, except for potions. Snape had been more vindictive than usual since Sirius Black's escape, and he'd found a variety of ways to punish Harry.

It was the Defense final that was the most interesting though. It was an obstacle course in which
students had to deal with a variety of the creatures they'd talked about during the year, ending with facing a new boggart.

Steven Universe was asked to take the course last of anyone, in case there was a repeat of what had happened earlier in the year.

His aunts were waiting on the sidelines, covered with the spell to make the boggart ignore them. The last thing any of them needed was to make something that would scare a gem partially real.

Furthermore, all students had been cleared from the grounds, although much of the class watched from the windows. It felt like a strange repeat of the year before, except that this time Harry was one of the spectators instead of fighting on the ground.

Despite everyone's fears, Steven performed admirably. He tricked the Grindlow by transmuting snacks from his pocket into tasty fish. He didn't even bother to cast a spell on the redcaps, simply ducking and dodging them, leaping from hole to hole. He talked to the hinkeypunk but ignored it's directions.

When the boggart appeared everyone held their breaths. It appeared as a dementor, but as Steven pointed his wand and shouted, a woman's stockinged leg appeared from inside its robes, kicking up into the air as the dementor started waving a cane and singing something that was too far away to be made out.

He drove it back into it's chest with no problems.

Harry wondered if his life and Steven's were always going to be some kind of spectator sport. Some of his classmates almost seemed disappointed that some sort of disaster hadn't happened, although not the Hufflepuffs.

For once the rest of the school year went uneventfully. The Gryffindors finally managed to win the house cup by the skin of their teeth from the Hufflepuffs. The Hufflepuffs had taken it in good spirits; they'd won the previous two years and had proven to their classmates that they weren't just a group of duffers and weaklings.

It had been a close thing, though, especially when Dumbledore awarded points at the end of the year, but at least it didn't change the rankings.

With no more murder attempts outside the dementors, Harry considered it to be a successful year. With any luck, he'd be able to finish the next year out quietly, in peaceful anonymity.

Next year would be just about classes and Quidditch. Harry knew it in his bones.
Except for the nightmares, the summer had been uneventful. Harry sometimes had strange dreams about being in places he’d never been, with people he’d never seen. His latest nightmare, involving a strange baby creature, a snake and a Muggle had been particularly disturbing.

Fortunately, Ron and his father had gotten him an invitation to the Quidditch world cup. The tickets were free, apparently, garnered through the elder Weasley's political connections.

Steven and Amethyst were coming as well. Steven had sent a letter. Apparently he was able to afford to pay for his own tickets, as the basilisk money had been quite lucrative.

Harry's own portion of the money had more than doubled the size of his pile of gold in Gringott's. However, he hadn't touched the money for several reasons. First, it had to last throughout his time at Hogwarts and possibly beyond. His experiences at the Dursleys left him with a deep and abiding fear of going without.

Secondly, of he was to buy many new things, it would make the Dursleys suspicious. They'd want to know how he'd paid for everything, and the last thing he wanted was for them to learn that he had money.

So the offer from the Weasleys was a blessing.

He was sure he'd pay for what had happened when the Weasleys picked him up; Dudley shouldn't have been such a pig and he certainly shouldn't have taken candy from the twins. For the moment though he didn't care.

He had two weeks with the Weasleys and he was going to see the Quidditch finals. Furthermore he was going to get to see his friends. For the moment he wasn't going to worry about anything.

It was even worth getting up this early in the morning. It wasn't even dawn yet, and the air was chilly. Hermione looked particularly put out; she wasn't quite the Quidditch fan the rest of them were. She gamely tried to keep up though.

They all reached for the Portkey at once, and a moment later he felt as though he was being hooked from his navel. They were spinning, and he wondered why all Wizarding transportation had to be so unpleasant. Even brooms were less pleasant in bad weather than Muggle transportation.

A moment later they landed. Mr. Weasley had warned them that they would have quite a walk; it took a lot of work to bring one hundred thousand wizards to one place without alerting the Muggles, and so the Portkey sites were spread far and wide.

Having wizards apparate in on top of each other would be a nightmare. Splinching sounded bad enough to Harry without the risk of getting people's body parts mixed up. The last thing he wanted was to end up with someone else's arm or leg or something.

He was surprised then to see Steven Universe and Amethyst sitting a distance away on what looked like a Muggle golf cart.

It was a large one, with seats for six if the people in the back faced backwards.
"Hey guys!" Steven said.

Cedric quickly introduced his father, who seemed as excited to meet Steven as he had Harry before they'd left. Of course, after the basilisk incident last year and the troll incident the year before, Steven undoubtedly had quite a reputation among the parents at Hogwarts. Considering that Cedric was a Hufflepuff, even more so.

"They let you bring a golf cart?" Hermione asked.

Steven grinned. "Peridot built it out of spare parts. She thinks that the reason electronics don't work around Hogwarts is that there is too much magic there...layer after layer of spells cast in too small a space. She was hoping we could see if having this many wizards in one place would do the same thing."

"Hasn't done it yet," Amethyst said. "We've been making money for the past couple of weeks driving wizards around."

"Wizards really hate to walk," Steven said.

"Yeah...we've been making crazy money, even if some of the pure bloods won't give us the time of day." Amethyst scowled. "Some of them are really rude about it too."

Harry suspected that they were more offended by her than by the Muggle transportation device. Wizards didn't respect non-humans much. Of course, he had been known to be wrong in the past.

"So how much?" Hermione asked. She looked worried. "I didn't bring that much with me."

"We'd never charge you guys," Steven said. He grinned. "You guys are our friends."

"There's too many of us to ride on that though," Hermione said. "We'll have to make a couple of trips."

"A couple of wizards cast some spells to make it seat more people in return for a free ride;" Steven said. "You can't tell from the outside."

"That's illegal," Ron's father said, frowning.

"It's just temporary," Steven said. "The wizards who cast the spell say we'll be lucky if it lasts to the end of the finals."

Ron's father relaxed. "I suppose that's all right then. You haven't taken it out where Muggles might get hold of it, right?"

Steven shook his head. "We've spent the last two weeks right here. You guys will love it! They've got stands selling all kinds of stuff."

"Wizard food is pretty good too," Amethyst said.

As they loaded what possessions they had into the golf cart, Harry asked Steven where Pearl and Peridot were.

"Pearl doesn't care about Quidditch," Steven said. "If I was playing she'd come, but otherwise...and Peridot doesn't understand sports at all."

"I'm just here for the funnel cake," Amethyst said.
"I didn't think they'd have that here," Steven said, "But there are some American food stands over by the common."

They all loaded in, and although it was a tight fit, they all managed to fit inside. To Harry's surprise, Steven took the wheel.

"Amethyst's been teaching me to drive," Steven said. "After a couple of weeks, I've gotten pretty good."

"Wizards don't know about driver's licenses," Amethyst said. She hesitated. "I dunno if you need them for a golf cart anyway."

A pair of wizards dressed as Muggles approached them from the west.

One of them, dressed in a business suit walked up to the cart and peered inside. "It looks like you've got everybody."

"We've got everybody," Steven said. "I hope you enjoyed your coffee."

"You're a lifesaver," Basil said. "We've been here all night. You all need to get moving; we've got another party arriving in less than fifteen minutes and it looks to be a big one."

"I know the way to their campsite," Steven said.

"Get going, then," Basil said. He looked at Mr. Weasley. "Hello Arthur. Must be nice being off work."

Steven did something, and the engine purred to life. It was quiet, and they began moving right away.

"You should have seen the way that guy was dressed before I set him straight." Steven shook his head. "They both would have stood out like sore thumbs."

They drove a half mile across the moor. Although it was still dark, the carts headlights illuminated everything and the trip only took a couple of minutes.

"Peridot wanted to make this thing fly," Amethyst said. "I thought it'd be fun, but Snape kept talking about magical secrecy or something."

Considering that she was a purple woman Amethyst couldn't be that worried about secrecy.

They pulled up next to a stone cottage. A man stepped out and Harry was surprised to see that it was Mr. Filch, the Hogwarts caretaker.

"There used to be a regular person here taking all the camp reservations," Steven said. "But they were having to obliterate him ten times a day. We managed to talk them into sending him on vacation and letting Mr. Filch step in for him."

Filch scowled at Steven, but he didn't cause any problems, taking Mr. Weasley's money.

"Mr. Filch doesn't really like dealing with wizards," Steven murmured as Mr. Weasley stepped out of the vehicle in order to pay Mr. Filch. "But he likes the extra money, and this way he gets to go to the finals without anybody giving him charity."

A moment later Mr. Weasley was back in the vehicle.

Steven drove them between row after row of tents. Most of them were mundane looking, although
there were often tell tale signs that something wasn't normal. Most Muggle tents didn't have chimneys after all.

Occasionally there was a gaudy eyesore of a tent. One was three stories tall, and others were of unique, eye catching colors.

They pulled up to an empty site with a wooden sign posted.

"We'll have to put the tents up by hand," Mr. Weasley said, "Since we're out in the open around Muggles."

"I can show you how!" Steven said. "We've been doing it all week. There are wizards who'll pay you to put up their tents for them."

"Since when have you been so determined to make money?" Hermione asked. "I thought you had plenty already."

"We didn't want to go back to the bank," Steven said. He shrugged. "And Amethyst eats A LOT. Besides, after a while it got to be fun. A lot of wizards will talk to you while you are driving them or putting up their tent. It's a good way to get to know people."

Steven was true to his word, and he showed them how to put the tent up quickly and efficiently. The sun still hadn't risen by the time they were done.

When he stepped inside, his jaw dropped. It looked like a three room flat. It was bigger on the inside. Still, it would be cramped as there would be ten of them once everyone arrived.

"Me and Amethyst managed to get a tent just three rows over," Steven said. "If you want to come over there it won't be a problem."

"I'll move some of my piles," Amethyst said. "It won't be a problem at all."

Mr. Weasley started talking about making a fire, which Steven was excited about for some reason. Harry looked at Hermione and he couldn't help but grin.

Harry had never been on a family vacation, or any kind of vacation at all. This was something he could get used to easily. The game hadn't even started and he was already having a blast.

Mr. Weasley asked them to go get water. Steven, of course knew the location of a nearby tap, and he offered to take Harry and Hermione while the others gathered firewood.

"Want to learn how to drive a golf cart?" Steven asked.

The day just kept getting better and better.

Amazing couldn't begin to describe Harry's day.

There had been shops selling items he'd never seen on Diagon Alley, including foods that Steven had insisted that he try. Some were Wizarding foods from foreign lands that Steven had been trying for the past two weeks. Others were old favorites from Steven's homeland.

He'd particularly enjoyed the funnel cakes, although he wasn't the hot dog enthusiast that Steven was. Fortunately Amethyst was more than happy to eat anything they didn't want, including the
He'd bought Omnioculars for himself and Ron. Steven bought ones for himself and Hermione.

The game itself was nothing short of astonishing. It was Quidditch as he'd never seen it before. The Irish and Bulgarians played on a whole different level. It was brutal and visceral, and Harry loved every minute of it.

Most of all, it was a tremendous spectacle. It was everything magic was supposed to be.

Even now, sitting around the campfire with the others, Harry still hadn't come down. He felt exhausted and drained, but he still felt a little euphoric.

Steven was playing his guitar softly, with Hermione sitting next to him.

The guitar fit a little better in his hands than they had the year before. Steven had started on a Ukulele because it was smaller and easier to handle. Harry blinked as he realized that Steven was a little taller than he had been the year before. He hadn't noticed it because he'd grown even more than Steven had, but it was there.

He looked more like a second year than a first year. Harry wondered for a moment if that would affect his Quidditch game, but then he had to laugh at himself. Contrary to what Snape thought, Harry didn't only think about Quidditch.

He was glad for his friend. It wouldn't do for him to be a child forever, leaving his friends behind.

Of course, he might not ever age past adulthood, but considering that his aunts were functionally immortal, that wasn't terrible. Wizards were relatively long lived compared to Muggles, and even Muggles were living longer than ever before due to advances in medicine and science.

It was a beautiful evening, and Mr. Weasley had been right. There was something tremendously pleasant about sitting next to a campfire, it's heat washing over you and staring up at the stars.

Falling asleep would be easy.

The Irish were singing in the distance, riotous, joyful songs, but somehow the tune Steven was improvising seemed to work with them instead of against them.

Harry suspected that Mr. Weasley would have made them go to bed long ago except that he was enjoying the fire and the music too much. Given the ambient noise and the excitement of the day it would have been hard to have fallen asleep right away anyway.

They'd already argued the game back and forth, talking plays and possibilities. By now they'd all subsided into a companionable sort of silence.

Harry didn't want to go to bed, even though he knew he was very close to snoozing. Going to bed would mean that this magical day had ended, and he wasn't willing to do that any sooner than he had to.

It wasn't until the singing stopped that he knew something was wrong.

Steven frowned and his fingers went silent on the strings as they heard the sound of screaming in the distance.

Harry was suddenly wide awake. From the expressions on the faces of the others, they were too.
Something was wrong.

Amethyst had been lying on her side next to the fire; she sprang to her feat and launched into the air
in the shape of an owl. In the darkness her purple color wasn't obvious at all.

She wasn't gone more than a few moments when they heard the sound of people running. She was
back almost instantly.

"You all need to get out of here," she said. "There's a group of wizards attacking people and they're
coming this way."

"Leave the tent," Mr. Weasley said.

Steven dropped his guitar and reached into his pocket. He handed a set of keys to Harry.

"You guys drive to the woods," he said.

"What about you?" Hermione asked.

"The expansion spell has worn off," Steven said. "And if people are getting hurt I can't stand by and
let it happen."

"We're going to help the Ministry," Mr. Weasley said. The older Weasley's all agreed and they were
heading in the direction everyone was running from.

There was a flash of light in the distance and Harry could see a group of Faceless wizards coming.
They were holding someone aloft in the air.

"Is that Filch?" Ron asked, squinting.

The crowd cheered, and it was a raucous, ugly sound.

Harry clenched the keys in his hands, hoping he remembered everything Steven had told him earlier.
Before he could reach the cart, there was a flash of light from one of the wizards in the distance and
the cart exploded.

Harry's ears rang.

Lit by their fire, the cart had been too tempting a target.

"To the woods," Hermione said.

Steven had stopped, seeing them in trouble, and his face was obviously twisted with indecision.
When he saw that everyone was all right and on their way to the woods, his expression firmed with a
new resolve.

Harry ran with the others. He was shoved by an unseen figure, and he could hear children crying as
people ran past him.

In the distance he heard the distinctive crack of Amethyst's whip and sudden screams from the group
that was hunting them. Harry felt a certain vindictive pleasure in knowing that at least someone was
fighting back.

He heard Ron curse beside him as someone shoved him.

Harry grabbed his wand and cast a quick Lumnos. Ron was on the ground, having fallen over a tree
Hermione helped him to his feet and Harry let the light from his wand die out. There was no point in attracting attention any more than they absolutely had to.

He was glad they hadn't already gone to bed when this already started. It would have taken time to get dressed and get awake and from what he could see the crowd was thicker behind them than it was ahead of them. He'd have still been half asleep, and that was a state that led to mistakes being made.

They couldn't afford mistakes, not now.

He heard Ron curse again. "I've lost my wand."

Hermione's voice came from the darkness. "Could you have left it back at the camp?"

"It was in my pocket, I swear!" Ron said, his voice sounding thin and panicky.

Harry cursed and he cast a lumnos again. The light from his wand shone brightly even though he tried to make it as dim as he could. In the darkness it made them stand out far more than he would like.

They searched frantically, but the wand wasn't anywhere along the trail. In the light from his wand his friend's faces looked drawn and pale. They were both visibly frightened, and seeing it didn't make him feel at all more brave.

He finally let the light die out. They couldn't afford to leave it on any longer.

"We'll have to look for it in the morning," he said to Ron. Hopefully they'd still be around when morning came.

They set off down the path again. Somehow they'd gotten separated from most of the crowd; taken a turnoff in the darkness or gotten separated from the trail.

The only sound came from behind them and to the right. Harry spun and tried to stare into the darkness, but his night vision had vanished from the light. All he could see was pitch blackness.

"Hello?" he asked softly.

From the blackness they heard a voice speak out loudly and clearly.

"MORSEMORDRE!"

Something vast and green exploded from the darkness behind them, erupting through the canopy of trees and exploding into the sky.

It was a gigantic skull composed of emerald stars, with what looked like a snake protruding from its mouth like a tongue. It rose higher and higher in a blaze of green smoke, blotting out the constellations.

The darkness of the wood was suddenly gone. Everything was illuminated in a sickly green light, and from all around them came the sounds of screaming.

"Who's there," Harry said, his wand held out before him.

Hermione grabbed his arm. "Let's go, Harry!"
"What?" he asked.

"It's the dark mark," she moaned.

They heard the distinctive popping sound of apparition before they'd taken more than a few steps. Harry barely had time to register almost two dozen wands pointed in his direction.

"Duck!" he shouted, pulling Hermione to the ground with him even as the beams of multiple stunners flew by his head.

"Stop!" He recognized Mr. Weasley's voice. "That's my son!"

Ron had been hit by a half dozen stunners, and he was on the ground unconscious.

Mr. Weasley was suddenly beside them. "Harry, Hermione...are you all right?"

He was checking Ron quickly. He visibly relaxed after a moment; apparently Ron would be all right. Harry didn't know what the effect of being hit by multiple stunners at once were, but it didn't sound healthy.

"Which one of you cast the dark mark?" Mr. Crouch's voice cut through the air like a whip. He was striding toward them with a cadre of Ministry aurors at his back. Their wands were still outstretched.

Harry carefully laid his wand on the ground.

"We didn't do anything," he said carefully.

"Don't lie to me! We caught you at the scene of the crime!"

"They're just kids," one of the auror's muttered.

"You can check our wands," Harry said. "We didn't have anything to do with this."

"Did you see where the spell was cast from?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry nodded and pointed.

There was a mighty flapping of wings and the aurors turned their wands upward as a massive shape dropped toward them.

"It's just us, guys,' Steven said.

Amethyst had taken the form of a great bird and was carrying Steven in her claws. "You guys could have waited up a little. Not everybody can just warp wherever they go."

The aurors relaxed after a moment.

"We might have gotten one of them," Cedric Diggory's father said, turning to Mr. Weasley. "There were a lot of stunners pointed in that direction."

The aurors spread out and moved toward the grove with a grim sense of determination.

A moment later, Mr. Diggory returned with a small figure limp in his arms. It was Winky, Mr. Crouch's house elf.

"She had a wand," he said quietly.
As the man came forward, Harry couldn't help but stare. He glanced down at the fallen figure of his friend, and he felt his heart drop into his stomach.

The wand Mr. Diggory was holding looked exactly like Ron's wand.

"Wake him up," Mr. Crouch said harshly.

For a moment Harry thought he was going to kick Ron's body, but a glance at Mr. Weasley caused him to visibly rethink his action.

That the wand was the one that had cast the spell wasn't in doubt. Harry hadn't known that there was a spell to reveal the last spells cast by a wand, but the aurors certainly knew.

The expression on Mr. Weasley's face showed that he knew the wand belonged to Ron as well as Harry did.

"Ron was with us the whole time," Hermione said. "He couldn't have cast the spell."

Harry nodded emphatically. Ron never would have cast that kind of spell even if he'd known it. Harry hadn't even known the spell existed before tonight.

"He could have given it to my house elf and told her to do it," Crouch said. "I want to know why."

"We never met Winky before today," Hermione said indignantly. "Besides, she has a squeaky little voice and the voice we heard wasn't anything like that."

An auror finished casting a spell on Ron, who woke up groggily.

"Bloody hell, what..." he said before he realized that there was a circle of adult wizards standing over him with their wands pointed at him.

"Your wand was used to cast the Dark Mark," Mr. Weasley said carefully, glancing over at Mr. Crouch. "Can you tell me when you lost it?"

Ron goggled at his father for a moment, and it took him several moments to collect his thoughts. "I had it at the game for sure. I used it to check the leprechaun gold. I don't remember...I didn't know I didn't have it until we were running through the woods."

"So you didn't give your wand to my house elf and tell her to cast the Dark Mark?" Crouch asked, leaning forward.

"Why'd I do something stupid like that? With my own wand? I'm not an idiot." Ron looked offended.

"Winky could have stolen it from him," Cedric Diggory's father said. "She's about eye level to hit pockets and in the excitement of the game I doubt he'd have noticed."

Mr. Crouch's lips tightened as he looked at the prone form of his house elf still being held by Mr. Diggory.

"Wake her," he said grimly.

Mr. Diggory lowered her carefully to the ground, then pulled out his wand. He cast the spell to wake
her, and a moment later it was done.

She blinked for a moment, confused and uncertain as to where she was or what was happening. Slowly she pushed herself into a sitting position. She noticed Mr. Diggory's feet first, her eyes traveling up to look at him.

The moment she saw the Dark mark in the sky over his shoulder her eyes widened and she began to sob.

"Elf," Mr. Diggory said. "I am a member of the Department for the Control of Magical creatures."

She continued to sob, and began rocking back and forth where she sat. Harry glanced at Hermione, and then at Steven. The same expression was on all of their faces; pity.

"The Dark Mark was cast a short time ago, and you were found right beneath it with a wand in your hand," Mr. Diggory said sternly.

"I...I...I is not doing it sir," Winky gasped. "I is not knowing how!"

"You had a wand in your hand...you know it is forbidden," Mr. Crouch said. "Why should we believe you?"

"I is not using it to do magic sir. I is just picking it up." Winky's eyes were even larger than usual, seeming to take up her entire face.

"The spell was cast by the wand in your hand," Mr. Diggory said. "A stolen wand...a wand that you are forbidden to even hold much less use. Crime after crime..."

"Where would she have even learned the spell?" Mr. Crouch hastily. "Do you think I am in the habit of teaching my servants dark magic?"

"No..." Mr. Diggory said.

"Where did you find the wand?" Mr. Weasley asked Winky. His voice was gentler than Mr. Diggory's.

The elf looked around and pointed back in the direction she had come. "Over there. On the ground."

"The perpetrator could have easily used the wand then apparated away," Mr. Weasley said. With a glance at his son, he said, "Apparently they weren't idiotic enough to use their own wand."

"Did you see who did it?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Winky trembled and looked down at her feet. She shook for a moment before shaking her head.

"I know in the normal course of things that you'd keep her for questioning," Mr. Crouch said. "But I'd prefer to deal with this matter privately."

The man was a politician. Harry had heard Steven talk about the mayor in his hometown, a man who would lie and promise anything to anyone to get re-elected. Having his house elf implicated in this kind of crime would be the kind of black mark that his career couldn't handle. People would be whispering that he was secretly a death eater from now on.

Of course, if justice in the Wizarding world was truly impartial, Winky would be taken in for questioning even if she was innocent. It was possible that she knew something that either she wasn't telling or that she didn't realize was important.
The Durselys liked police procedurals and he'd listened to enough of them while locked in his cupboard to know how it was supposed to go.

He was surprised when Mr. Diggory grimaced and nodded.

"Don't worry. She'll be properly punished," Mr. Crouch said. He glanced at the miserable elf. "I told her to stay in the tent. I told her to remain there while I left and sorted things out."

He scowled. "I never would have believed that a house elf in my house would act so...reprehensibly. This means clothes."

"No master!" Winky sobbed loudly as she fell to the ground in front of Mr. Crouch's feet. "Not clothes! Not clothes!"

"She was frightened," Hermione protested. "She's afraid of heights and they were levitating people."

"I have no use for an elf who disobeys me," Mr. Crouch said coldly. "I have no use for a servant who has no regard for her master or her master's reputation."

Steven was standing next to Hermione. He glanced at Hermione, and then at Winky. His expression was hard to read in the darkness.

"Maybe there's another way," he said slowly.

Crouch stared at him.

"You know who I am, right?" Steven said. "Steven Universe. I've been helping the Ministry out with problems like the troll and basilisk at Hogwarts."

Mr. Crouch glanced at the aurors, who nodded. Steven was rapidly gaining almost the reputation and fame that Harry himself had. He was known as a monster hunter and fighter.

"The thing is, I'm really busy with all my schoolwork and fighting monsters and all that, and I've been having trouble keeping up with little things," Steven said. "I don't need a lot of help; it's not like I have a lot of things to spend my money on."

"Are you saying you want to buy my elf?" Crouch asked incredulously.

"You just said yourself that you can't trust her anymore," Steven said. He shrugged. "Maybe I'm not as picky."

Hermione stepped away from Steven, horrified.

"Elves don't come cheap," Mr. Crouch said. His expression hardened. "Why would I think a child like you could even think of affording a house-elf?"

"Have you seen the prices on basilisk parts lately?" Steven asked. He shook his head. "I don't have a lot to spend my money on either."

Crouch was silent for a moment, then leaned forward. "Let's discuss this in private," he said.

Winky was staring up at them both, still horrified.

Steven followed Mr. Crouch off into the distance.

"Is Steven about to buy a slave?" Hermione asked. She stared at Steven and Mr. Crouch talking in
the distance.

Harry sighed.

"Winky," he said. "It looks like Mr. Crouch is determined to get rid of you."

She started sobbing again.

"Would you rather be free or serve someone else?"

She stared at him for a long moments as though she didn't understand him. Her eyes were wide and unblinking, but at least she'd stopped crying.

"I know Steven," Harry said. "He's a good person. He wouldn't make you serve him if you'd rather be free."

"I...I...wants to stay with Mr. Crouch," Winky said.

"That's not going to happen," Harry said. "Your choices now are freedom or service with my friend Steven."

Winky cried for a moment. She'd fallen back to her knees and she stared at her hands. "I'd rather serve Mr. Steven."

"You just watch," Harry said. "He'll ask the same question before he makes the deal."

As it turned out, Harry was right.

It wasn't until later that Harry learned that Steven had bartered away half his fortune to save a single, miserable and forlorn young house elf.

When he asked Steven later about it, Steven expressed not a single regret.

"I can't just stand by and let somebody get hurt, no matter who it is," he'd said. "No matter what the cost, I have to protect people."

It didn't take Hermione long to forgive him.

Winky had been quiet and withdrawn since the deal had been finalized.

Steven held her hand in his and said, "It's all right. This is where I live when I'm not going to school in Hogwarts."

Since Pearl had revived at the end of the last school year, the temple had changed. It had been expanded over the past few weeks, and a great pool and fountain had been added. Half the temple was now spotlessly and meticulously clean.

"I'm not going to lie to you," he said. "This is going to be a challenge. You're going to want to clean Amethyst's piles, but that'll make her mad. Pearl likes to do her own cleaning...I think your best bet will be to help Peridot."

"What is this place...M...m...master?"

"It's your new home," Steven said. "With any luck, we'll make it a place where you can be happy."
The house elf looked dubious, but she followed him as he led her deeper into the interior of the temple.
After the chaos of the Quidditch finals, Harry was grateful to find that the rest of the summer was uneventful. There was no ride in a flying car to Hogwarts, no confrontation with Draco Malfoy...all in all, it was a peaceful and non-eventful start to the school year.

Steven and Hermione had argued on the train over Winky. Apparently the house elf was still depressed over having had to leave her former family. Hermione believed she would have been better to have been free, but Steven disagreed.

"The Hufflepuff rooms are near the kitchens," he said. "And I've spent a lot of time talking to the house elves there."

Steven spent a lot of time talking to everyone, so it didn't surprise Harry. Also, he'd somehow managed to get the house elves to make some American snacks, some of which Harry liked better than others.

"There are house elves at Hogwarts?" Hermione asked.

"Over a hundred of them," Steven said. "They're really nice. They make all the food and they clean up at night."

"The food..." Hermione said. Her face was pale. "It's made by slaves?"

"They like to do it," Ron said. "Servin wizards is their whole reason for living."

"Like your mother exists mostly to cook and clean for you?" Hermione asked. She was flushed and she looked almost sick.

Steven looked at her, concerned, but she scowled and looked away. He sighed.

"I've seen the way they treat Dobby," he said. "They look down on him...pity him. They think he's strange for wanting to be free."

Harry felt a moment of shame; it hadn't even occurred to him to ask how Dobby was doing in his job at Hogwarts. The house elf had always put a brave face on everything and he'd assumed that everything was good.

"Winky was about to lose the only family she'd never known. If you add being ostracized by her people on top of that...I don't think it would have been good for her."

"That's no reason to make her a slave!" Hermione insisted. Her voice was unusually loud.

"I told her that she could have clothes anytime she wanted," Steven said quietly. "She's only going to be with us as long as she wants to be with us."

"How's she getting along then?" Ron asked, with an uncomfortable look at Hermione, who was quietly fuming.

"I asked Amethyst to be careful about pranking her until she feels better," Steven said. "Peridot seems to like her; she keeps having to tell her that safety goggles and a fireproof apron for welding are not clothes. Pearl's been trying to mother her."
Ron wisely managed to change the subject to the upcoming Quidditch year at school, and Hermione had settled into an irritable silence, although Harry could tell that this wasn't the last they were going to hear about this.

Other than a few mysterious comments from Ron's older brother about the upcoming year, there had been nothing else notable about the trip.

This year, he noted, the professors' table was longer than it had been in previous years. Pearl was sitting at the table, although there was no plate in front of her. It took Harry a moment to realize that Steven had told him that she didn't like to eat.

Amethyst was lying on the table in front of her in the form of a purple cat.

The sorting process was by now old hat to Harry, although the poem the hat recited was different every year. He supposed that it had nothing to do all year except compose the poem.

Dumbledore was going through his usual first of the year speech, warning everyone away from the Forbidden Forest. Steven apparently didn't count; apparently his Watermelon soldiers had found a way to reproduce and they were now breeding in the forest.

Steven visited them occasionally, more often during the summertime. He'd as much as admitted that he hadn't told any adults about them except Hagrid for fear that the wizards would feel threatened by them.

Considering what they'd done to Professor Quirrell, Harry could understand Steven's worry.

Harry blinked as he realized that Dumbledore had said something different than he's said in any other year.

No Quidditch? For the entire year?!

For a moment Harry felt as though he was having a panic attack. He couldn't breathe and he felt as if his heart would beat out of his chest.

Quidditch meant freedom. It meant time away from books and studying. It meant popularity and success from something he'd earned instead of from something that had happened to him.

He forced himself to calm down. Hermione made fun of Ron for only thinking about Quidditch. Maybe he also was a little too obsessed.

Before Dumbledore could explain the reason why, the door to the Great Hall slammed open, and a hideous mockery of a man stepped into the room. Every inch of his skin was scarred. He was like a patchwork of a man, and parts of him were missing. He was missing part of his nose, his eye and one leg at the very least.

His artificial eye was rolling around in his head, and he stumped across the floor headed for the professor's table.

He stopped only for a moment next to the Hufflepuff table.

"Keepin out of trouble Universe?"

"Hi, Mr. Moody," Steven said.

"Good work with the troll and basilisk."
The man didn't say anything else. He just stomped his way up to the professor's table. Amethyst's reception of him was somewhat chilly; she hissed at him and turned into an owl and flew up into the rafters. As there was an illusion of the night sky above them, she quickly became invisible.

Dumbledore rose and spoke. "May I introduce your new Defense against the Dark Art's teacher, Professor Moody."

Normally all the students applauded a new professor, but this time nobody applauded but Dumbledore and Hagrid.

Steven looked uncomfortable and then he started clapping as well. The Hufflepuffs began clapping sporadically as well.

Moody didn't look as though he cared.

"Is that Mad-Eye Moody? The auror who tried to capture Amethyst?" Harry asked.

Hermione, who had been picking at her food and not eating it looked up and nodded. "Steven told me all about him last year. He seems rather...cautious."

"Looks like he hasn't been cautious enough," Ron said quietly. His eyes hadn't left the professor. "'E looks like he got torn apart by dogs and then sewed up again by a blind guy who didn't know what faces were supposed to look like."

"-the Triwizard Tournament will be held this year," Dumbledore said.

Harry sat stunned as Dumbledore explained the history of the Triwizard tournament. It wasn't until Dumbledore mentioned the reduced death toll that he began to have an uneasy feeling.

There had been attempts on his life every year at Hogwarts. This would be a perfect opportunity to try again.

He'd just have to do everything he could to avoid volunteering. While part of him couldn't deny the allure of winning the cup for Hogwarts, he'd spent too much time around Steven to realize that fame and glory weren't everything.

Hermione had once told him a story about Steven singing and dancing in women's clothing just so he wouldn't hurt a friend. Steven cared nothing about glory and fame, and yet somehow both seemed to come to him.

More importantly, Steven had helped him realize that he didn't have to do everything himself. He'd learned not to trust adults all throughout his childhood, but this was a different world. He didn't have to fight every battle alone.

He wasn't even the only boy-who-lived anymore. Technically Steven also fit the bill.

"-have to be seventeen years old."

There was a sense of relief at the knowledge that at least the attack wouldn't come from this direction, but paradoxically, he felt a sudden desire to participate. Being forced to play was one thing, but being told that he couldn't was entirely another.

He glanced over at Steven. Steven was actually old enough to participate, although he didn't have nearly the knowledge of spells students three years older would have. He hadn't signed up for apparition lessons, even though technically he could have qualified. He didn't have the magical
background, what with being three years behind everyone else his age.

Steven was watching intently, but he didn't look as though he was going to put his name into the hat, or whatever it was.

Dumbledore admonished them not to attempt to fool the age restriction, as there would be countermeasures in place.

The Weasley twins were plotting almost from the moment that Dumbledore stopped speaking, and Harry had a feeling that it wasn't going to go well for him.

As far as he could tell, Steven wasn't planning to try out, even though what seemed like the entirety of Gryffindor was, down to the youngest first year.

Had his time with Steven changed him? With the exception of Hermione, all the other Gryffindores wanted to forge blindly ahead.

Or maybe it was that little piece of Slytherin that the hat had seen within him as a first year.

For whatever reason Harry forced himself to realize that it was for the best. In the end, it would be nice to be on the sidelines for once. It would be good to go one year where he was the one who got to watch while other people put their lives on the line.

If he felt a little piece of envy for that unknown person, he forced himself to squash it. He had all the fame and glory he needed.

If a traitorous little part of him wished he could participate, he'd just have to enjoy the benefits. Without Quidditch he'd have more time to spend with his friends this year. He'd have more time to goof off and enjoy himself.

This was going to be a great year. He'd make sure that it was.

So why did he have an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach?

It doesn't sound very nice," Steven said.

Steven had managed to slip once again from the Hufflepuff table over to the Gryffindor table, and by this time no one even bothered to be surprised. He seemed to make his own rules sometimes.

"It was Draco...he deserved it," Ron said. He grinned widely. "A flying ferret! I'm never going to let him live it down."

"Draco attacked me," Harry said. "He deserved whatever he got."

It was true that Harry had just insulted his mother, but that only happened after Draco had insulted Mrs. Weasley. In retrospect, he should have been more mature about the whole thing, although he'd never admit it in public.

"It's not right to bully anybody, even if they're in the wrong," Steven said quietly. "Just because you have the power doesn't make it right."

"Professor Moody really could have hurt Draco," Hermione said. "It's a good thing that Professor McGonagall stopped it."
"Don't ruin it for me." Ron took another bite and shook his head.

Hermione rushed through her meal and started to get up from the table. Steven looked up at her and sighed, shaking his head.

"What's that all about?" Ron asked after she left.

"She's been spending all her time in the library researching non-human rights," Steven said. "She wants to free the House-elves."

"What? Is she crazy?" Ron stared at Steven like he'd grown a second head.

"No," Steven said. "I think she's right. House-elves really do deserve to have more of a choice in how they live their lives. They certainly deserve to be treated better."

"They like serving wizards," Ron said.

"Have you talked to Dobby lately?" Steven was quiet for a moment. "He still has problems from the way the Malfoys treated him."

"You own a house-elf," Harry pointed out.

"I shouldn't, really," Steven said. "I wouldn't if it wasn't what Winky thought she wanted."

"So why look so concerned if you agree with her?" Harry asked.

"She wants to free them by force," Steven said. "Whether they want it or not. That's not going to work very well."

From the look on Steven's face it was an argument he'd had with Hermione more than once. Hermione had been very upset about Steven taking over ownership of Winky, and they hadn't been as close recently. Mostly it was because she was always in the library.

Steven looked down at the table. "I've learned the hard way that forcing somebody to do something isn't right, even if you think it would make them happy."

"Is this the story where you put on a dress and sang in front of your hometown?" Ron asked. "I've already heard that one."

Steven shrugged uncomfortably. "At least I learned not to force what I want on other people."

"And how drafty a miniskirt is," Ron snickered.

"Like school robes are any better," Steven said. He shook his head. "The dungeons here are cold and drafty. I've actually had to wear shoes."

He said it like a house elf would say clothes. Harry snickered, wondering what it would be like to live somewhere that you could wear sandals for almost the entire year.

"Hey," Ron interrupted. "Did you guys hear my brothers talking about Moody's class? According to them, it's gonna be cool."

"That guy is cool," Harry said.

Steven looked a little dubious but didn't press the issue.
"Which curses are most punished by Ministry law?" Moody stared at them, his artificial eye whirling in a way that had most of the Hufflepuffs pulling away from him.

Steven didn't move; instead he watched the professor intently. No one had told him about what was going to happen in the class, but there had been something in the look in the eyes of those who'd had it that he didn't like.


"Can anyone name one of the Unforgivables?"

"The imperius curse," Hannah Abbott volunteered meekly.

The professor nodded grimly. He reached into the jar beside him and pulled out one of the three spiders inside.

Steven's stomach dropped as the professor pointed his wand at the spider and said "Imperio."

He made the spider dance, and most of the class laughed uneasily. Steven didn't. He simply sat stone faced.

"Universe doesn't think it's funny!" Professor Moody snapped. "You should be asking yourself what he knows that you don't."

Steven realized that everyone was staring at him suddenly.

"Why isn't it funny, Universe?"

"You could use it on a human just as easily as a spider," Steven said. "And there would be nothing they could do about it."

"Total control," Professor Moody said. "I could make it jump out the window or make it walk straight into a flame and there would be nothing it could do about it."

"Fortunately, we're not spiders. We're human beings, well, most of us," he said with a glance toward Steven, "and there are ways for us to fight off the curse. I'll be showing you how later in the term."

"Anyone know another illegal curse?" Moody asked after a moment.


"You need something a little bigger to understand this," Moody said. "Engorgio!"

The spider swelled until it was larger than a tarantula.

"Crucio!"

The spider made no sound, but from the way it was moving what was happening was obvious. Steven felt something splinter in his hands; his desktop cracked, even though it was at least a half inch thick of solid wood.

"Stop that," Steven said. He rose to his feet.

"Or what, boy?" Moody asked. His hand was still on his wand. "What will you do if I continue with this?"
Steven stared at him silently, tempted to say something, anything.

"That feeling you have right now is what any right thinking wizard would have. Unfortunately, there are a lot of wizards who aren't right thinking."

Moody pointed his wand at the spider again, and Steven tensed, but Moody only reversed the enlargement spell.

"And what's the last of the Unforgivables, eh?" Moody asked. His human eye hadn't strayed from Steven, although his mechanical eye looked all around the room.

"Anyone?" he asked.

No one spoke. They glanced at each other uneasily, and Steven could see the knowledge in everyone's faces about what was going to happen to the spider.


He pointed his wand, and the moment he did, Steven was already moving. He lunged over his desk, but he was too far away. There was a flash of green light and a moment later the spider was dead.

Steven didn't remember bringing his shield up, but it was in his hands.

Moody's wand was now pointed in his direction. "Sit DOWN!"

"You didn't have to do it," Steven said, staring at the spider.

"Didn't I?" Moody asked softly. "Is any of you ever going to forget what that looks like? Once you've seen it once, it's seared in your brain and you never forget it."

Moody shook his head. "This isn't a spell you can cast on a desk or a mannequin. It only works on something living. Knowing what this spell looks like can be the difference between being alive or dead."

Steven stood frozen.

"Sit down, boy," Moody said more gently. "We'll fix your desk later."

Slowly, reluctantly Steven returned to his desk.

"Not everyone already has experience with this spell," Moody said.

Steven's classmates looked at him, startled. Steven wondered for a moment how Moody knew; as an auror he probably knew all about Steven's encounter with Quirrell. Steven suspected that Dumbledore had kept quiet about him surviving the killing curse, though.

"Many wizards may never encounter it in their entire lives. But there is no way to know if you'll be faced with it until it happens. The only way to ward off danger is CONSTANT VIGILANCE."

Moody finally lowered his wand as Steven sat down.

"What I'm here to teach you isn't pretty. There's a reason the dark arts are considered dark. But knowing this could be the difference between life and death. It might not even be you who dies, but someone you care about. Can you take the risk and not know?"

Steven stared at Moody for a moment and after a long moment finally looked away. Despite his
feeling that something was definitely wrong here, Moody had a point. Steven would do whatever he could to protect everyone, and the more he knew the better he'd be at doing it.

He was no longer in a world where he could smash all his problems with a shield and hope they went away.

The Wizarding world was full of complexities that sometimes made Steven uncomfortable. He was confident though that it was possible to remain a good person and still protect the people you loved. It was simply harder.

Was it better to own a slave and have her be happy or free a slave and have her be miserable? Steven's gut told him that sometimes change needed to be made in increments, to give people time to adjust. Otherwise they'd fight back against even change that was in their own best interest.

It was at times like this that he wished Garnet had already reformed. Amethyst was of no help at all with deep philosophical questions, and Pearl tended to be too pragmatic.

Garnet had always had just the right touch when it came to moral matters. Sometimes Steven thought it was something she'd learned from his mother; other times he felt that it was something she'd always had.

As class ended, he left the room troubled. Normally he'd go to Hermione about these things. She'd taken on much of Connie's role in his life as the bright friend he could confide almost anything to, although she'd never quite developed Connie's easy sense of humor.

Right now though, Hermione was still preoccupied with the whole House Elf issue. She claimed to have forgiven him, but he felt like he'd disappointed her somehow.

Life was complicated enough; unfortunately Steven suspected that it was only going to get more complicated from this point on.

"SPEW isn't the best acronym," Steven said gently. "Why don't you just call it the Elfish Welfare Society...EWS?"

Hermione stared at him for a moment.

"You know Ron will just make fun of the name if you call it SPEW, right? Draco Malfoy will be worse."

Biting her lip, Hermione said, "If I change the name, will you join?"

"I agree with all of your goals," Steven said. "Elves SHOULD have more rights. I'm sure I can get Hagrid and Professor Flitwick to join as well. We've got a...unique perspective on nonhuman rights."

As half-humans, they were all allowed wands and full Wizarding rights, but there were hard liners who wanted to repeal rights even for them. Getting rights for fully non-humans would be a harder sell, as it wasn't just the hard-liners who wanted to see the current system maintained.

"How is Winky doing?"

"She's still depressed, but she's doing better," Steven said. "Peridot is teaching her how to build things and Pearl won't let her have any butterbeer. Apparently it's terribly alcoholic for house-elves.
The house-elves here treat her much better than they treat Dobby."

Dobby was still ostracized by the others, although he didn't seem to let it get him down. He was a proud elf, and he was happy about his freedom. The fact that he didn't seem to be ashamed at all distressed the other elves and made them avoid him.

"You still won't give her clothes," Hermione said disapprovingly.

"All she has to do is ask," Steven said. He hesitated. "She seems to think it's a threat instead of a promise though, so I try not to bring it up much."

Hermione stared at him for a moment, then smiled. She patted him on the hand. "You're a good person, Steven Universe."

If her hand stayed atop his longer than normal, neither of them noticed.

It was supposed to be an unforgivable curse. Yet somehow Professor Moody had justified using it on Steven's classmates and nobody had objected.

Whether it was because Moody intimidated most of the Hufflepuffs or because of his admonitions that knowing how to resist the curse might save them in the long run, Steven didn't see anyone complaining.

They danced and sang silly songs and did all sorts of things that they would never do, and not one of them resisted for an instant.

Moody was going by alphabetical order, so he was the last in his class to step up and volunteer to have his mind taken over.

When Moody pointed his wand and spoke the incantation, Steven realized that it wasn't anything like giving up his will during fusion.

He'd never been able to completely vanish into a fusion like Sapphire and Ruby or the others. His mind had always partially been there, as though he was holding himself back. It might have been because he wasn't fully a gem, or because his partner wasn't a gem at all.

It might simply be that he'd never stayed fused long enough for both sides to vanish into each other.

Possibly it was that he'd always valued Connie so much that he'd never wanted her to disappear, even into him.

This was different. It felt good; he felt like he was floating and all of his troubles were melting away. The pain of leaving his father and Connie behind, his worries about Garnet, Ruby and Sapphire, his fears that he wouldn't be able to protect his new friends or live up to the Gems expectations that he'd match his mother...none of it seemed to matter.

He heard Moody's voice telling him to dance over and over.

He actually liked to dance; next to singing it was one of his favorite things. But thinking about dancing made him think about Connie, and her shyness and fear of dancing in front of people. It made him feel sad, and he could feel the pleasant feeling washing away already.

Moody shouted the command. "Dance!"

He could feel the pressure of the command, but it was muted and he didn't feel like doing it at all.
Instead he simply shook his head as though to wash out the cobwebs and he turned and headed back for his desk.

"Handy, that," Moody said quietly. He was looking at Steven with an odd and not entirely friendly look in his eye. "Magic just sloughs off you. If you've got an advantage like that, you should use it."

It wasn't completely true. Magic affected him; it just didn't affect him as strongly as it affected everyone else. Some of it was an act of will.

The thought that Moody would have been more complimentary if he'd been fully human came as the all the worries that had vanished when the spell hit returned all at once. Steven's thoughts were black for the rest of the period. Fortunately that wasn't much longer.

The other schools certainly knew how to make an entrance.

The gigantic flying horse drawn carriage didn't have to be the size that it was; given Wizarding tents they could have easily arrived in a normal sized carriage and emerged like clowns from a clown car. Instead the whole production was designed to impress.

Hermione glanced at Steven. He seemed to love the drama.

He wasn't the only one. All of the boys seemed entranced as the girls from the other school made a huge production of their arrival. One girl in particular seemed to draw the eye of every male in the the Great Hall and Hermione forced herself not to scowl.

Boys were too impressed by superficial things. After her experience with Lockhart during her second year she'd learned that physical beauty wasn't very important. Lockhart had been...impressively attractive and she had to admit that her objectivity had been compromised when he was around.

Still, she'd learned her lesson two years ago and she would have thought that the boys would have picked up at least something in the past two years.

At least Steven didn't seem enthralled. She glanced at him. He loved the spectacle, but he was watching the coach and the extraordinarily tall Headmistress and the dance moves. He wasn't drooling over one girl like everybody else.

"Look," Steven said. He pointed toward the lake excitedly.

The ship rising up from the depths was, if anything more impressive than the coach had been. Hermione took a moment to wonder how it had arrived if it wasn't by apparition. Hogwarts was supposed to be warded against that kind of thing.

Maybe part of the lake stretched out past the wards, much like Amethyst's and Pearl's underground temple.

She'd been surprised how much she liked Steven's newest aunt. Pearl actually knew what a work ethic was and she knew the importance of learning. As an astronomy teacher she was a revelation.

It was one thing to hear about what ancient astronomers in Egypt had thought; it was entirely another to meet someone who had actually been there and talked to them up close.

If Pearl had been a little cool and distant toward her, Hermione could understand. In her mind she'd been gone for an instant and suddenly Steven had a new set of friends. Steven had told her that she had always been the one least interested in humans anyway.
She'd bonded with Steven's friend Connie, but that had taken a lot of work and sword lessons.

Hermione blinked. Harry and Ron seemed excited about one of the boys emerging from the ship. It was Victor Krum, the professional Quidditch player.

Hermione forced herself not to sigh. She'd be lucky to get any work out of either of them for the entire year. All either of them could think of was Quidditch.

Steven liked it too, but he at least seemed to have a remarkably rounded lifestyle. He played Quidditch, but he also played in a band. He studied and he spent a lot of time with pretty much everyone. Hermione thought she'd even seen Steven petting Mrs. Norris once, under the distrustful gaze of an impatient Mr. Filch.

Maybe the TriWizard tournament would give them something to think about other than sports for once.

"Anyone interested in becoming champion will have twenty four hours to put their name on a piece of paper and put it into the cup," Dumbledore said. "At the end of that time the cup will determine who is the most worthy to participate."

"You should put your name in," Cedric Diggory said.

Dumbledore was talking about the precautions against underage wizards trying to apply.

Steven blinked. "I'm only a fourth year."

"You beat a troll with a door and you killed a basilisk in front of the whole school. What better champion could the school have?"

"I had help with the basilisk," Steven said dryly. "And I'm sure the challenges will require all sorts of spells that I haven't learned about yet."

"If you can't handle it, the goblet won't pick you," Cedric said. "I'm going to apply."

"Then why would you be asking me to put my name in?" Steven asked.

Cedric smiled. "I don't want to make it if I'm not the best candidate. If I am, I'll be proud to serve even if it's dangerous."

Steven frowned. The thought of putting his name in the Goblet had never occurred to him, but now that it had, it was curiously alluring.

What if he really was the best candidate? Dumbledore was even now talking about how dangerous the tournament was.

Would he be able to live with himself if someone else was chosen because he didn't apply and they died?

He was a lot more durable than an ordinary human. As far back as when they were fighting whatever monster it had been that had possessed his breakfast, he'd fallen fifteen feet onto his head and it hadn't bothered him at all.

A fall from a similar height had given Neville a broken arm. If he'd fallen on his head he might have died. Even with accidental magic making Wizards a little more durable than Muggles, they weren't nearly as durable as he was.
Plus, it might be fun. It might be a pleasant change from helping Harry survive all the assassination attempts that seemed to crop up on a yearly basis.

"We can apply together," Cedric said. He smiled widely.

"I'll think about it," Steven said.

Hermione scowled.

Of all people, she'd have thought that Hagrid would understand what she was trying to do. According to Steven he'd faced more than his share of prejudice and injustice because of being a half giant. He should understand the need for non-humans to have equal rights.

Yet somehow he'd been brainwashed like all the other wizards into believing that House Elves actually wanted to be slaves.

Even Ron and Harry believed that, and Harry had been raised by Muggles and should have known better. Harry should know better than anyone the kind of life that house-elves lived; from what he'd told her, it sounded like he'd been treated like one by his aunt and uncle.

House Elves like Dobby and Winky were being abused every day, and it bothered her that she was the only one who could see it.

Only Steven seemed to agree with her even in principal, and he actually owned a house elf! He seemed to believe that change couldn't be forced on people and that they would resist if you even tried.

She could see his point, sort of, but the problem with gradually convincing people to not be slaves any longer was that they continued to be slaves!

Still, he'd done what he'd done in a spirit of compassion and so she couldn't entirely fault him for it.

Compassion was the one overriding quality that described Steven more than any other. More than being strong or friendly, he was kind. It was one of the things she most...liked about him.

It was going to get him killed.

He'd come to her the night before and asked about putting his name in the goblet. She'd counseled against it; for all of his power and despite his true age, he was only a fourth year. He didn't have the magical knowledge or the skill to take on tasks designed for sixth or seventh years.

The Tournament had killed people in past years. Hogwarts a History had noted that even the judges had been injured by contests in the past.

She'd talked about all the people who had died; she'd taken time off from her Elvish Protection Society research to look up the tournament and what she'd found hadn't been encouraging. There really had been a lot of deaths in the past.

The more she'd tried to argue about the risks, the more adamant he had become. He'd worried that if he didn't participate that someone else would be killed and then he wouldn't be able to live with himself.

"I'm not going to lose anybody else," he'd said.
As to arguments about being only a fourth year, he'd shrugged them off. If the goblet didn't think he was the best candidate, it wouldn't pick him.

His conscience would be clear.

Now, with the selection about to begin, Hermione couldn't help but have a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. The other Gryffindors had kept trying to put their names in the Goblet even if they weren't old enough, as though they didn't understand how dangerous it really was going to be.

The Weasley twins still had their beards from their attempt to circumvent the age line.

She looked at Steven sitting at the Hufflepuff table nearby. He didn't looked concerned at all. If it had just been courage, there was no question that he would have been a Gryffindor.

"The champion for Durmstrang will be Victor Krum," Dumbledore announced, holding up the paper for all to see.

No one seemed surprised; even Hermione would have been able to have predicted that, and she didn't follow Quidditch closely. Her only knowledge was what she absorbed by osmosis from Harry and Ron's interminable conversations about the sport.

Her stomach clenched again as Dumbledore held up the next slip of paper.

Fleur Delacour.

Of course it would be her. She wasn't fully human, not that that should matter. Still, it explained why the boys all followed her as though she was a particularly fresh piece of meat and they were wolves.

At least Steven and Harry both seemed immune.

The final piece of paper came from the Goblet and Hermione closed her eyes. Let it be a seventh year...anybody other than Steven.

"The champion for Hogwarts will be Steven Universe," Dumbledore said.

Hermione kept her eyes closed for a moment as the applause began, then forced herself to open her eyes, smile and applaud. It wouldn't do for anyone to think that she didn't approve of Steven as a candidate.

The applause was thunderous; every single Hufflepuff had jumped to their feet screaming and stomping their feet. What surprised Hermione was that it wasn't only the Hufflepuffs. Her own house was just as excited, and most of the Ravenclaws were the same.

What shocked her was that almost a quarter of the Slytherins were applauding.

Steven had made a lot of friends, and even the Slytherins wanted Hogwarts to beat the other schools. What shocked Hermione was that everyone seemed to think that Steven would actually be able to do it.

While he'd beaten a troll by himself and a basilisk with help, there was no guarantee that the trials would be something he could simply fight his way out of.

She'd have to help him if he was going to have any chance at all.

Dumbledore was giving a speech about supporting the school candidates to their best ability when something happened that shocked everyone.
The Goblet turned red once more, sparks emerging, and a final slip of paper appeared.

Dumbledore looked as shocked as anyone as he reflexively pulled the paper out of the air. He stared at it for a long moment before he spoke.

"Harry Potter."

Hermione froze for a moment as she turned to state at the boy sitting beside her.

Was he an idiot?

At least Steven was superhumanly strong and durable. He had an unbreakable shield and a bubble that was almost impervious. There were reasons that he'd thought he might be a good candidate, and even if Hermione didn't entirely agree, she had to admit that there were some valid points.

Harry had none of that. He didn't know any more magic than Steven really, and his body was entirely soft and squishy.

Steven might get hurt in the tournament, but Harry would die.

"Somebody's trying to kill him again," Steven had said. "It's obvious."

"He wanted to put his name in the goblet just like everybody else," Hermione argued.

It was true that Harry had claimed that he hadn't been the one to put his name in the cup, but no one believed him. Hermione hadn't and she knew Ron hadn't. Ron was still stewing that he hadn't had his own chance to trick the cup.

"Do you really think that Harry is cleverer than the Weasley twins?" Steven asked. "It'd take really sophisticated magic to fool the Goblet and the wards Dumbledore put up, and Harry doesn't have it."

"He might have talked one of the older students into doing it," Hermione argued.

"Who?" Steven asked. "If there was a Seventh year Hermione Granger, or even a Tom Riddle I might agree with you. But is there anybody in school who's that talented?"

Hermione frowned. There were very few students who'd even remotely have a chance of beating Dumbledore, unless he'd intentionally made the spells easy to circumvent.

The few who might even have a chance were mostly in Ravenclaw and none of them seemed likely to help Harry. Either they'd be uninterested, or they'd want the spot as champion for themselves.

"It had to have been an adult," Steven said.

"Do you think it was Dumbledore?" Hermione asked quietly.

She'd had years to think about the traps Dumbledore had set up in their first year to protect the stone. While Steven had steamrolled through them with his Watermelon soldiers, Hermione had worked out ways she could have beaten all of the traps with only the spells she'd known as a first year.

Lockhart had done a lot to damage her trust of authority. She'd been so impressed by him; not only was he really good looking, but he'd been in all the books.

It had been the first time books had failed her and that she'd realized that just because it was written in a book didn't necessarily mean it was true.
The more shocking thought had only occurred to her a year later. If what books said weren’t necessarily true, then what adults said might not be either.

She'd talked to Peridot a couple of times, and she'd been told about the spying within the ranks of the gem empire. Supervisors would pretend to be on a subordinate's side and then would betray them when they were no longer useful.

Steven didn't look as shocked as she would have hoped. He shook his head, though.

"Dumbledore would have found a way to make Harry the only champion if he wanted him up there for some reason," Steven said. "Since he's the one in charge of the Goblet. Whoever did it had to work around Dumbledore's magic, not with it."

It wasn't a perfect piece of logic, but it had a ring of truth.

"So who?" she asked.

Steven shook his head. "Who tries to kill Harry every year?"

"So You-Know-Who," Hermione said. "But he didn't do it himself. I haven't seen anyone wearing turbans or even large hats, so it's not likely that he's hiding in the back of someone's head again."

"I've seen some ladies with hair that was big enough on Diagon Alley," Steven admitted, "but not nearby."

"So he has to have someone working for him, someone who put the paper in the hat and was a good enough wizard to have jinxed the Goblet without getting caught."

Steven sighed. "I'm starting to feel like it wouldn't be Hogwarts without Harry's annual death threat."

At the rate he was going, Harry would be lucky to make it seventh year. If things didn't go well with the Tournament, he might not make it to the end of the term.

She was going to have her hands full helping them both.
There had been ugly rumors spreading about Harry ever since the Goblet had revealed the Champions. It was widely assumed that he'd found some way to cheat his way into the contest, with Ron being the loudest proponent.

There'd even been thoughts of having pro-Steven buttons made. It was a plan that had died before it really got started because it had originated in Slytherin and they were conflicted about his only being half-human.

Despite this, people found ways to make their displeasure known. Harry had supporters in Gryffindor, but outside his own house, only Steven seemed to support him at all. Although Steven insisted that it wasn't Harry's fault, everyone assumed that he was just too nice to say anything different.

At least the Champions had kept the arguments among the judges to themselves. It hadn't just been over Harry's participation either. The other two schools had been suspicious of Steven's appearance, given that he looked much too young to be participating in the contest.

Durmstrang had wanted him disqualified for being half-human, but Beuxbatons had protested vehemently, given that their own champion was part Veela and their headmistress being part giant. The discussion had gotten heated, with ugly accusations of racism that they'd been warned against spreading.

Viktor Krum had rushed to assure both Steven and Fleur that he wasn't prejudiced against non-humans. His assertions that some of his best friends were non-humans seemed a little dodgy, but the other champions assured him that they didn't blame him for his headmaster's positions.

Harry was only thankful that Hermione hadn't heard about the argument. She was angry enough about the house elves; learning that Steven had been mistreated would have inflamed her beyond all reasoning.

Now they were being called away from class for photographs. Snape had been reluctant to let him go, but had finally given in.

Because of the delay, Harry was the last to arrive.

Both Viktor Krum and Fleur were standing near Steven. Both of them seemed entranced by whatever it was that he was saying. Behind him stood Pearl, his "aunt."

She'd always scared Harry a little. In astronomy class she was always just a little too intense; she made Harry suspect that she'd outdo Hermione in obsessiveness and Hermione was scary enough on her own.

Now, although she stood and smiled tolerantly, there was a tension in the way she was standing that worried him.

It was a small classroom; Ludo Bagman was sitting at one of five chairs and he was talking to a witch Harry had never seen before.

He stood as Harry entered and smiled broadly. "At last, our fourth champion! Don't worry, boy, it's
just the wand weighing ceremony. The other judges will be here in a moment."

"Wand weighing?" Harry asked.

"Have to make sure your wands are in tip top shape," Bagman said. "Dumbledore is up with the expert and he'll be down in a minute."

The witch next to him cleared her throat.

"Oh!" Bagman said. "This is Rita Skeeter. She's doing a small piece on the contest."

Skeeter smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "It might not be that small of a piece. I wonder if I might have a word with Harry before we start?"

Harry stared at her for a long moment, but as she put her hand on his arm and made as though to pull him away, Pearl's voice cut through the chatter.

"I don't suppose you have his guardian's permission to do an interview, do you?" Pearl asked. Somehow she'd moved from being behind Steven to standing next to Harry without his even noticing.

"I'm sure they wouldn't mind," Skeeter said. Her smile had turned into a grimace. "Harry here is a national treasure. Everyone is just dying to know what he thinks about all of this."

"Harry's a minor," Pearl said flatly. "I understand that Steven is legally an adult in the Wizarding world, but Harry doesn't have the legal right to consent to giving an interview."

"His guardians are either Muggles or on the run for mass murder," Skeeter said. "They are hardly available to give permission."

"Then you'll just have to rely on his public statements," Pearl said triumphantly.

From the look of it they'd argued earlier, presumably over Steven being interviewed. Given that Steven was legally an adult, Pearl might have lost the earlier battle, especially given her look of vindictive satisfaction now.

Steven reached them and pulled Harry away.

"Don't go anywhere with her," he said quietly. "She asks insulting questions and her pen doesn't even quote you right."

Harry glanced at the woman and shuddered. His reputation was already damaged enough without being misrepresented and misquoted.

"She wrote an article protesting Amethyst being put on as assistant groundskeeper at Hogwarts," Steven continued. "And another complaining about Pearl assisting in Astronomy classes."

"Good thing Amethyst doesn't get the paper then," Harry muttered.

Steven nodded emphatically. Although the gems didn't believe in hurting humans, Amethyst was less civilized than the others and she'd be more likely to retaliate.

Dumbledore and Ollivander arrived, and the weighing of the wands ceremony began without further problems, even if Skeeter and Pearl did glare at each other whenever they thought the other wasn't looking.
Steven's wand was the largest of all the wands even though he was the smallest contestant. Fourteen inches, hazel with a phoenix feather core, pliant and supple.

Harry's by comparison was eleven inches, holly with a phoenix feather core, also nice and supple.

Harry was vaguely relieved that Steven's wand was as grubby as his was. The other two contestants had clearly polished their wands and taken much better care of them. Both his and Steven's hand fingerprints.

Steven's wand even looked like it had an orange substance that Harry recognized as the leavings from Cheetos. Steven had somehow managed to find someone willing to import them from America. Apparently this world didn't have "Chaaaaps," which was Steven's favorite brand from his homeworld. He seemed to think Cheetos were a good substitute.

The dirty look Ollivander gave Steven over his wand's condition made Harry feel a little better about his own wand.

The scathing article Rita Skeeter wrote about Steven made Harry relieved that he hadn't given an interview. The woman barely said anything about the tournament itself, instead focusing on smearing Steven, Harry and the gems.

She'd somehow gotten quotes from students from the other two schools suggesting that Steven should have some kind of handicap for the tournament.

The fact that his magical education was two to three years behind that of the other champions never came up. Instead the woman talked about all of Steven's unfair advantages.

What surprised Harry was that she hadn't gotten anyone from Hogwarts to say similar things, not even the Slytherins.

Of course, the Slytherins wanted Hogwarts to win as much as anyone, and they probably didn't want Amethyst pranking their entire house if anyone said anything.

Rita Skeeter had even brought up the theory that Steven wasn't a child at all, that he was actually thousands of years old and should be disqualified based on being older than the entire audience combined.

How she'd gotten that information Harry didn't know, but it was worrying.

Steven's worries about being his own mother wasn't something he shared with just anyone. It was something he shared only with his closest inner circle of friends.

He thought of accusing Ron; Ron had been known to make foolish mistakes when he was bitter or jealous. However, Ron had never seemed jealous of Steven. Whether it was pity for Steven having lost his entire world, or because there was no way to compete with someone who wasn't really human in the first place Ron had never seemed to even consider competing with him.

Harry, on the other hand seemed to be the target of every bit of envy Ron had. Whether it was Harry being richer or more famous or having an invisibility cloak, Ron always seemed to want what Harry had.

He never seemed to realize that Harry was jealous of him. Harry would have traded places with him in a minute. Having a large family that loved him was something Harry could only dream about. Having the freedom that came with anonymity...Harry could barely imagine it, even though he'd
only known he was famous for a few years.

Not having someone trying to kill him on a yearly basis would be worth almost all the rest of it.

Ron was being a stubborn arse and for once Harry was determined not to be the one who went to apologize. He hadn't done anything wrong, and until Ron was willing to admit that he hadn't put his name in the Goblet, he wasn't going to talk to him.

Both Hermione and Steven tried to make peace between them, but neither Harry nor Ron were willing to budge. Because Harry wasn't spending all his time with Ron, he was spending more time with Harry and Steven in the library, and with Steven listening to his band practice after hours in the music classroom.

It wasn't the same. He liked Hermione, but she was quiet and didn't have Ron's sense of humor. Steven was at least as funny as Ron, but he was pulled in so many directions that he simply didn't have as much time to spend with Harry.

Even if he had been less busy, he was in another house, which limited their friendship. There couldn't be any after curfew discussions before falling asleep, no late nights together laughing over Draco's latest indignity.

Steven was a very good friend, but he couldn't match what Ron had been to Harry.

Harry decided that since thinking about it only upset him, he would start focusing on the first task. He wasn't allowed to get help from teachers, but that didn't include other students and other champions. He and Steven had been discussing possibilities, and Hermione had been telling them about tasks that past Tri-Wizard champions had faced.

Still, it wouldn't do to allow himself to get too worked up about it.

He comforted himself with the thought that the creators of the contest weren't crazy. These had to be tasks that could be accomplished by sixth and seventh year students. It wasn't as though they were going to have to slay a dragon or anything.

The first task really did involve dragons. Harry was in over his head and he knew it.

Amethyst had gotten Peridot to spill the beans. Whereas teachers weren't supposed to help the champions, Peridot wasn't actually an employee of the school and could technically help all she wanted.

No doubt if Harry or Steven showed up to a contest in some sort of armored Mecha everyone would scream foul, even assuming the contest was held far enough outside the wards that it would actually work. Still, Amethyst wasn't one to follow the rules and she certainly wasn't going to leave Steven unprepared.

Steven, being who he was made sure all the champions knew what the first challenge involved. Undoubtedly he'd decided that leaving anyone in the dark would make it more likely that someone would get hurt, which was something he couldn't abide.

He doubted that any of the other champions would have been as generous, but Steven was who he was.
Steven had even tried to brainstorm strategy with him. Any other person, and Harry would have assumed they were trying to get an advantage over him, but Steven simply cared about everyone. They were friends.

Unfortunately, Steven didn't know any more about magic than Harry did. He was actually a little less proficient than Harry in Defense class, although he more than made up for it with his ability to dodge spells faster than anyone.

Hermione was more helpful, but even she was only a fourth year. There was a limit in how much information she could cram into her head and more importantly into his. Relying on spells that he'd just learned recently was a good way to get hurt or killed.

Facing a fire breathing dragon wasn't the best time to try to remember whether it was swish or flick or to try to remember a tongue twisting pronunciation.

Harry would have to focus on learning one spell and learning it well; any more than that and he was sure that the memory would leave his head in an instant.

As he stood waiting for the others to draw which dragon they would face from the bag, Harry felt his legs trembling. He didn't want to be here; he'd have traded almost anything to be anywhere else.

He only hoped that his fear didn't show on his face. The others looked stoic and unconcerned, although it might simply be that they were covering up their own fears. Steven looked more concerned for everyone else than he did himself.

Steven stepped aside to let Harry pick before him.

Harry reached his hand in and pulled out his dragon. As he saw which one it was, he closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. He'd drawn the Swedish Short Snout. He'd been afraid that with his luck he'd have gotten the worst dragon of the lot, the Hungarian Horntail.

The short snout would be difficult; it was one of the better fliers of the lot, but it wasn't nearly as vicious or fast as the Horntail.

As he saw Steven pick the last figurine, the Horntail, Harry felt almost guilty. Steven didn't look afraid, only cheerful. He was probably relieved that nobody else was in as much danger.

Now all there was to do was wait.

Brushing soot off himself, Harry grinned weakly. It had been a close thing, but he'd managed to use his broom to outfly the short snout. The crowd was going wild, and now that it was over, he felt almost magnanimous.

Better yet, he would be able to watch the last bout with the other champions, since whatever Steven did couldn't change his performance now.

He settled into the champion's box next to Fleur, who politely congratulated him.

As the handlers pulled the last of the dragons into the arena, Harry felt his stomach clench. This dragon wasn't anything like the one he'd faced. It was visibly bigger, faster and much more vicious.

It snapped angrily at its handlers and it tried to spray flames at the audience. Fortunately there were spells to protect the audience. After a couple of unfortunate tournaments in the thirteenth century, organizers had learned their lessons.
This thing was a monster, and Steven was going to have to face it.

He looked across the arena, searching for Hermione. She was sitting next to Ron, and her face looked pale and drawn. She looked as though she was about to pass out, and Ron didn't look better.

He looked guilty and sick.

Now that Harry thought about it, Steven wasn't as invulnerable as his aunts. They were sentient rocks, with bodies that were only illusion. As long as the stones at their core weren't damaged, they could never die. They could be killed and reform over and over again.

Steven...no one knew what would happen if he actually died. The chances that he would reform were slim. Hermione had asked Pearl once, when Steven was out of earshot occupied with something else. Pearl had admitted that no one knew what would happen, but having Rose return was more likely than Steven being reborn.

He could see Pearl in the stands as well. She too looked paler than usual, although on her that was almost impossible. Amethyst was with her, and it looked as though she was almost visibly having to restrain her from jumping down into the arena and killing the dragon herself.

If Steven actually did get hurt, he didn't think the dragon would last long afterwards.

Peridot on the other hand seemed to be enjoying the whole thing. She was eating popcorn and was throwing it at the back of a group of Slytherins further down the stands. Whether it was in response to something they were saying or just because she was enjoying harassing them, Harry couldn't tell.

The handlers were running now, getting away from the agitated dragon. It was crouched over the eggs, its black scales shining.

At the other end of the arena, Steven stood. His wand wasn't out; instead, he was holding his ukulele.

While he played the guitar now, he still played his original instrument sometimes, either for the sound or because it was smaller and easier to carry.

The noise of the crowd rose.

Steven had been making a name for himself for years. While he wasn't as famous as Harry, he'd earned his fame more honestly. The parents of the Hufflepuff students he'd saved cheered and stamped their feet.

This only seemed to agitate the Horntail. It roared and struggled against its chains.

Harry noticed Professor Moody in the audience nearby. He was leaning forward, and there was an odd expression on his face. It almost looked as though he was waiting on something, anticipating what Harry didn't know.

Why it bothered him, he wasn't sure. Everyone in the audience was anticipating something, even if it was only Steven getting torn limb from limb. This seemed almost predatory though.

The dragon lunged against its chains once again, and Steven began to walk forward.

"It's ok big guy," he said softly.

The crowd quieted quickly, undoubtedly wanting to hear what Steven had to say.
"I know you want to protect your eggs, and I'm sorry I have to scare you like this, but there's something I have to get." Steven's voice was low and soothing.

The dragon snarled and lunged forward, breathing flame in his direction.

Seemingly not daunted at all, Steven stepped forward. He put his hands on his ukulele and he began to play.

It was a song he'd played for them before; something about life and death and love and birth. Except this time he was playing it differently. It was slower, more melancholy. Instead of being about the rush of life and death it was more about peace and love.

The crowd was suddenly silent. This wasn't what they'd been expecting to see at all. Instead of some great contest of magic between man and beast, instead all they saw was a small child singing and walking slowly toward the slavering beast.

He reached the farthest point the dragon could breath its flames, and as it breathed at him, he calmly stepped to the side. The flames barely missed him.

From recent experience, Harry knew that even being close to the flames was hot enough to hurt, but Steven didn't show any sign that it bothered him. Instead he simply walked closer and closer to the monster.

Once he got within the range of it's teeth and claws, even his speed and agility weren't likely to save him.

Only, the dragon wasn't moving as quickly now as it had been. It breathed blast after blast of fire, but it was exhausting itself.

Dragons weren't meant to breathe this much flame. The flames were meant to incapacitate their prey so they could move in and finish them off with tooth or claw.

Steven kept singing and playing. He made dodging look easy, and now that Harry was watching, he wasn't making a lot of forward progress. He was moving side to side a lot and only incrementally forward.

At last the dragon stopped breathing flame.

It's sides heaved and it stared at Steven as he continued to play. It was getting visibly calmer, and it was watching him warily.

It hadn't been this calm even with its handlers.

Steven carefully edged around it, making sure never to present his back to it. No matter how calm it seemed now, it would undoubtedly lunge the moment he wasn't looking.

Almost seeming hypnotized, the dragon's eyes never left Steven. It simply backed up protectively over the eggs.

The flaw in Steven's plan was obvious. The dragon didn't have to be active in order to protect the eggs. All it had to do was interpose itself between Steven and the eggs and eventually it would regain enough energy to lash out at him.

He was within reach of the dragon’s claws now, but incredibly it didn't lash out at him. It simply hissed and backed up even further.
Steven was coming to the end of his song; he'd played two choruses already, and he didn't seem likely to go for a third.

As the song ended, Steven simply dropped his ukulele and suddenly he was moving faster than he'd ever moved before.

He was rolling underneath the dragon and the crowd gasped. All the dragon had to do was slam it's weight down and Steven would be done for.

Harry heard Pearl scream out in the audience. He and the entire audience leaned forward as the dragon slammed its weight down, only to see that somehow Steven had already managed to roll out from underneath its tail and he was already lunging for the golden egg.

He grabbed the egg and he was already running.

The dragon screamed, lunging with its full weight against the chains as it tried to get the egg thief. Steven was already outside of its range, although it still could blow fire assuming it had the energy.

The dragon handlers were already running forward. The challenge was all but over. Steven had gotten the egg, and he'd gotten away unscathed. He was only moments from being safe.

The crowd roared its approval, but the roar changed suddenly as some members of the crowd saw something others couldn't see. There were cries of dismay as the dragon lunged again. It stepped on Steven's ukulele, smashing it beyond recognition.

Steven was outside of the range of its fiery breath, but the crowd behind the dragon still seemed upset. Harry couldn't see what they could see, but there was definitely a commotion.

The dragon lunged, this time with more force than it had used any time previously.

The chain holding the dragon suddenly snapped.

Charlie Weasley suddenly realized that he was going to die.

It wasn't that he hadn't known it was a possibility. Dragon handling had a similar death rate as curse-breaking and being an Auror or hit wizard.

His only regret was having it happen in front of his mother. She was in the audience, watching with horrified eyes as the dragon lunged toward him.

If the chain had held, he'd have been at a safe distance to try and stun the animal. He was wearing a dragonhide suit that was flame resistant. It should have been enough.

The world seemed to be moving in slow motion; he didn't see his life passing in front of his eyes, but he had time to regret not having done more with the life that he had. He should have found love, spent more time with his family, done more with friends.

He tried to move his wand upward, but he was falling, and his body seemed to move slower than his consciousness.

Charlie didn't close his eyes as he stared up at his death, and so he was confused when the world suddenly turned pink.
The dragon's face suddenly slammed into whatever it was that had interposed itself, and suddenly the world seemed to speed up again.

It was the Universe boy, Charlie suddenly realized, the champion. He'd heard only good things about him and now the boy had interposed himself between Charlie and the dragon.

He was sliding backward as the dragon pushed forward, his feet leaving tracks in the earth.

Steven Universe looked down at him and said, "Get up. We need to get her calmed down before she gets hurt."

Charlie stared up at him for a moment, uncomprehending. Not one wizard in a thousand would think of the dragon's safety when they were being attacked. Even the ones who did were usually only the ones who were trained and worked with them on a daily basis.

He snapped into action a moment later.

"Can I cast through the shield?" he asked.

"Not unless it's Avada Kedavra," Steven said. He glanced back toward the stands with a worried look. "Listen, if we don't get this done quickly, Pearl and Amethyst are going to get involved, and they're likely to really hurt her."

Charlie glanced out in the audience where he saw two women with strange colored skin trying to break through the barriers protecting the audience from the dragons. The barriers were also designed to protect those inside the arena from the spells of those outside the arena after a cheating scandal in the 1500's made it necessary.

The dragon tried to grab the shield and pull it away, but it was attached to the Universe boy's arm somehow.

Unfortunately the boy didn't have the mass to resist being pulled instead of pushed, and a moment later he was in the air hanging on to his shield for dear life.

Charlie launched a spell that hit the dragon in the eye, and a moment later he realized that the other dragon handlers were rallying as well.

Steven's shield dissolved, and a moment later he was scrambling up the side of the dragon's arm like a monkey. The dragon turned and snapped at him, and it took Charlie a moment to realize what he was doing.

He was trying to distract the dragon so that the dragon handlers could do their job without the risk of being killed by the dragon.

Charlie launched spell after spell after the dragon as did the dragon handlers around him.

It shouldn't have been necessary. The chains the dragons were chained with had enchantments to keep them from breaking, and other enchantments to make them more docile than normal.

Nobody wanted to see dead teenagers at a school function, so the game was rigged in their favor. No one knew about it, and Charlie didn't even disapprove, but something had gone drastically wrong.

The dragon was sliding downward, falling asleep from the sheer weight of all the stunning spells directed against it.
There was an explosion from the stands, and a moment later the two women from before were entering the arena, looking furious.

Steven was at the dragon's head by now, and he was leaning down saying something soothing into the dragon's ear.

Charlie wanted to yell at the boy; even though a creature seemed to be stunned, there wasn't any guarantees. More than one dragon handler had died from overconfidence.

Still, the dragon seemed to be responding, and the two women charging toward them didn't seem as likely to kill the creature out of hand.

"Steven, are you all right?" the pale woman's voice sounded panicked, even if the way she was moving was anything but fearful.

"It's fine," Steven said. He patted the dragon on the head, and it stared up at him balefully.

"I wasn't really gonna take your egg," Steven said. "I'm sorry for tricking you."

Hearing any kind of wizard apologizing to a dragon wasn't something Charlie had ever expected to experience.

Of course, this was the boy who'd rescued Ginny from the hold of a nasty magical artifact simply by asking the right questions.

Charlie had assumed that half the things he'd been hearing about the boy were exaggerations. Stories had a way of getting blown out of proportion when Wizards were involved in telling them. Yet now he was starting to believe that there might be some truth to them.

"I can't believe I made first place," Steven said.

"You were the only candidate to actually fight the dragon," Harry said. "I'm sure they give extra credit for that."

Harry felt it was unfair actually that he was only one point behind Steven. While it was true that he'd managed to get through the event totally uninjured, his dragon had been far less vicious than Steven's. On a brighter note, that put him in second place, with Krum falling behind due to destroying dragon eggs.

"I wasn't supposed to," Steven said. He seemed downcast. "I was really trying to get out of there without letting her get hurt."

Hermione appeared at the mouth of the tent. "You were brilliant, Steven!" She rushed forward and hugged Steven, a little more tightly than Harry would have expected.

Behind her was Ron. His face was white as a sheet.

"I'm sorry." He said. "I can't believe I.." He shook his head.

"I guess somebody else really did put your name in the goblet."

"That's what I've been telling you," Harry said. He felt elated. Being separated from Ron all term had dragged at him. It had been like a bad tooth; he'd never been able to stop thinking about it.
"Did somebody put your name in too?" Ron asked.

Steven smiled slightly and shook his head. "I put my own name in the Goblet."

"But why?" Ron asked. "You aren't the type to be out for the glory."

"He wants to keep people from getting hurt." Hermione said. She still hadn't stopped hugging him, but she looked up from him for a moment.

"If someone else became champion because I didn't put my name in, and they got hurt...I couldn't let that happen."

Ron blinked and then rushed forward.

"Thanks for saving Charlie," he said earnestly. "I may not talk about him much because he lives so far away, but growing up he was always the best towards me out of all of my brothers."

He looked down. "Besides, I don't think mum could have taken seeing it happen like that. Losing one of the boys would be hard enough without it happenin right in front of you."

Two more figures appeared, silhouetted in the door to the tent.

It was Charlie Weasley and Professor Moody. The soft ground outside had made his artificial leg a lot more stealthy. It click against the stonework the way it did when they were inside Hogwarts. It was a point that Harry would have to remind himself.

Just because you thought you'd hear someone coming, even someone as obvious as Professor Moody didn't mean that they wouldn't be able to find a way to surprise you.

"The chains were tampered with," Charlie said. "There were spells to keep them from breaking, but someone undid them and put a curse on the chains so they'd actually break."

"Someone is out to kill you boy," Moody said. "You're gonna have to be more vigilant."

Steven chuckled and everyone stared at him.

"It's actually a nice change. Someone is after me instead of Harry for once."

"That's nothing to be jealous of," Ron said quietly, leaning toward Steven and Hermione. He glanced at Harry. "Havin people out to murder you isn't fun at all."

Steven shrugged. "I'm probably harder to kill than Harry."

"Don't get ahead of yerself, boy, and don't get cocky. You might be a little harder to kill than a regular wizard, but that doesn't mean that someone out there can't actually do it."

"I wonder why they've targeted Steven," Hermione asked. She finally pulled away from her embrace.

"Some of the old guard thinks it's insultin that a half-breed is representing Hogwarts. I've been keeping my ear to the ground, and I hear that a lot of the old guard would have been happier if a mudblood had been champion instead of someone who isn't even human at all."

Hermione looked insulted, for multiple reasons. Harry rushed to interject before she said something.
that got her in trouble.

"Just because they're after Steven doesn't mean they aren't after me too."

Moody nodded at him approvingly. "Thinkin ahead boy. Good to hear that you're actually listening in class."

"So what do we do?" Hermione asked, this time in a quieter voice. "We can't just let somebody kill Harry or Steven."

"Magical contract with the Goblet means that neither one of you can back out." Moody said. He was quiet for a minute, seemingly deep in thought.

"Main thing they are worried about is that a half-breed might actually win this," Moody said. "It'd make mockery of all their ideas about blood supremacy."

"Doesn't that mean Fleur is actually in just as much danger?" Steven asked.

Moody shook his head. "She's in last place. Nobody cares about last place, especially from heathen foreigners. If she was pushing for the top spot, I'd worry a little more about her."

"Still," Steven said. "We need to keep an eye on her."

"Safest place for you to be would be in the back of the pack with her," Moody said.

Hermione blinked. "Are you saying that he should throw the whole tournament?"

"I'm not going to hide," Steven said. His voice was strong and commanding. "I'm not going to prove to them that they are right."

He was silent for a moment, then he said, "I'm going to win this."
Peridot figured it out," Steven said quietly to Harry. "It wasn't all that different than the problem we
had translating the wailing stones message from audio to video."

"We're supposed to use machines to understand the next task?" Harry asked suspiciously. "that
doesn't sound like something Wizards would expect at all."

"No," Steven said. "You just have to find a way to muffle the message so it makes sense."

"Cover it with a blanket?" Harry asked.

Hermione stared at both of them disapprovingly. "Champions are supposed to do this on their own."

Steven shrugged. "I'm not in this to win. I won't try to lose just to satisfy some people who don't
think I have to be here, but I really just want everybody to be safe."

"He'll tell the other two the same thing he's telling me," Harry said. "just to be fair."

Steven nodded. "The more time everyone has to prepare, the more likely everybody will get through
everything all right."

Hermione hesitated, then said, "We tried covering it with blankets. It'd have to be something better.
You'd almost have to immerse it in...water?"

Steven grinned and didn't say anything.

"Thanks, mate," Harry said.

"It was actually Winky who came up with the solution," Steven said. "Plopped it right in the gems
pool and everything got clear as a bell."

"I can't imagine the gems liked that much, what with Ruby and Sapphire still being in there."

"They complained," Steven admitted, "but Peridot stood up for her. Winky's getting a little more
brave now than she used to be; she still won't stand up for herself, but she'll stand up for Peridot."

Hermione shook her head. She hadn't approved of Steven's enslavement of Winky, but her visits to
the gems temple had showed a house-elf who was gradually improving and regaining her zest for
life.

"None of us can actually give her clothes," Steven said. "But Pearl showed her how to make herself
a leather hat and goggles. Peridot is still weird about clothes that aren't part of your body."

Apparently giving elves clothes wasn't allowed, but letting them make their own was. Most
Wizarding masters never chose to give their elves anything more than rags, which firmed Hermione's
resolve that something had to be done.

Even Winky only wore clothes inside the temple. She reverted to typical House-Elf attire when she
was in Hogwarts.

Hermione had asked her about it once, and she'd replied that she didn't want the shame of being
thought a free elf. The horror of the thought had made the elf shudder and revert to her previous gloomy demeanor, and so Hermione hadn't pressed her any further.

It did make her reconsider her idea about leaving clothes around for the house-elves to find. She might be able to free some of them, but if they were to become more miserable and unable to find work, she wouldn't be improving their lot much.

It sounded like she was making excuses, but the Hogwarts elves probably had the best lifestyle of any House-elves in Britain. They had their own community, they worked away from Wizards and they weren't abused.

They were hardly representative of the average house-elf, from what she'd seen. Dobby and Winky were proof that abusive wizards existed, and there was no one to protect the house elves from them.

Steven had promised to help her get more protections and rights for the house-elves. It was the laws that needed changing, and she wouldn't accomplish that by freeing unwilling house elves one elf at a time.

She needed to make big changes.

"The champions will be dancing for the yule ball." Professor McGonagall said firmly. "And that's that."

Harry had tried arguing, but it hadn't worked. Professor McGonagall was intractable. The fact that he didn't know how to dance or even how to ask a girl to be his date didn't seem to matter to her at all.

He tried Hermione, but Steven had already asked her. Steven probably could have asked anyone except a Slytherin and had a fairly good chance of getting a date, despite being the smallest in his class. He was increasingly popular.

Some girls were asking Harry out, but Harry felt that it was just because he was famous. He was a little reluctant to accept and just be a trophy for some girl to brag about.

Fortunately, Professor McGonagall gave them a few perfunctory lessons in how to dance. Harry felt that he was stumbling all over his feet, but Steven seemed to be graceful.

Later, Steven admitted that he'd been taught to dance by the gems. It was an important component of some sort of magical ritual; Harry wasn't sure he understood exactly.

Steven reassured him that when he had first been learning to dance he'd been awkward too. He'd stepped the wrong way, zigged when he was supposed to zag and had done everything wrong.

"The important thing," he said, "is to have a sense of humor. Even if you step on a girl's feet, if you can both laugh about it, it'll be all right."

Harry wasn't as certain, but he did get his courage up to ask Cho. Steven encouraged him to ask sooner rather than later, lest someone ask Cho in advance.

To his delight, she said yes.

This was unexpected, and made him nervous. The few lessons he'd had from McGonagall hadn't been nearly enough and he was convinced that he'd make a bad showing of it.

Steven suggested that he and Ron, Hermione and Neville come to the temple, where Pearl could teach them more about formal dancing. He warned them not to listen to Amethyst, as the kind of
dances she'd teach would get them in trouble.

Ron for some reason seemed intrigued by this, but let it pass without comment.

Pearl, surprisingly, turned out to be a good teacher. She was an excellent dancer, and Harry could see where Steven had learned his skills.

Neville, surprisingly was the one who took the training most to heart. Even after they left the temple he kept practicing on his own.

While Ron rolled his eyes and kept trying to find a date, Neville kept practicing.

Ron had gotten a date with Padma, who looked less than impressed with the horrible outfit that he was wearing. It was centuries out of date and was hideous, with ruffs and fringes.

Steven was sympathetic, but didn't know of any way to make things better. He's spent the first fourteen years of his life wearing variations of the exact same outfit, and had only branched out since coming to the Wizarding world.

Even the gems weren't experts on clothes. They effectively went everywhere naked, as their clothes were actually just parts of their body and they had no need of clothing for warmth. Pearl's clothing skills mostly existed from mending rips and tears Steven had made in his own clothes.

So Ron was stuck.

Steven tried to convince him to ignore it. Harry suspected that if it had been Steven, he'd have been the life of the party whatever he was wearing. His story about putting on a dress and singing in a competition on a beach in his homeworld proved that he wouldn't have been self-conscious.

Ron, however, wasn't as confident in himself, and he seemed self conscious.

Harry was just happy that he'd taken the extra time to practice dancing. He was looking forward to dancing with Cho and only hoped that he'd be able to remember all the steps of the dances.

Cho and Padma joined them, and thankfully Cho seemed much happier than Padma. They were making small talk with Ron and Steven, and everything seemed normal. Once Hermione arrived, they'd go into the ball.

Cho was the first to fall silent, followed by Padma and then Ron. Steven noticed next, turning and staring. His pupils visibly dilated.

Harry turned and found himself staring as well.

Hermione was at the top of the stairs, but this wasn't a Hermione Harry had ever seen before. She looked like a different person. She'd done something with her hair that made it sleek and shiny and swept back. Her robe seemed more like a dress, with a blue color that seemed to enhance her looks. She even seemed to hold herself differently; she stood more proudly, more confidently.

She was beautiful.

Harry could hear Cho gasping slightly beside him, and a moment later Steven was sweeping past him to take her hand.

It almost looked like Steven had grown inches taller in the moment since Harry had taken his eyes off him. For Steven, this certainly wasn't impossible, although from what Harry had heard he
couldn't maintain it for the entire evening. His robes were still well fitted though, which meant they were enchanted somehow.

They looked good together. Steven had done something to his hair as well, and he looked thinner and older as well. He actually had a neck. He looked as old as Hermione, and for once he was taller than she was.

She smiled up at him, and it was radiant.

Dancing wasn't nearly as bad as he'd thought it would be. The lessons from pearl helped a lot, as did Steven's advice about not taking any of it too seriously. It helped that he was dancing with Cho, who he'd liked for a long time.

Steven had even convinced Ron to give dancing a try, badgering him into dancing especially once the Weird sisters started playing faster music.

He'd visibly shrink between songs; whenever he went to sit down and rest he'd revert to his old look. He admitted that it was easier to maintain his size that way, without any risk of reverting to a baby.

Harry would have expected Steven to be all over the place, encouraging reluctant couples to dance, making shy people feel more at ease, and generally being there for everyone. That was his usual way of behaving.

Tonight, though, he was completely focused on Hermione. He danced with her over and over again until her face was flushed. When he sat with her at the table, he made them all laugh, but his eyes kept going back to Hermione.

It wasn't until one particular song though that something strange happened.

Harry was sitting with Cho, exhausted. They'd been dancing all night, and without Quidditch practice he had to admit that his endurance wasn't what it once had been.

Steven and Hermione were dancing closer than they had been all night, and it looked like Hermione was whispering something in his ear.

There was a glow from somewhere within Steven's robes. Steven laughed, and a moment later Steven and Hermione began to shine.

Their forms began to meld and shift and change.

There were screams from the people around them, who stumbled back, leaving a growing circle of empty floor space around them.

Teachers were already moving toward them when the light faded.

Steven and Hermione were gone, and where they had danced, someone else stood.

Hermione was confused and a little frightened. A moment before she and Steven had been dancing and now he was gone and she...they were different.

She'd always held herself tightly and in control; tonight, for the first time she'd just let go and started to enjoy herself without thinking. She'd never felt so close to Steven as she had during that last dance, and now...
Looking down, she gasped. Her hands were not her own.

They were alone in the center of a group of horrified students, with teachers rushing toward them, and all Hermione could wonder was where Steven was.

A moment later she knew. He was all around her, and she felt his presence as a warmth, reassuring her that everything would be all right.

This was fusion; he'd told her about it, but she'd never really understood how two people could fuse into one person. The gems had told him their personalities completely disappeared into the new person, but Steven admitted that that had never happened to him. There had always been a little bit of a separation, whether it was because the human half couldn't completely join, or simply because they'd never remained fused long enough.

"What's the meaning of this?" Professor McGonagall demanded.

"I'm sorry to cause all this trouble," Hermione was surprised to find herself saying. "This happened accidentally."

Amethyst was flying down from the rafters.

"Finally! I thought you two were never going to do it!"

"It's a gem thing," Hermione said, looking down. It took her a moment to realize that although the words were coming from her mouth, they weren't really her words.

She towered over Professor McGonagall, who looked down at her for a moment, then sniffed. "If you are going to insist on doing...whatever this is, you should see to your appearance."

They looked down and realized that their knees were showing. The dress that had been a full length dress on Hermione was scandalously short on her. Steven's robes were draped around her like a cloak.

"I'll help you," Amethyst said, pulling them toward the direction of the bathroom.

They absentmindedly send a command to Steven's robes which were enchanted, and they stretched to reach the floor.

"How do I look?" they asked Amethyst, as she rushed them past groups of staring students.

"Different, but still great," Amethyst admitted. "You're taller."

They could tell that; Steven's memories of being Stevonnie were vague to Hermione, but she could tell that they were looking down on people a lot more. They weren't nearly as tall as Hagrid, or the Headmistress of Beuxbatons, but they had to be taller than Garnet.

It astonished Hermione that she could now visualize Garnet even though she'd never really seen her.

Amethyst rushed them past the usual girl's bathroom toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Whether it was to spare any embarrassment Steven would have about being in the girls' bathroom (which was none, Hermione could now feel) or to spare them any comments from the girls they weren't sure.

Myrtle stared at them as they entered the bathroom.

A moment later, Hermione found herself staring at her new body.
They had to be more than seven feet tall, with hair that was a deep brown, darker than her own hair, but lighter than Steven's. It was miraculously long; longer than she'd ever considered having her hair. Given Steven's hair, which was permanently unkempt, and her own, bushy hair, it should have been a hideous mess.

Instead it was long and lustrous. It made them look a little like a rock star.

They felt a moment of sadness as a flash of Steven's memory showed a vision of his father when he was young. He'd had long hair like this.

Their eyes were as black as Steven's. Somehow, impossibly, they seemed even more beautiful together than she'd felt earlier during the ball.

Steven had made her feel beautiful.

"You guys gonna stay like that?" Amethyst asked. "It's cool with me...don't know how the squares are gonna take it."

A question from Steven's side of their mind; Hermione hesitated. All her life she'd been unable to stop and enjoy herself. Her entire life before Steven had been about control, and it had never really brought her happiness.

It wasn't until she'd met Steven and Harry and Ron that she'd learned to relax, even a little. It was hard to learn to live in the moment, to simply be.

She'd always admired that about Steven, and even Ron. This was perhaps the best chance she was ever going to get to see what it was like to be Steven.

"It might be fun."

She felt a moment of hesitation. If the Purebloods had problems with a half-human like Steven, what were they going to make of the both of them?

Steven's voiceless reply was amused. Either they were three quarters human, which was actually more human than he was, or they were half-mudblood, one quarter muggle and one quarter gem, in which case they'd be considered even more of an abomination.

Every slur Draco had ever given Hermione over the past four years suddenly went through her mind. She'd had enough from stuck up Purebloods, and if she had to rub their noses in it, all the better.

Nobody had the right to tell them what to do with their relationship.

They looked at themselves in the mirror, and then pulled out Hermione's wand. She'd studied domestic magics just in case she tore her dress.

She could feel Steven's astonishment at just how easy the magic came to her. It was probably never going to be his first resort, because he had all sorts of other things he could resort to. He didn't love magic the way Hermione did, although she could feel that he was feeling it now.

Their robes merged; it helped that Steven's had already been enchanted to change size and shape. It became something between their two outfits. Fortunately, it looked great.

"What was that?" Ron asked.

For once Padma didn't seem put out by Ron's paying attention to another girl, as she and Cho were
talking animatedly about the same thing. Her twin sister, who had gone out with Cedric Diggory was approaching as well.

"I heard him talk about it once," Harry said. "Something about fusing together."

"Into one person?" Ron asked, outraged. "You mean Steven's a girl now?"

"Are you a girl if you drink polyjuice potion?" Harry asked distractedly. He wondered how Hermione was taking the whole thing. Was she scared?

Steven had been through it before, and he'd undoubtedly be keeping her calm.

Even the teachers seemed to be talking animatedly. Nobody was dancing at all, so astonished was everyone.

Snape looked positively ill.

The only professor who didn't seem taken aback was the Headmaster, who beamed.

Harry wondered if he really understood what was going on, or if he just insisted on looking like he did so that everyone wouldn't panic. Steven had once told him that the gems had tried something similar, shortly before the gem war had begun. They'd tried to act as though nothing was wrong, even though he knew things were.

Everybody was going to have questions, and Hermione had always worked so hard at being respected. Being like this...there was going to be fallout, and not just from the Purebloods or the Slytherins.

Amethyst emerged, and this time she was alone. She flew over the heads of everyone in the form of an owl and she landed on the shoulder of the lead singer of the Weird Sisters. Contrary to their name, the entire group was male. They'd stopped playing in the middle of the confusion, and they all looked a little flummoxed.

He seemed to argue with the Gem on his shoulder for a moment before finally turning to the rest of the band. A short discussion, and they all seemed to agree.

"I heard they were going to ask Steven to play a little," Ron said. "After all, he did save the lives of a couple of their nephews somewhere down the line..."

Steven was popular enough with Hufflepuff parents that there might have been some pressure from relatives. The Wizarding world was small enough that everyone knew someone who knew someone.

The murmur of the crowd stopped again, voices dropping off as heads turned. Harry found himself following the crowd, and like everyone else, he found himself staring.

The fusion looked...good. It was beautiful like a statue and it's outfit was somehow strangely androgynous without lacking style. Given that Harry had thought wizards all wore funny dresses when he'd first seen them, it wasn't all that difficult.

The crowd parted in front of the fusion, who walked directly toward the stage. Instead of turning toward the stairs, it simply leaped and a moment later it was on the stage standing in front of Kirley Duke, the lead guitarist.

He handed it his guitar and stepped back.
The fusion said something to the band, then turned toward the magical megaphone. It strummed the guitar, a few notes that none of them had ever heard before.

"Tonight's about being together with the one you...like," it said.

A moment later, it began to play. At first the music was slow and tentative. The crowd looked at each other in confusion, but the Weird Sisters somehow caught the melody and started playing behind it.

The music sped up quickly, though, turning from something that was almost a little sad into something else, something joyous. Harry felt his foot tapping, and he saw that Cho and Ron and Padma were responding the same way.

A moment later, the fusion began to sing. It's voice was better than Steven's. It had that clear, perfect tone that made the listener instantly respond.

The song was something about hearts and souls and being one. Harry couldn't remember the lyrics afterward, but the tune was stuck in his head for days.

The fusion began to play faster and faster, until even the Weird Sisters were having trouble keeping up.

It was the kind of music that grabbed at everyone who listened and drew them in.

The crowd was dancing now, and without even being aware he'd decided to do so, Harry found himself joining in. Cho was dancing beside him, closer than he would have thought comfortable, but right now it was all right. He was surrounded by people on every side and somehow he felt he was part of something greater than himself.

Cho grinned at him as they danced, and while normally he would have worried about every awkward move he made, right now he didn't care. This wasn't about what moved he made; it was about how moving made him feel.

The fusion jumped at the end of the song, straight up inhumanly high before coming down to land on the stage lithely, even though it should have crashed.

The music finally ended, and as it did, the fusion handed the guitar back to Kirley Duke and then it split apart into a grinning Steven and Hermione.

After a moment of stunned silence, the crowd burst into applause.

Hermione's face looked radiant as she looked out into the crowd, with Kirley holding her hand up into the air and everybody cheering her name.

She was going to be fine. Harry cheered for the both of them as loudly as anyone.

Tonight was a good night.

was a magical night. Steven returned to his normal self, and he even played a couple of sets with the Weird Sisters as himself. He danced and sang and encouraged the people who were too shy to dance to get out on the dance floor and live just for once.

Harry found that he even enjoyed fast dancing, once he stopped worrying about how foolish he
looked while doing it. Fast dancing meant getting closer to Cho than he otherwise would have thought about doing, and without having to memorize steps he could actually enjoy doing so.

It wasn't until the next morning that reality finally ensued.

Harry's first inkling was when Hermione threw a newspaper in front of him at breakfast. Her face was ashen.

"What's going on?" Harry asked slowly.

He glanced down at the headline, then froze.

The headline screamed, "Hogwarts Board of Governors calls for recall of Champion!"

For a moment he thought they were talking about him, and he felt a moment of relief. A couple of paragraphs later, however, he discovered that it wasn't him the board wanted to recall. It was Steven.

"A lot of parents complained," Hermione said. "They said what he was doing...what we were doing was unnatural and wrong. They threatened to pull their kids from the competition."

Harry looked at her for a moment, then shrugged. "It's not going to happen."

"They're talking about going to the Wizengamot and having Steven declared non-human. They'll break his wand and say he's a creature." Hermione's face was turning redder and redder, and it looked to Harry as though she was working herself up into a panic.

"They can't do anything until the end of the competition," Harry said calmly. "It's a magical contract. If they could pull anybody out, I'd be the first one in line."

It wasn't as though the other schools would be willing to allow last minute substitutions anyway.

"If something happens to him because of me," Hermione said. "I don't..."

"Stop," Harry said. "Nothing is going to happen. This is a lot of Slytherins blowing hot air. Steven's made too many friends and saved too many people for anything like that to go through."

He didn't actually know that, of course. He knew almost nothing about Wizarding politics. But Steven had once told him about the mayor of his old town who seemed to believe that looking like you knew what you were talking about was almost as good as actually knowing it.

Ron, sitting beside him nodded. "It's just a bunch of jealous snakes. They aren't gonna pull their kids from school. Where are they going to send them? Durmstrang?"

Harry nodded. It wasn't like a few less Slytherins would make the school any worse, especially the kind who would write their parents and get them to make this kind of fuss. They were better off without them.

"What's Steven going to think? They're saying he's unnatural...that we're..."

Harry said, "We're all unnatural. What's natural about waving a stick at things and levitating things or changing beetles into buttons or whatever?"

"And McGonagall turns into a cat," Ron said, remembering his conversation with Harry the night before. He shoved bacon into his mouth, looking pleased with himself.

"Whatever that was last night was totally natural for Steven; if it wasn't, you'd have seen the gems
freaking out." Harry said.

Hermione seemed slightly reassured, although she kept staring at the paper, rereading the same article over and over.

Harry had hoped that Steven would appear for breakfast to reassure her, but he didn't. He wasn't to be seen all morning.

It wasn't until later that Harry learned that there had actually been a hearing.

Fortunately, the magical contract was indeed binding, and the Wizangamot didn't have the votes to remove Steven's personhood. It was closer than Harry would have liked to think, however.

Apparently the idea of fusion bothered a lot of wizards on a deep and fundamental level.

Harry couldn't understand it. He didn't see the appeal, really, but he also didn't see why Hermione couldn't participate in it if she wanted to. It wasn't like Steven had forced her into anything.

Steven reappeared that afternoon, acting as though nothing had happened. He brushed off any questions about it, and to all appearances seemed to be his usual self.

He calmed Hermione, and if Harry caught a strange, almost pensive look on his face whenever Steven thought Hermione wasn't, he didn't comment.

Two days after the hearing, another article came, and this time it was Hagrid who disappeared.

Apparently no one had realized that he was half-giant.

How anyone with eyes could have missed that connection Harry didn't know, but apparently it was true. There were reports from multiple Slytherins about how dangerous Hagrid's classes were. The reports were total fabrications.

Flobberworms couldn't even bite anyone; they didn't have teeth. Furthermore, with Steven's help, classes had actually been safe and informative throughout the semester.

It wasn't until Hermione said something that Harry realized that Steven's participation was exactly the point.

If they couldn't get to Steven, they'd attack his friends. Whoever was the most vulnerable would be the first to go.

It wasn't like anyone was saying anything to Hermione. Even Draco was smart enough not to say a thing to her, although he taunted Harry incessantly about Hagrid's absence.

The reasoning seemed to be that taunting Hermione might be the one thing that made Steven stop being a nice guy, and nobody wanted that.

After all, he'd been involved in the killing of a professor in the first year he'd been in Hogwarts, a fact which had been brought up repeatedly in the case for his rights to be removed.

In the middle of it all, Rita Skeeter was writing articles designed to elicit outrage. She made it sound as though Steven was going to try to fuse with every girl in Hogwarts, and with half the boys.

Both Amethyst and Pearl had taken to having perpetually angry expressions on their faces, but through it all, Steven pretended to be unaffected.
What astonished Harry was that only the Pure Bloods hadn't known Hagrid was a half-giant. It had been obvious to everyone else.

Hagrid was so upset that he didn't attend classes for an entire week, and Steven wasn't there to help the new teacher.

Hermione assured him that Steven and the gems and even Dumbledore were all trying to reassure Hagrid, but he didn't seem to want to talk to anyone.

Harry resolved that he and Ron would go add their voices in to the others who were trying to reassure Hagrid that he was loved and wanted.

"I'm sorry I got you into this," Steven's voice was obvious from Hagrid's door.

The door was open for once, and Harry glanced at Ron as they carefully stepped closer. The last thing either of them needed was to be knocked over by Hagrid's giant dog while trying to eavesdrop.

"Weren't your fault." Hagrid's voice sounded down.

"They wouldn't keep writing about you if it weren't for me," Steven said.

Harry stepped forward. "Hagrid...Steven?"

He stepped inside the darkened room. Hagrid was sitting on an oversized chair staring at the embers of a huge, dying fire.

"Everybody's missed you," Harry said. "Both of you."

Steven had been attending classes, but he'd cut his extracurricular activities to a bare minimum. Even Hermione rarely saw him, and although she understood on some level, Harry could see that it hurt her feelings as well.

"The Headmaster has a whole pile of letters from people wanting Hagrid to come back," Steven said. He nodded toward the table, which was covered with letters.

"An the paper has a whole lotta letters from people wanting me to go away," Hagrid said.

Ron spoke up from beside Harry. "Harry's got a lot of people wanting him to go away, but it never stopped him."

Harry glanced at his friend. It wasn't like he'd really had a choice. His life came down to living with the Dursleys or living a life of magic. In his mind there had never been an actual choice at all.

"Nobody has everybody like them," Harry said finally. "Not even Steven."

Hagrid looked as though he would protest, but after the recent newspaper articles he really couldn't. Steven was only popular with the people who actually knew him. The people who knew of him were much more leery.

"They're not half-giants either," Hagrid said.

"Steven's half-rock. Professor Flitwick is half-goblin. Professor McGonagall turns into a cat. Everybody at this whole school is weird," Harry said. "What matters isn't where you come from. It's where you go."
Ron glanced at Harry. Unlike Harry, he still had some Pure-blood prejudices. Still, he was loyal to his friends. He spoke.

"Anybody who doesn't realize what a great guy you are is a dirty slimy snake."

"I know it's hard to believe it coming from me, or Amethyst," Steven said. "Given as we're all in the same boat, but Harry and Ron are full on human and they want you back."

"Was right nice of 'ermione to come by too," Hagrid said.

"The headmaster's the one who hired you," Harry said. "And he hasn't talked about kicking you out at all."

Hagrid nodded.

It took a while to fully convince him, but eventually Hagrid agreed to come back.

As they were leaving, Hagrid had some final words for them.

"Yer good boys, all of ye." He stared at them for a moment before saying, "Ye know what'd make me happy? If one of you won."

He chuckled. "Dumbledore always said we should let everybody in, not just the Purebloods. It'd be nice if one of ye were to win it, and show them ye don't have te be a pure-blood te be a winner."

Steven chuckled. "Actually, only Viktor Krum is a Pure-blood. Harry's a half-blood, and Fleur is a half-human like me."

Three in four chances that Purebloods weren't going to be champions. Somehow the idea didn't bother Harry at all.
As the time for the second task approached, Harry found himself struggling with how to approach the problem.

If he'd been left to his own devices, he'd doubtlessly would have not found out about the task until it was almost time, but Steven's warning had given him weeks of extra time to master the spells he would need.

Unfortunately, the bubble headed charm was proving much harder than he would have thought. He was only successful in casting it one time out of three, which was not reassuring. He'd mastered the Patronus charm at an unusual age, but he'd been extremely motivated.

He was tempted to simply give the whole thing up and forfeit. Unfortunately, he wasn't sure if the magical contract would accept that, or if there would be nasty consequences.

Hermione began spending more and more time with him, and less and less time with Steven. Her explanation was that he needed her help more than Steven did, but Harry suspected that there was more to it than that.

Their relationship hadn't been the same since the night of the dance; whether it was Steven feeling guilty because of the fusion, or his fear that the enmity of the Purebloods would spill out on Hermione, Harry wasn't sure.

He was selfishly grateful for the help, though.

Neville came up with the idea of using Gilly Weed; Harry decided to continue practicing with the bubble head charm and keep the Gilly weed as a backup. While the lazy part of his mind insisted that it would be easier simply to use the plant, another part reminded him that people were trying to kill him.

Being underwater when someone dispelled the plant could mean a death sentence if he didn't have a backup plan in place. He spoke with Steven, and they agreed to help each other if either of them got in trouble.

Steven seemed confident that he knew what he was going to do, and Harry didn't ask him about it. Steven had already helped him enough, and he didn't want the other schools accusing him of collusion.

The time of the second trial came more quickly than Harry would have imagined. He'd improved with the bubble headed charm, but still wasn't one hundred percent. He decided it would have to be enough; if it didn't work he'd use the Gilly weed.

When Ron and Hermione disappeared on the morning of the second event, he didn't think much of it. He was too busy feeling ill.

Still, when they were finally at the docks, he looked over at Steven and he felt himself inexplicably beginning to feel calmer.
Steven was wearing some kind of vest which had dozens of pockets. Each pocket seemed to be filled
with some kind of heavy brick.

The dock actually groaned as Steven stepped out onto it, and Harry wondered what his plan actually
was. With that much weight, he'd probably sink like a stone.

When the whistle was blown, they would have one hour to retrieve whatever it was that had been
taken from them. Dumbledore said as much to the watching crowd.

Harry didn't worry about what it was that had been taken; he was sure he'd know it when he saw it.

When the whistle was blown, he waded out into the lake, casting the bubble headed charm. To his
surprise, he actually managed to get it right, and as he slipped into the freezing water, his head
remained entirely dry.

He heard a thunderous sound of footsteps behind him; he looked back and he saw Steven leaping off
the side of the dock. In midair his bubble formed around him, and then he suddenly dropped like a
stone.

Harry suddenly understood; the weights were necessary so that the bubble didn't float on top of the
water. He wasn't certain how Steven was going to move inside his bubble, but that wasn't his
concern.

As he slipped under the water, he saw Steven running inside his bubble, like a hamster in a hamster
wheel. It wasn't as fast as swimming, as he had to deal with the mud on the floor of the lake, but it
was much better than drowning would be.

Steven was wearing a glowing bracelet on his wrist; it definitely looked more like something a
muggle would wear than a wizard. Wizards tended to be either archaic or ostentatious.

Harry swam forward, quickly outpacing his friend. Endurance was the one area where Steven didn't
have a tremendous advantage over Harry. Harry had years of experience running from Bullies, while
Steven had apparently spent his time eating leftover deep fried snacks.

It was darker than he would have liked; even when he cast a luminos with his wand, the light didn't
reach very far. Fortunately, he saw Moaning Myrtle, who pointed him in the right direction.

The rose colored glow of Steven's bubble quickly vanished behind him in the darkness, leaving him
alone. There were no other champions in sight.

At times he though he saw something dark moving toward him out of the murky dimness, but
invariably it turned out to be something inanimate; long lost junk on the floor of the lake.

He was able to avoid a group of grindylows and after thirty minutes he reached the village of the
merpeople.

Seeing Ron, Hermione, Tracey Greengrass and a small girl floating in the lake, held by great ropes
was a shock. The crowd of merpeople surrounding them was even more of one.

Harry approached them cautiously, but they didn't attack him.

They wouldn't lend him their spears either to help him cut Ron free, but at least they didn't interfere
with him as he searched on the floor of the lake for a sharp rock.

He began sawing away at Ron's rope, knowing instinctively that Hermione was going to be Steven's
target. It was slow work, given that the rock wasn't very sharp. He found himself wishing that he'd studied the severing charm; then it would have been a simple matter to remove the ropes.

Instead he was left struggling with the ropes.

He saw Victor Krum coming. Krum had given himself the head of a shark and he made quick work of the ropes.

Harry had freed Ron already, but he stopped when he realized that he didn't see Steven or Fleur anywhere.

When he tried to free Hermione and the small girl, the merpeople tried to stop him.

He wanted to win, but he wasn't willing to risk the life of Hermione or the small girl. He cast his patronus, which drove the merpeople back as he began to saw at the ropes holding the other two.

Time ticked on, when finally he saw Steven's bubble.

Steven was inside his bubble, but so, miraculously was Fleur, who looked much the worse for wear. Steven had Fleur thrown over one shoulder, and it looked like he'd gotten rid of some of the weights that he'd been carrying along the way.

His expression was grim, but it brightened as he saw Harry struggling to free the other two.

Harry's bubble charm was fading; he'd already reinforced it twice, but each time it was lasting less long. It wouldn't be long before he had to resort to Gilly weed, which he didn't want to do if he didn't have to because he'd have to stay in the water.

Steven came charging toward him. As he did, he pulled weights from his pocket and as he did each weight dissolved into nothingness.

The weights were conjured, Harry suddenly realized, designed to disappear the moment they came out of his pocket like leprechaun gold.

Steven gave a leap and his bubble came sailing directly toward them.

Harry grimaced and tried to dodge out of the way, but Steven's bubble disappeared as he was about to hit them, then reappeared around all of them, snapping the remaining ropes.

The bubble was full of water, though.

Fleur, looking exhausted waved her wand. She cast a bubble headed charm, but this one expanded until it was big enough to fill the entire bubble.

Harry wasn't sure where the water went; it was possible that the spell simply transmuted it into air. Creating a spell this large was impressive though; it really wasn't meant to do much more than cover the user's head.

Steven stopped for a moment, then sighed. He set Fleur down, then draped Hermione across his shoulders. He picked up the girl, then looked at Harry and pointedly down at Ron.

Harry bent down, but it was quickly apparent that lifting Ron was going to be impossible. Although he didn't look it, Ron was solid and he weighed much more than looked remotely possible.

Steven considered for a moment. He probably could carry all of them, but not hurting them would be difficult.
"Can we wake them up?" he asked.

"Finite incantum," Harry said, waving his wand.

For a moment he worried that he might accidentally reverse Fleur's bubble; Steven's would be fine, given that it wasn't a creation of Wizardly magic.

Ron stared up at him. "Wha..."

A moment later, they woke everyone in their group. A moment after that they were all running on the inside of the ball.

Steven looked exhausted. His face was red and he was out of breath, but he continued running without argument.

At least it was much warmer inside the bubble than the freezing water outside had been; the presence of so many people inside the bubble caused it to warm quickly. Harry didn't have time to shiver as he was too busy running.

They saw Krum fighting Grindylows. A huge swarm had come out of nowhere to attack him.

Numerous Grindylows darted toward them, but Steven's bubble seemed impervious to it. They lost interest after a time, and it wasn't until they came to the slope leading toward the surface that they saw a problem.

Climbing the steep hill was going to be a problem for all of them; although Steven's bubble seemed to repel the mud, going uphill against it was an entirely different proposition.

"You guys think you can make bubble charms for them?" Steven asked, gesturing toward the hostages.

Harry had gotten more confident in his spell work and he nodded. "What about you?"

"Not fair helping me," he said. "When you're trying to win. I can hold my breath for a fairly long time."

They could see Victor Krum behind them, having finally dealt with the grindylows. He was surging forward quickly.

They quickly cast the charms on their hostages and a moment later Steven dropped his bubble.

After that, it was every man for himself.

Krum won the race; his shark head form was simply too fast and he surged past them too powerfully. Harry placed second, Steven third and Fleur placed last.

It wasn't until later that he learned that Fleur would have had to withdraw from this challenge altogether if Steven hadn't helped her.

Furthermore, Peridot had helped "enhance' the event by placing special underwater omnioculars at key points along the route. They had been spelled to project what they saw onto large screens that had been borrowed from the Quidditch World Cup organization.

Everyone had seen how they'd worked together while the Pureblood had worked alone. Harry wasn't sure how that would affect public opinion one way or the other, but at least the event was over and he was actually in second place overall.
There was talk of giving them additional points for trying to help each other, but the headmaster of Durmstrang was adamant and angry at the idea. His champion had won and it was going to stay that way.

Although Krum had won the second challenge, all the attention went to the rest of them. Having everything broadcast on big screens had impressed everyone, and even Ron was reveling in the attention he'd gotten even though he'd done nothing but run around in a big wheel.

He was embellishing what had happened before the event was televised. Although Hermione claimed they'd simply been called to the Headmaster's office and put into a magical sleep, Ron spun stories of having been kidnapped by mermen that grew wilder and more outlandish every time he told them.

Hermione was irritated by all of the attention, and she grew snappish. It grew even worse after an article appeared in Witch Weekly claiming that she was sharing her affections with both Harry and Steven. The article was written by Rita Skeeter.

"Nobody will believe it," Hermione said. "It's just..."

"What?" Harry asked quietly. They were in potions class and the last thing he needed was to draw more attention to himself from Snape.

"How did she know Steven asked me to stay with him for part of the summer?" she said."Nobody else knew anything about it, and it's not like Steven is big on telling secrets."

Harry nodded absently. Steven was very good at keeping people's secrets. It wasn't that he lied about them; he simply never brought them up.

He stopped chopping beetles for a moment. "What?"

"It was after the second task, after we got on shore," Hermione said. "Rita wasn't anywhere near us...nobody was."

"What did you tell him?" Ron asked.

"It's none of your business," Hermione said primly.

"You know if you stay with him you'll be fighting mutant mummies or giant spiders or something," Ron said. "Steven's a fun guy, but his summers sound like a death trap for anybody normal."

"I'm sure he wouldn't put me in terrible danger," Hermione said self consciously. "besides, there are the gems."

"Like they're any better," Ron said. "Amethyst is a menace, Pearl is scary, and Peridot is crazy. I saw her with Winky the other night, and she had Winky riding in the head of some kind of weird metal golem."

"It was a robot," Hermione said. "And Winky is becoming quite the skilled pilot. Peridot has this idea that she could equip all the House Elves in Hogwarts with combat mecha if she could just find a way for technology to work within the wards."

"It was creepy!" Ron protested. "That house elf had a crazy look in her eye and the leather hat makes
"You have no reason to complain about anybody else's looks, Mr. Weasely," Snape's voice came from behind them. "Or about their fashion sense."

The Slytherins in the room sniggered.

"As interesting as Mr. Universe's family may be, I'd ask that you not discuss them during class. Ten points from Gryffindor."

Noticing the magazine that Hermione had slipped under her work, he took another ten points off from that.

He grabbed the magazine and began reading quotes from Skeeter's article, much to Harry's humiliation and the delight of the Slytherins. By the time he was done, even Hermione's face was beet red.

It was more evidence that somewhere, someone hated Harry. His life careened from humiliation to danger and then back again.

Steven called them all to the temple. Hermione had a standing invitation to go there, and went there all the time, but Harry and Ron went much less frequently. Harry wasn't entirely comfortable with the gems, especially Pearl, who seemed a little alien and remote.

Ron was even less comfortable, given that Amethyst loved to prank him, and she'd somehow gotten Peridot and Winky in on it. His face turned red very easily, which Amethyst found hilarious.

Still, Steven invited them all for Sunday dinner, and they all went.

It wasn't until they were deep in the temple that Steven saw why. Sirius was there, talking animatedly with Pearl.

"Sirius!"

Sirius looked thin and shaggy, but he was eating a full meal and he wasn't bolting his food. At their look, he shrugged.

"Winky's been helpful about getting food from the kitchens in Hogwarts. She claims it's for Steven."

"It is!" Steven said. "There's no way I could leave you here eating rats when I'm eating great food a few hundred yards away."

"Aren't you in danger here?" Hermione asked.

Sirius shook his head. "The gems have had areas of the temple spelled against detection, should there ever be anything they need to hide. They suggested that the temple might be used as a shelter should Hogwarts ever be attacked and the headmaster seemed to agree."

"We're shielded every way old Dumbles could think of," Amethyst said. "If things get bad we can even make the entrance disappear under a fidelius charm; everything's cast but the last part. Once it's cast the only way they'll ever find us is if they start digging, and its a big forest."

"Let's hope we never have to go that far," Pearl said. She poured more tea in Sirius's cup. She had a cup of her own, but she didn't drink from it.
According to Steven, she enjoyed the smell of tea, but didn't like to eat or drink because that made her have to go to the loo, which she found disgusting.

"We've been trying to figure out who is behind forcing you into the tournament." Sirius said, nodding toward Pearl.

"I'm pretty sure it's Voldemort," Harry said. "It's always Voldemort."

Although Sirius flinched when he said the name, he didn't try to correct Harry like most wizards would. No one else even batted an eyelash. Ron had gotten used to it, and the others didn't have the fear of Voldemort that was ingrained in Wizarding culture.

"But which of his people are doing it for them?" Sirius asked. "If we knew who, we might be able to figure out where the attack will come from, and what kind of attack it will be."

Harry mulled over that for a moment. Knowing that Draco was going to attack him would be different than if Goyle did. Draco would try something social, or maybe he'd attack while Harry's back was turned. Goyle would simply start beating Harry head on. He was a lot like Dudley that way.

They discussed several possibilities, including Barty Crouch. Sirius knew a number of unsavory things about Mr. Crouch, who had commanded that Sirius be sent to Azkaban without trial. He'd mistreated his house elf, and he'd sent his own son away to prison for life.

Sirius seemed convinced that Crouch was a strong suspect, although Harry himself wasn't so sure.

Both Steven and Amethyst warned them not to talk about Crouch in Winky's presence; she still became distraught whenever anyone mentioned him, and was adamant that she wouldn't reveal any of the Crouch family secrets, even to her new master.

Harry was thrilled in any case that Sirius was here. Being able to visit his godfather, and having him so close to the school was a godsend.

Sirius warned him, however, against coming by too often. People noticed changes in behavior patterns, and if he suddenly started visiting the temple every day, especially without Steven or Hermione someone was sure to notice.

They agreed on a schedule; he and Steven and Hermione would meet at the temple twice a week, which was better than the alternative. If Sirius had been living in a cave somewhere he might hardly have gotten to meet with him at all.

At least this cave had running water. A full bathroom had been put in because Steven still had human needs, even if the gems didn't.

The letters began arriving for Hermione almost immediately after Rita Skeeter's article in Weekly came out. The article had portrayed her as a temptress, toying with both the hearts of Harry and Steven. It had talked about fusion as some sort of perversion that she'd seduced Steven into in an effort to gain his power for herself.

In general, it made her look like a gold digger who was hungry for power.

There were twenty letters on the first day, and Hermione winced after seeing the content of the first letter.

Glancing over her shoulder, Harry fought to conceal his shock. He didn't even know what some of
the words the witch who'd written Hermione meant, but it was clear that she did. She flushed and quickly stuffed the paper back into the envelope.

The second letter was even more creative in excoriating Hermione.

"It doesn't mean anything," Harry told Hermione quickly. "None of them know you or me or Steven."

"They're all the same," Hermione said, opening one letter after another. She had a look in her eye, like she was hoping to find at least one letter to reaffirm her faith in people.

"Some people believe everything they read," Harry said. "But that doesn't mean everything written is right."

Hermione flushed an even deeper red. She'd believed everything in books for the longest time and it had only been recently that she'd started to realize that history was written by the victors.

"Ouch," she said, as she opened yet another piece of mail.

A yellowish substance leaked from the letter onto her hand, and her exclamation of irritation turned into one of pain.

Her hand began swelling horribly, growing boils.

Harry gingerly handled the envelope.

"It's undiluted bubotuber pus," he said, sniffing carefully. "You'd better get to the hospital wing."

Hermione nodded grimly as she tried to wipe the remaining pus off her rapidly swelling hand.

Those letters were only the first of an ever growing mass of letters, hate mail sent to Hermione day after day.

Each passing day saw Hermione's expression grow more and more stormy, until she finally admitted that she was going to find some way to make Rita Skeeter pay for what she'd done, not just to Hermione, but to Steven and Harry as well.

What scared Harry was that she was close to Amethyst, Pearl and Peridot. Between the three of them, and with Sirius, a former Marauder to provide ideas, there was no telling what form her vengeance might take.

Whatever it was, it was likely that it would be epic.
One day, the Quidditch field was as it had always been; by the next morning it was covered in low hedges that formed a maze.

Harry and Steven went with the other Champions to examine the maze while Ludo Bagman bragged that the walls would be twenty foot high within a month. There would be obstacles, but the first to reach the center of the maze and take the prize would be the winner of the contest.

Peridot's video screen innovation had been enormously popular; sales of omniocular recordings from the last task were still brisk despite the limited number of them. There wasn't time to set up enough equipment to cover the entire maze, but there would be viewers at key points along the route.

Future events would be better prepared, Bagman assured them. Wizards were already crafting equipment that could be rented for all sorts of events, especially culturally important ones.

Harry wondered if Peridot was getting a cut of the profits, or even recognition of her role in the creation of the system. Given Wizardly disdain for non-humans, it seemed unlikely.

Of course, he wasn't sure Peridot really understood the concept of money, so it was possible she didn't care. After all, she didn't eat, and most of her equipment came from Muggle junk piles. She didn't need clothing and she lived in a cave. Most things humans need money for weren't an issue for her at all.

"Do you have any idea what Hagrid's got cooking up for us?" Harry asked Steven as they left the maze.

He could already see that the maze was going to be huge, far outstripping the Quidditch field. Given Wizards' abilities to bend space, the inside of the maze might be even bigger than the outside. It was likely going to be a nightmare.

Steven shook his head soberly. "He's been really careful about telling us, and I've been trying not to ask. After what's been happening in the papers lately, I don't want to give the Purebloods any reason to fire him.

Harry nodded. If they got rid of Hagrid, Amethyst was the obvious next target, followed by Pearl. It was possible that they'd lose their right to have a temple of Hogwarts grounds at all, in which case they'd have to use the fidelius charm to disappear.

Of course, Steven was probably just concerned about his friend.

"Hey," Harry said suddenly. "Do you see that?"

Steven turned and squinted. "Is that Mr. Crouch?"

The Triwizard judge had been missing since the last task, although there had been notes from Percy Weasley that he was just ill.

He looked more than ill now; he looked dazed and confused, with hair sticking up. He obviously hadn't shaved for days. His robes were torn and scuffed at the knees.
If Harry hadn't known who he was, he'd have taken him for one of the homeless.

They both approached him.

"Can we help you, Mr. Crouch?" Steven asked cautiously.

He was talking to a tree. He sounded like he was dictating a letter to his secretary, and his eyes were bulging.

"Mr. Crouch?" Harry asked.

Crouch lunged forward, grabbing at Harry's robes. "Dumbledore...I need to see Dumbledore."

"OK," Harry said. "If you'll just get up we can go to..."

"I've done...a stupid thing. Must...tell...Dumbledore." The man looked utterly mad now, his eyes staring, and drool coming from his mouth.

"Warn him!" the man said intensely.

A moment later he blinked and turned to the tree again. He began to dictate another letter, sounding fluent and bored as though he did this every day.

Steven glanced at him, then sighed. He spit on his hand and slapped it on the man's forehead.

Crouch didn't react at all.

After a moment of waiting for something that didn't happen, Steven sighed and said, "We'd better get him to Dumbledore. My spit should have healed any physical injuries he would have had."

Before Harry could ask what Steven meant, he stepped close to the other man and picked him up, holding him above his head. The other man was tall enough that if he'd put him over his shoulder his feet would have dragged.

"You could just get taller," Harry said.

Steven shrugged. "My pants have been getting tight and short lately and I haven't had a chance to get any more."

Harry took that to mean that he was growing taller, not fatter. Like Neville, his baby fat was slowly dissolving as he grew older, though Steven was aging more slowly than any of the rest of them.

Still, it looked uncomfortable, holding the other man directly over his head.

They started walking back to the castle. They were almost there when there was a flash of green light from the edge of the forest.

It hit Mr. Crouch, who'd been rambling on talking about his wife.

The man immediately sagged and went limp in Steven's arms. Steven immediately dropped to the ground and pulled up his bubble, which covered the world in a haze of pink.

It wouldn't do any good against another Avada Kedavra spell, and Steven knew it.

He grabbed Harry in one hand and Mr. Crouch in the other and he started to run, zigging and zagging until he was able to find cover.
Mr. Crouch's legs dragged on the ground, but by this point he was beyond caring as he was very dead.

Aurors swarmed Hogwarts, looking for clues to what was assumed to be an assassination attempt directed toward Harry Potter.

The assumption was that Mr. Crouch had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Avada Kedavra spell had been cast from a great distance, and from that distance it was easy to make mistakes.

Both Harry and Steven had voluntarily offered up their Pensieve memories for examination, but none of their memories seemed to have helped the Aurors at all.

The area where the attack had come from had been meticulously examined, but no one had found enough evidence to lead anywhere.

Harry wasn't at all certain that the attack had been directed at him. Crouch had certainly had something he'd thought was important to say to Dumbledore, and shortly after revealing it, he was dead.

The worst effect of all of it was that the Aurors assigned Harry an escort. Two Aurors were to follow him at all times until the third task began.

This was a disaster; not only did it irritate his teachers, but it meant that he could no longer visit Sirius at the temple. Sirius was still wanted for murder, and he'd be arrested the moment he was seen by any Auror.

Furthermore, it was hard to live a normal life when he had adult eyes on him every waking hour.

The only way it could have been worse was if they'd brought the dementors back or simply swarmed the school with an army of Aurors. As it was, Harry felt like he was in prison. For the first time he found himself hoping that the third task would finally arrive so that Voldemort could try whatever he was going to try and get the Aurors off his back.

He tried complaining to Dumbledore, but for once the Headmaster refused to intervene on his behalf. The Aurors were there for the duration, which meant any chance he had for a normal life was over.

He began to spend all his time either in the library looking up hexes or in empty classrooms practicing them. For once the Aurors proved useful, as some of the friendlier ones were willing to offer advice about what he was doing wrong.

He quickly learned to look forward to some Aurors while others he came to dread, as they refused to do anything but stare off into the distance. It was usually, but not always the younger Aurors who were friendly.

The Aurors presence irritated some of his professors, especially Professor Snape, but given his past as a Death eater, the Aurors refused to stand outside the door to the classroom. It made Snape even more irritable and snappish than he usually was, and Harry found himself losing his house even more points than usual.

All of it was exhausting, which was why he found himself nodding off in Binn's class. He'd often nodded off before, given that Binn's class was enough to make the living feel like the dead, but the urge was even more powerful now.
He was flying on the back of an eagle owl, sailing through the blue sky toward an ancient house covered with ivy. The house was on a hillside, and it grew larger and larger until they sailed through a broken window and through a long passageway into a darkened room.

The windows were boarded up, and everything was cast in shadows.

He left the back of the owl and it fluttered across the room to a large chair with two figures on either side. One was a monstrous snake, and the other was Peter Pettigrew.

Harry had only seen him once, but he'd know the face of the man who'd betrayed his parents like the back of his hand. Although the Ministry had declined to charge Pettigrew with anything, believing his story about being terrified by Sirius, he'd vanished and hadn't been seen since shortly after the Auror investigation ended.

A high pitched voice spoke from the chair in which the owl had landed.

"It would seem that your luck holds, Wormtail." The voice wasn't the voice of a child, but Harry couldn't understand what was wrong with it. "Your foolishness hasn't ruined everything. He is dead."

"Thank you master," Pettigrew said, fawning gratefully.

"However, this will create suspicions that threaten everything. Security has been tightened and the plan will only become more difficult because of it."

"I'm sorry, Master." Pettigrew bent lower to the floor and his shoulders tightened.

"One more blunder..." the voice said. "Nagini has been peckish lately. Perhaps she needs an...addition to her diet."

"No, master, please."

"Then a reminder of why any more mistakes won't be tolerated."

"No, mas-"

"Crucio!"

One moment, Pettigrew was screaming. The next Harry found himself on the floor of Binn's class. The Aurors were standing over him, wands drawn as they looked for an invisible attacker.

It took Harry a moment to understand what had happened. He'd had another dream. It had taken him a long time to realize that there might be some kind of link between him and Voldemort, but Sirius had told him what to do if he had another one of these kinds of dreams.

"I need to see Dumbledore," he said quietly to one of the Aurors. "Now."

Crouch, it turned out, was even worse than Harry had realized.

Dumbledore showed him pensieve memories of the trial of Crouch's son. Any Muggle court would have had a father recuse himself from judging his own son's case, but Crouch had sent his own son to Azkaban. It was a worse punishment than anything Muggle law had to offer, and the man hadn't hesitated.

Worse, Dumbledore explained that he and Voldemort were inextricably connected through his scar.
The curse that had destroyed Voldemort's body had created a connection between both of them. Dumbledore had even admitted that he often didn't tell Harry everything, not because he didn't believe Harry was ready, but for fear that Voldemort might find a way to reach through the connection the other way.

The thought that Voldemort might be spying through his eyes gave Harry nightmares over the next few weeks- ordinary ones this time. He was learning to tell the difference. For the first time, he almost regretted Dumbledore being so forthcoming.

The idea that Voldemort might be using Harry to find out who he cared about most so he could target them worried him the most.

He talked to the others about it, and Steven and Hermione hadn't seemed nearly as worried as he was. According to them, there were enough spies in Slytherin alone that any competent Death Eater would already know who he cared about.

Steven even warned him against trying to go it alone and push all his friends away. He said he'd tried it once, and it had been terrible.

Further questioning revealed that his descent into pushing his friends away for their own good had lasted only a few hours. Given Steven's nature, it surprised Harry that it had lasted even that long. He'd have expected it to only last five minutes.

In the end, Harry decided that if he couldn't do anything about it, he couldn't worry about it. That was Ron's advice, and for once it was good advice.

"I had a rat spying on me for years," Ron said. "If I think about it for more than a minute, it starts to drive me mental."

In retrospect, Ron's experience most closely matched his own, although at least Ron hadn't known he was being spied upon until later.

Still, this advice was enough for him to finally put his worries aside and start preparing for the third and final trial.

A nasty article from Rita Skeeter about his collapse in Professor Binns' class was enough to make Harry irritable again. What worried him was that the class was entirely composed of Gryffindores, all of whom were supposedly on his side.

Skeeter didn't have Slytherin spies there, and Binns didn't even remember his collapse the next day. Binns rarely even remembered Harry's name correctly, so he wasn't likely as Skeeter's source.

Hermione seemed to have an idea about how Skeeter had done it, and she went to see Peridot of all people on the morning of the final challenge.

Although the challenge wasn't going to occur until nightfall, Harry was called that morning to meet with the other champions and their families. An invitation had been sent to the Dursley's; Harry was unsurprised not to see them there. What did surprise him was that he felt a little disappointed.

He would have thought that any idea of the Dursleys coming to see him succeed at anything would have gone out the door by the time he was five, but apparently there was still a tiny part of him that craved their affection.

What made it worse was seeing Amethyst and Pearl and Peridot and Winky gathered around Steven. Although they weren't at all a traditional family, they all loved him. They weren't even biologically
related, and they were showing Steven more love in a single morning than Harry had received from his own family in his entire life.

The gems weren't even biological and they were better people than the Dursleys.

Of course, there were probably a few of the more moderate Death Eaters who were better people than the Dursleys.

It wasn't until he saw Mrs. Weasley and the twins that Harry realized that Ron's family had come to support him where his own family hadn't.

The warm glow that gave him supplanted the fear that had been gnawing away at him about the final task. For a few moments he almost felt normal.

"Mrs. Weasley, this is Pearl...she's Steven's 'aunt.'" Harry said.

"I'm not actually his aunt," Pearl said. "I'm not sure why everyone keeps saying that."

Steven looked up at her and said, "It's easier?"

"It's nice to meet you," Mrs. Weasley said politely. "I've heard about you from Ron and Ginny in their letters."

"Ginevra is a diligent student," Pearl said. "She's a pleasure to teach."

She didn't say anything about Ron as a student, which was probably for the best. Ron was a little scared of Pearl anyway; as far as he was concerned, she was what Professor McGonagall would be like once she was ten thousand years old.

Or worse, Hermione if she was thousands of years old and controlled a classroom.

Mrs. Weasley chose to ignore the slight toward Ron and simply extended her hand. Pearl shook it, If Mrs. Weasley was uncomfortable with the fact that Pearl wasn't human, she didn't show it, which was more than a lot of adult wizards managed.

Even the decent ones tended to be condescending, outside of a few like Dumbledore who were more accepting.

Harry had a great deal of fun showing the Weasleys around the grounds. While Mrs. Weasley had attended Hogwarts when she was younger, there had been changes made since she graduated, changes that she talked about at length.

The Aurors following him had been good at blending in and seeming like a part of the crowd. There were times he almost felt like they weren't there at all, although he would eventually spot them once again trailing him.

Finally, the time for the last task was at hand.

They were all standing at the entrance to the maze, and he and Steven were to be given a head start because of their scores. Victor Krum had won the second task, but not by enough, so he would be following shortly behind them with Fleur trailing behind.

They were to send up a red flare if they needed to give up and be extracted. The audience had screens, but they only covered particularly dangerous parts of the maze; much of the maze was dark to everyone.
Harry felt tense; if Voldemort wanted to assassinate him, this would be the perfect time. Hiding in a
dark part of the maze, Voldemort's men would have little trouble in sniping at him. Worse, if he spent
too much time obsessing about them, he might miss one of the actual challenges and be eaten by
one of Hagrid's pets.

For the first time, the lack of Aurors following him around felt less like a blessing and more like a
curse.

He and Steven took off running, separating at the first split. Part of him wished they could stay
together; Steven's shield and bubble would make him feel safer, even if they weren't useful against
an Avada Kedavra.

Steven had promised to look out for him, but they'd both agreed that running together might make
the other schools think they were colluding. It would make the suggestion that Hogwarts was
cheating with a second candidate seem much more believable.

By itself, that wouldn't have been enough to sway either of them. Harry's safety was more important
than any task or even their school's reputation. However, Hermione had worried that working
together might be considered cheating by the magical contract with the Goblet of Fire.

The list of possible penalties that she'd researched had been enough to make Harry think twice about
it. No one knew the exact curses that had been laid in the cup; the records had been lost for a long
time. They'd just have to muddle through as well as they could.

Harry ducked as fire exploded over his head. Hagrid's blast ended skrewts had grown to a monstrous
size. The one in front of Harry was as large as a small automobile.

His first spell bounced off its shell.

He cast again, this time waiting until it reared up to show its softer underbelly. The creature froze,
and Harry ran onwards.

He was running, but had to stop as the hedges in front of him disintegrated. Steven went flying,
pursued by a familiar giant orange gem.

It had to be a boggart; Harry cast a Riddikulus spell, and the creature melted away.

"Are you ok?" he asked Steven.

Steven nodded, looking a little stunned. He'd apparently had his own encounter with a Skrewt, as his
robes were burned on one side.

Leaping to his feet, Steven was soon running ahead of Harry.

It occurred to Harry that running behind Steven might be the best place to be. Steven would run into
any traps or monsters, and Harry would be much less likely to be surprised. Yet the one physical
advantage he had over Steven was endurance. Harry had little doubt that if they ran long enough
he'd be able to outdistance Steven.

It was the best of both worlds. No one could accuse him of cheating, but he'd still get some
protection from Steven with a possible chance of pulling out a win at the end.

Steven ran into dead ends sometimes, which made Harry's plan a little less straightforward than it
might otherwise be. He had to pretend to be lost down a side passage sometimes, before resuming
the chase.
His strategy proved to be successful when he saw Steven fighting a giant spider up ahead. The spider was even larger than the Skrewts, and he stepped forward to help his friend, but it soon became clear that he wouldn't need it.

Steven ducked and dodged and climbed up the spider's legs before climbing on top of the spider and shooting it in the eye with a spell that made it stiffen up and topple over.

For a moment Harry wondered why he hadn't simply bashed it in the head; if he'd had Steven's strength, that's what he'd have done.

It occurred to him that Steven simply hadn't wanted to hurt the spider. It was harder to knock someone out by bashing them in the head than the telly would indicate. According to Hermione, that could lead to permanent brain damage.

It was far kinder simply to use a spell to stun a creature, which probably was the kind of spells Steven had been drilling himself in.

The Sphinx was undoubtedly supposed to have clues if they answered its riddles, but Steven simply took a different path.

He was attacked by more Skrewts and Harry could see that the fights were finally causing his endurance to flag.

Now was his chance.

As Steven knocked the last of the Skrewts out with a spell, Harry went flying past him, sprinting. They were close to the end of the maze; he could see the goblet in the distance.

It was a straight run, and Harry had a lifetime of experience running from Dudley and his friends. Steven was tired and there was no way his shorter legs could keep up with Harry's longer stride.

He glanced backward to see how far ahead he was; he almost froze as he saw Steven's bubble flying toward him.

Steven had grown to the size of a man, and he'd somehow lost control of his bubble and fallen so that he was spinning around inside it.

Harry's eyes widened in horror; he was going to be crushed by the ball.

Just as it was about to hit him, it vanished. Steven flew forward, crashing into him and shoving him into the Triwizard Cup.

In a flash, they both vanished.

They were no longer in Hogwarts.

Harry landed deftly on his feet, grateful for his experiences with Portkeys at the Quidditch Finals; if he hadn't known what to expect he'd have landed in a heap again.

Steven landed just as easily beside him.

They were standing in the middle of a darkened graveyard, with a small church in the distance. Tombstones were all around them, and it was as silent as the grave. In the distance a hill lead up to a fine house.

Weeds grew thick everywhere, and the cemetery looked as though it hadn't been visited in years. It
looked abandoned, and the tombstones nearby looked old. There weren't any electric lights anywhere, not even in the distance, with the only light coming from the moon.

"I've seen enough movies to know nothing good ever happens in a graveyard," Steven said quietly.

Harry was glad he'd held onto his wand despite the disorientation from the Portkey; Steven was already pulling his out.

"If there's zombies, I'll let you go first," Harry said.

Steven glanced at him and snickered.

"Is this supposed to be part of the task?" Steven asked.


Steven nodded grimly.

In the distance he heard the shuffling sound of footsteps. He saw a silhouette of a figure approaching in the darkness. From it's profile, it looked as though it was carrying something, although Harry couldn't see whether it was a baby or a bundle of rags.

The figure shuffled toward them until it was standing only six feet away.

Pain suddenly exploded from Harry's scar, and he felt his wand dropping from nerveless fingers. He fell to his knees.

"Kill the abomination," a high pitched voice said.

"Avada Kedavra," a second, familiar voice said.

Green light flashed, illuminating the night only to be replaced by a rose colored glow a moment later. Harry grimaced and turned his head with some difficulty.

Steven was standing beside him, his shield in front of him. The shield had green cracks in it, but it had held.

Steven glanced at him and said, "I've been getting stronger."

"Kill it! Kill it!" the high pitched voice shrieked.

Before the hunched figure could cast another spell, Steven threw his shield. The figure flew backward, falling over a low gravestone, and he saw something smaller flying through the air.

The shield vanished, and a moment later Steven was at his side.

"Are you all right?" Steven asked. Without asking he picked Harry up with one arm and dragged him behind a huge tombstone even as another flash of green light flew over their heads.

The tombstone they were hiding behind had a name on it; Tom Riddle.

Harry wanted to laugh hysterically at the idea that Voldemort's tombstone was the only thing protecting them from Voldemort's men.

He could hear whoever it was muttering in a low voice. A high pitched voice followed it, and a moment later he could hear the figure moving among the tombstones, presumably in an attempt to get
"Can you run?" Steven asked.

The pain had finally receded; Harry nodded. They both crouched and began making their way through the tombstones.

Emerald light flashed again, impacting another tombstone nearby. The one good thing about it all was that it gave away their attacker's position.

"If we get far enough away I can call Lion," Steven said. "And he'll carry us out of here."

Steven's patronus had powers that no one had ever heard of; Steven suspected it was because the original Lion had been created by his mother's magic and something of that power was infused in the patronus when he summoned it.

Harry nodded as they ducked behind another tombstone. The problem with summoning a patronus was that it was incredibly obvious in the dark. Unless they got some distance between themselves and the enemy they'd be in trouble.

They crawled and ducked and moved toward what they assumed was the outer edge of the graveyard; all they had to do was keep moving in one direction and they'd be out sooner or later.

Apparently their enemy had realized he was giving himself away with the bursts from his wand because there were no more attacks launched.

It wasn't until a figure lunged out of the dark that harry realized they'd been caught. Instead of a wand, something silver glinted in the moonlight, and Harry felt pain suddenly blossoming in his side.

The figure ducked away behind the tombstones, and he heard footsteps quickly retreating.

Firelight blossomed in the distance. He could hear chanting even as he fell to his knees. Blood was soaking his shirt.

"Steven," he called out.

Steven turned, and his eyes suddenly widened.

"What happened?"

"I've been stabbed." Harry said. He felt himself slowly dropping to the weed covered ground.

Anybody else would have frozen, unsure of what to do, but Steven only rushed to his side and said, "Where?"

Harry looked down and saw that his blood looked black in the moonlight. He wondered if the Dursleys would care when they heard he'd been killed.

"This is going to be a little gross," Steven said.

He licked his hand, and then carefully slipped his hand into Harry's shirt looking for the wound.

Harry hissed in pain as he found it, but a moment later he felt a cool warmth and the pain quickly vanished to a dull throb.

Steven spit on his other hand, and a moment later Harry felt a lot better.
"You're a miracle worker, mate," Harry said.

In the distance they could hear a voice. "Bone of the father, unwillingly given..." The voice faded into intelligibility.

"They're raising Voldemort," Harry said. "We have to stop them."

Steven nodded grimly, pulling Harry to his feet.

They began racing toward the fire. If they could stop Voldemort from being resurrected, everything would be easier.

"Flesh of the servant...willingly given..."

This was followed by a cry of unendurable agony.

They'd almost reached the fire when the voice said something else. "Blood of the enemy, forcibly given...you shall resurrect your foe!"

By this time they'd reached the clearing where they saw a cauldron that was shooting sparks, a giant snake and Peter Pettigrew, who was mysteriously missing a hand. The way he was clutching a cloth over his arm and the way it was rapidly becoming soaked with blood said that this was a recent development.

Rising from the cauldron stood a tall, balding figure that was entirely nude. His face was unnaturally white, bone-pale with a flat, almost nonexistent nose and red, glaring eyes,

"Robe me," Lord Voldemort said.

There was a dull cracking noise, and blood suddenly spouted from the side of Voldemort's head. He staggered backward, falling over the lip of the cauldron and landing sprawled out of sight behind the cauldron.

Harry glanced over at Steven, wondering if he'd seen what had happened.

Steven was picking up another large rock from a tombstone that had broken at one point of another. He looked at Harry and shrugged.

A moment later he threw the rock, and Peter Pettigrew yelped and fell behind a tombstone.

Harry felt himself grinning. In the darkness, it would be almost impossible to see where the stones had come from and even better, they were almost totally silent.

Thrown by someone as strong as Steven, a stone like that could kill. Unfortunately, Harry knew that Steven was unlikely to throw that hard, even when he knew these men were trying to kill him.

"We need to get out of here," Harry muttered. These men were grown wizards, killers who'd been through at least one war. They wouldn't let something as simple as a few rocks stand in their way.

Light exploded all around them, illuminating the entire graveyard as it flared from behind the tombstone. The light hung a hundred feet above the graveyard and simply hovered.

Like a nightmare, Voldemort rose from behind the cauldron. He'd found robes somewhere, and he was wearing them. He levitated directly into the air without using a wand., something Harry had always thought was impossible.
Steven threw another stone at him, harder this time, but it shattered off a shimmering in the air in front of him.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry shouted. The only way they'd have any chance at all would be to take his wand from him.

Without it, he'd only have spells he could cast wandlessly and his power would be decreased to a point where they might be able to survive.

"Avada Kedavra!" he shouted.

Steven's shield appeared again, and again the green light shattered against it. An unhealthy green light shone from the cracks and it took the light a moment to fade.

From what he'd been told, Steven could only summon his shield a few times a day before he exhausted himself. Voldemort could cast Avada Kedavra over and over.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry shouted again.

His wand began vibrating and his hand spasmed around it as the light from his spell met the light from Voldemort's in mid-air. Where the beams met, the light wasn't red or green, but was deeply golden.

Voldemort looked as surprised as he did, and Harry could see that his bone white hands were also spasming around a vibrating wand.

Harry felt his feet leaving the ground as he lifted into the air. A thousand beams of golden light arced from him to Voldemort, encircling them in a gold of golden light. A sound filled his head, one he'd always associated with joy and hope.

He pushed power toward Voldemort, who grimaced and began to push back.

The golden light flared, first pushing toward Voldemort, then Harry. Harry felt the light around him brighten, and he suddenly felt invigorated.

A moment later, he heard another dull thud as a rock hit Voldemort on the other side of the head.

The light surrounding them both vanished as Voldemort fell like a rock. Unfortunately, Harry found himself falling as well.

He felt his arm being jerked violently as a hand grabbed him in mid-air. It was Steven riding lion, and Steven pulled him up behind him.

Voldemort was already rising to his feet, pushing himself against something on the ground.

He looked down, and there was an expression on his face that Harry couldn't make out. Horror...resignation, he couldn't be sure.

Voldemort had his hand on the Tri-Wizard trophy, and a moment later he vanished into thin air.

"Uhh...do you suppose that was a double portkey?" Steven asked.

Harry nodded.

Without Voldemort to maintain it, the light above them was starting to fade. They could see Peter Pettigrew laying on the ground, a huge puddle of blood spreading from the stump of his hand.
"We've got to help him," Steven said.

Given that he'd just tried to kill them, Harry wouldn't have bothered, but Steven wasn't like that.

They landed and a moment later Steven was spitting on the remains of Pettigrew's stump. He tried it over and over again, but it didn't make a difference, blood soaking the from of his shirt as he desperately tried to keep the man alive.

Harry finally had to put his hand on Steven's shoulder. "It's too late."

Peter Pettigrew was dead, and what was worse, they had no way of knowing where the Tri-Wizard cup had sent Voldemort.

It was a hell of a way to end the tournament.
By the time Steven stopped trying to revive Peter Pettigrew, the light from above had faded into darkness. On his knees next to the body, Steven sat and stared down at his hands.

"Was this our fault?" he asked.

"He cut off his own hand," Harry said. "I didn't see anybody else there that could have done it."

"If I hadn't hit Voldemort, he'd have saved him," Steven said. He didn't look up.

Harry scowled. "We'd both be dead if you hadn't hit him when he wasn't ready for it."

The sorting hat had wanted to put Harry in Slytherin. It was possible that it was moments like this that had led it to that conclusion. As far as Harry was concerned, hitting Voldemort when he wasn't looking wasn't just smart, it was right.

"You saw what he could do when he was ready," Harry said. Once he'd been ready for the rocks they hadn't been any use at all.

From the darkness, Harry heard something rustling in the grass. He started to turn, but it was already too late. He saw ivory fangs flashing in the moonlight as something scaled lashed out at him.

He couldn't react fast enough, even though it was suddenly as if his life was flashing in front of his eyes. It was the snake, Voldemort's snake, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

A flash of white filled his vision, and Harry fell backwards, landing painfully on his backside. It took him a moment to realize what he was seeing.

Steven's Lion was devouring the snake, and Harry had a momentary feeling that he could hear screaming in the back of his mind.

"He used to be pink," Steven said. "And he was around all the time, not just when I cast a patronus."

The fact that Steven didn't even comment on the fact that Lion was eating Voldemort's snake bothered Harry for some reason. Maybe it was the look on his face; he looked like he was in shock.

He had blood all over his arms and hands; the blood of both Harry and Peter Pettigrew. He looked terrible.

"We need to get back," Harry said. "Everybody is going to be worried about us."

Steven didn't react for a moment, but finally he nodded. He looked down at the corpse of Peter Pettigrew. "We can't just leave him here. It wouldn't be right."

Glancing at Lion, Harry winced as he saw him devouring the snake's head whole.

"I'm not sure there's room for all of us. He looks like he'll be dead weight." Harry said quietly, then winced at the pun.

"It'll be fine," Steven said tiredly. He turned and pointed his wand at Pettigrew's body. "Wingardium Leviosa."
A moment later the body was floating. Harry wasn't sure why Steven didn't just pick him up, unless he was squeamish about handling a dead body. Maybe it was a sign of respect.

"Lion," Steven said.

The Lion looked up for a moment. It looked as though it was going to ignore him, but finally rose to it's feet, the snake's body trailing from it's mouth.

It bowed, and a moment later Pettigrew's body was slipping inside it's mane.

"He doesn't need to breathe," Steven said absently. "So it'll be O.K."

He still seemed out of it, but he climbed back up on Lion's back and Harry scrambled to follow. The less time they spent in this graveyard, the better.

The Lion looked almost resentful as it spit out the last third of the snake. It started moving, and a moment later it roared.

A moment later they were somewhere else. It wasn't like apparating at all; there wasn't the sensation of being squeezed by a tube. It didn't feel like anything; all Harry felt was the muscles of Lion's back against his legs as they flexed and moved.

It made him wonder again why all Wizarding transportation tended to be uncomfortable.

Then they were at the edge of the maze, the stands which had been full of onlookers looming above them. The stands were empty now, and the stand in the middle had somehow collapsed. Where three large screens had been set up, there was only shattered glass.

They could hear the sound of weeping from somewhere behind the stands, along with the murmuring voices of a crowd.

Lion sat, letting them slide to the ground, and a moment later he disgorged Pettigrew from his mane and then he vanished.

Harry cautiously moved to the side to get a better look.

It was a chaotic scene, with people lying injured on the ground and other people milling about, seemingly confused. He saw classmates who looked stunned, as though their worlds had been totally upended.

He recognized Susan Bones, who was kneeling over an injured classmate. She looked up and caught his eye. Before he could say anything she shouted and pointed in his direction.

The crowd surged toward him and Steven, and he felt like running back into the maze as lights from cameras flashed in his eyes.

_____________________________________

His artificial eye rolling back and forth, Mad Eye Moody sat on a bench in front of them. He'd been interrogating them for thirty minutes after having gotten them away from the crowd. It had been a little dicey for a minute, as grasping hands and the press of the crowd had made it hard to breathe, but he'd extracted them efficiently using sheer intimidation.

"I'm the one asking the questions, boys," he said.

Harry sighed irritably and rubbed his scar. "We've told you what happened. We've even offered for you to look at our memories using a Pensieve, what more do you want?"
"I just want to know what happened to Pearl and Amethyst," Steven said. "And Hermione."

"The girl's fine," Moody said. "Was helping in the hospital wing last I saw. Your..."aunts" went after Voldemort along with Dumbledore."

Steven nodded, as though it didn't even occur to him that they would do anything else.

Moody said, "They seemed to get it in their heads that if he appeared instead of you that meant you were dead."

"What?" Steven asked, looking surprised instead of tired for the first time in the entire conversation.

"The tall one has a vicious streak too...she blasted him in the side with one of those spear things of hers and he was bleeding like a stuck pig even when he flew away."

Steven looked oddly distressed by this, even though Moody caught Harry's eye and they both shared a tight smile. Voldemort's pain was everyone else's gain.

"He killed three good aurors before he got away," Moody said. "Injured a lot more, and the stampede out of the stands hurt who knows how many. He deserves everything he got."

Steven sighed, but didn't argue.

"On the good side, with your aunts and Dumbledore chasing him, he won't have time to get up to any mischief," Moody said. "If we get really lucky, they might be able to save us the trouble of another war."

"You think that's what's going to happen?" Harry asked. "Another war?"

Moody's artificial eye focused on Harry for a moment, then switched to Steven. "If they don't catch him, it's all but certain. There's an army of purebloods out there just waiting to show the world what they can do."

"So who was the traitor?" Harry asked.

Moody didn't say anything.

"He had to have someone on the inside to jinx the Goblet, or they never could have got my name in," Harry said.

"That's what Hermione thought too," Steven said. "She assumed it had to be a teacher, but really it could have been anyone who had access to the school."

Moody chuckled coldly. "They broke into my house...tried to ambush me...but I had extra wards they didn't know about. I'd set them in case that short aunt of yours tried to come after me."

"Hey," Steven said, sitting up. "Amethyst wouldn't do that!"

"Like she wouldn't substitute a Weasley potion for Snape's hair gel?" Moody asked dryly. He shook his head. "I couldn't risk it. It saved me from an ambush anyway, even if I didn't catch the one's trying to get me."

"So if they didn't get you, who did they get?" Harry asked. He looked at the Auror dubiously. Just because he said they hadn't gotten him didn't mean they hadn't actually gotten him. Given the power of Wizard magic, it was possible that he wouldn't even remember if they had gotten him.
"We'll be looking into it," Moody said. "But so far, I'm thinking Crouch might have done it. He had the skill and the opportunity, and if he was Imperiused and broke it...it might explained why he was killed."

"Then who killed him?" Steven asked. "It wasn't like he killed himself."

"Whoever was holding him whenever he wasn't putting on a role here," Moody said. "I wouldn't put it past a Malfoy or any of the other Dark families, but it could have been almost anyone loyal to the Death eaters."

"Maybe he was being brave in the end," Steven said hopefully.

Given the damage the man had done to Winky, it astounded Harry that Steven could have any charitable thoughts toward him at all. Whatever he'd been trying to tell Dumbledore in the end didn't make up for the life he'd led before, at least not for Harry.

"Maybe it wasn't even Crouch when he was here," Steven said. "Wizards have ways of changing their shape, right?"

Moody shook his head. "Polyjuice has to be reapplied regularly, and I'd have noticed if he was slipping drinks out of a flask every hour."

"Maybe not," Harry said. "How often was he around people for longer than an hour?"

"Hmm," Moody said. He looked thoughtful. "It'd be easier for an outsider than a teacher here. Just make sure you aren't at an event that long..."

"The challenges were all longer than an hour," Harry said. "Somebody would have noticed."

"I think he might have been drinking something at all the challenges," Steven said. "Water or something out of a big cup."

"Pretending to be drinking," Moody said grimly. "Which means whoever impersonated him is still out there."

Harry scowled. As though his life wasn't complicated enough without the threat of some shape changing Death eater to make his life even harder.

Before he could respond the door slammed open, and Amethyst and Pearl were suddenly there.

"Steven!"

For a moment Harry felt as though he was outside of his body. Watching how these two inhuman women reacted to Steven made him feel bitterly envious. He'd never had anyone respond to him like that. The Dursleys would have been delighted to hear that he was dead.

It wasn't until he felt arms suddenly surrounding his in a bear hug that he suddenly came back to reality.

It was Amethyst, and she was hugging him. Harry wasn't sure how to react, and so he stood awkwardly, his hands to his side.

He felt odd, but in a good way.

"I'm glad to see you made it, dude," Amethyst said into his ear. "And thanks for bringing Steven home safe."
Before he knew it, Harry felt himself relaxing, and for a moment, just a moment, he felt a glimmer of what having a real family actually meant.

A warm hug from someone happy to see he was alive. It wasn't a bad way to end his day. It wasn't bad at all.

The interrogation by Moody was only the first of several; Dumbledore and Snape spoke to them first, and later they had to speak to other Aurors from the Ministry. It had already been past nightfall when the last trial had begun and by the time the adults were ready to let them go, all the other students had been in bed for hours.

The adults had a particular problem believing that Harry and Steven had dueled Voldemort alone, although Moody had chortled madly while examining the Pensieve memory of Steven hitting Voldemort with a rock.

No one had commented on the idea that Steven could have taken Voldemort's head off with the rock had he chosen to. There were three Aurors dead because he hadn't, and Harry could see that it was weighing on Steven.

Killing wasn't something Steven was meant to do. It worried Harry a little that if the rock had been in his hand and he'd had Steven's strength, he wouldn't have hesitated. To Harry, not killing Voldemort would make him responsible for everything Voldemort did afterwards.

Telling that to Steven was out of the question. He already felt bad enough. People had been hurt and he felt responsible.

Madam Pomfrey would have insisted that they stay in the hospital overnight; although she didn't say it, Harry suspected she thought Voldemort might have put any sort of nasty curse on the both of them. However, the wing was full of the injured. The chaos and pandemonium when Voldemort had appeared had injured far more people than he had himself.

Instead, they were both escorted to their respective quarters with strict instructions to go to her if they noticed anything strange at all.

Harry had found himself staring up at the ceiling unable to sleep. His mind was still racing, images of Voldemort's bone white skin hovering in the air flashing over and over in his mind.

It wasn't until he was being shaken awake by Ron that he realized he'd slept at all.

Being pestered with questions by Ron early in the morning would have been irritating enough, even if he knew he meant well. Having it happen when he'd only had a few hours sleep made it worse.

Having to go over everything all over again in the common room, with Hermione's questions being more pointed and intelligent than Ron's made it even worse. The only good thing was that they'd waited until everyone else had gone down to breakfast before waking him.

Apparently someone had decided that being mobbed by his classmates the moment he woke wasn't going to be helpful. Harry felt himself being grateful to whoever it was. That showed sensitivity and an awareness of human nature most Wizards didn't seem to possess.

He steeled himself for whatever reaction his classmates would have, and then they all went down to breakfast. They met Steven on the way; he was being escorted by Cedric Diggory.

Hermione rushed over to him and embraced him. Harry found himself looking away uncomfortably,
although he wasn't sure he understood why. It might have been because he thought he saw Hermione crying.

When they stepped into the Great Hall, the usual buzz of conversation dropped off the moment they were recognized.

Almost a quarter of the seats were empty.

"A lot of parents pulled their kids out of school," Ron murmured. "Think it's not safe here."

Harry didn't say anything. He was too busy watching the entire student body stare at him and Steven. They made their way toward the Gryffindor table, although Cedric steered Steven toward the Hufflepuffs at the last minute.

Fortunately there were plenty of seats and the Hufflepuffs were seated next to them. No one objected when they sat close enough that Steven could turn around in his seat and talk to them, although this was generally frowned upon.

Harry was proud to see that fewer Gryffindors seemed to be missing than any other house. The Hufflepuffs had the most missing, and they were sitting closer together than usual. The Slytherins, oddly, had almost as few people missing as the Gryffindors.

Cedric Diggory was making sure that all of the Hufflepuffs got to see Steven. The moment Steven sat down, it looked as though the entire House was leaning toward him. It wasn't just curiosity either. They almost seemed to find reassurance in his presence.

It wasn't long before Harry had to quit watching the Hufflepuffs. Everyone at his own table was barraging him with questions.

At some point, someone slipped a copy of the Daily Prophet in front of him. At the very top was a headline screaming "DARK LORD RETURNS!"

A picture of a snarling Voldemort levitating and gesturing with a wand took up the top third of the page. A smaller picture was in the bottom right hand corner; it was of him and Steven looking shocked. The blood covering their shirts looked ghastly. It looked like they'd been through a war.

It hadn't occurred to him just how bad the blood covering them would have looked. His only concern had been getting home and shock at the chaos that had followed.

The article that followed was demanding swift action by the Ministry; for some reason no one seemed to be talking about the fact that Voldemort's appearance at Hogwarts was an accident. Everyone seemed to assume that it was some sort of an attack designed to create maximum terror.

Looking at the faces of his classmates, Harry had to admit that it might have been an effective one. Voldemort had been the bogeyman for an entire generation, and he'd proven that the wards of Hogwarts weren't enough to keep him from attacking at leisure.

That was the newspaper's position, and that seemed to be what most of his classmates believed as well. They spoke in low, hushed tones among themselves, and their faces seemed thin and drawn. Everyone seemed paler than usual, and Snape was missing from the teacher's table.

The fact that it was all a lie didn't seem to bother anyone, and no matter how hard Harry tried to convince them, no one would believe it. He glanced back at Steven and they shared a look of dismayed resignation.
The paper had made them out to be victims who had somehow managed to survive, which actually wasn't far from the truth.

The article on whether or not they would suffer from Wand-shock (apparently a Wizarding form of PTSD) was entirely unnecessary, especially the suggestion that they'd have to be incarcerated in the psychiatric ward of St. Mungos.

Neville looked particularly pale and upset when he saw that article, although Harry wasn't sure why. He and Steven were the ones the paper wanted to send to the loony bin.

There was also an article calling for Cornelius Fudge to be impeached, even though he had nothing to do with Voldemort's return as far as Harry knew. He hadn't even been the Minister when Voldemort had disappeared, and he hadn't had a chance yet to make any policies that would affect Voldemort in any way.

As far as Harry was concerned, they needed to give the man the benefit of the doubt. If he was really as incompetent as the paper said, he'd soon prove it. Otherwise, he deserved a chance. He'd always been fairly pleasant to Harry the few times they'd met.

It could have been worse, Harry finally decided. Given his past experiences with the Daily Prophet, they could have blamed him for Voldemort's resurrection or accused him of being on Voldemort's side.

Over the next few days he found his classmates avoiding him and not meeting him in the eye. Word had spread that he and Steven had faced Voldemort and according to Ron, consensus around the school was that Voldemort was going to try to kill him.

Nobody, not even the Gryffindors wanted to be near him when that happened.

Most of the houses treated Steven the same way with the exception of his own house. The Hufflepuffs seemed to cling even harder to Steven than they had that first morning, as though he was some sort of talisman against evil.

He'd faced Voldemort and survived and apparently the Hufflepuffs assumed that Steven would stand between them and whatever danger came. It didn't hurt that his "aunts" had visibly harmed Voldemort. From what Harry had heard, Amethyst had even been "poofed" in the middle of the fight, only to return moments later as a twisted mockery of herself to continue the fight.

The gems themselves were being treated differently. They'd always been treated with a kind of condescending familiarity that none of the other teachers received. It was the same sort of familiar condescension as Hagrid himself was treated with. Wizards didn't think much of non-humans.

Now, though, it was as though the entire population of the school had finally recognized just how dangerous the gems actually were. Even the Slytherins were treating Amethyst with a kind of wary respect, and they were nicer to Pearl as well, at least to her face.

There were calls in the Daily Prophet to draft them into the effort to find Voldemort, who had disappeared. Despite a massive manhunt, no sign of him had been found, although there were suspicions that he was being harbored by any number of Dark families.

In some way, the response to his return was almost designed to draw people to his call. Aurors were breaking into people's homes and destroying their property without leaving them with any sort of legal recourse. People were becoming angry with the Ministry, which was only slightly better than being deathly afraid.
The remaining students were getting angry letters from their families, and Ron talked about his father's own uneasiness with the new policies.

Steven seemed to think that it was the government needing to be seen as doing something, anything so that people could feel safer. He said that politicians would lie to people and think that it was for their own good, and for once Harry couldn't disagree.

Each night Harry went to bed wondering if he would have the dream again, about Voldemort rising from the cauldron, his corpse-white skin glistening in the light. It wasn't one of the dreams connected to his scar; it was simply an unpleasant memory.

At least he didn't worry that Voldemort was going to kill him in his sleep. Voldemort had been trying for years and there was nothing he could do if he tried. There wasn't any point in worrying about it.

The school year ended with a grave speech from Dumbledore about the need for everyone to stand together in the face of hardship and adversity. It didn't seem to reassure any of his classmates, and Harry had to wonder if some of the faces he saw in the crowd would disappear before the start of the next year.

He hoped not. If there was really a war they'd need every wand they could raise to stand against Voldemort.

He just hoped it would be enough.

As Harry lay on the ground panting, he realized that this was the first year that someone had tried to kill him before the school year had even begun.

Three Aurors stood with their backs to him and Dudley, driving the dementors away, the light from each individual patronus lighting up the night.

Moody turned and grinned at Harry.

Harry heard a muffled shriek from Dudley beside him. He glanced over at Dudley, who looked almost as pale from Moody's appearance as from having his soul almost devoured only moments before.

Somehow, the initial shock of Moody's appearance had stopped mattering over the past year; the scars, the artificial leg, none of it mattered. Only the crazily spinning eye continued to be creepy, and Harry suspected it would continue to be so even if he knew the man for a hundred years.

"How'd you know?" he asked.

"Had a tip," Moody said quietly. "Ye've got good friends Potter. Trust me when I say we'll be lookin into this."

If they hadn't shown up, Harry would have had to defend himself with magic. Given that he'd already been charged with underage magic in the past, it might have caused him problems, or even caused him to have his wand snapped.

Voldemort must have someone in the Ministry, Harry decided, someone who wanted to destroy him legally if they couldn't find any other way to do it. After the way his and Voldemort's wands had interacted he doubted Voldemort wanted to risk a direct confrontation, at least without borrowing
someone else's wand.

"It's been decided to take you someplace safe, at least until this is all wrapped up," Moody said.

Dudley finally spoke up. "What about me? I'm not safe?"

Moody flicked his wand in Dudley's direction, and Dudley collapsed, his face hitting the concrete. At Harry's look, he shrugged. "We're going to obliviate him; it's not like he'll remember any of this."

"He's not going to be in danger, is he?" Harry asked. While Dudley had been horrible to him throughout his entire life, he didn't deserve to have his soul ripped out and devoured.

"Safest place for your kin is at home and away from you," Moody said. "I wanted to take you from the very start of the summer, but Dumbledore insisted you have time with your family."

"Why me?" Harry asked.

Moody gave him an incredulous look. "You and your friend beaned Voldemort in the head with a rock. He'd have had to come after you anyway, but now he really wants you dead."

A moment later, Moody dragged him back to his house in order for him to gather his things. Seeing his aunt faint at the sight of Moody was almost enough to make up for it all. Even better was when Moody obliviated all of them.

"Not in favor of leaving Muggles with any information about the Wizarding world," Moody said. At Harry's look he said, "They can't defend themselves; they're an open book to any Wizard who comes passing by."

Even if they were to ward the house like the Weasleys warded the barrow, it'd be an easy matter for anyone who knew anything about his family to simply track his uncle to work or his cousin to school. Harry wondered why no one had bothered attacking him at home in the past.

If he'd been a burgeoning Dark Lord, he'd have hired Muggle private detectives to track down all his enemies who lived in the Muggle world. Private detectives would be able to pick out patterns, and it would be an easy thing to attack someone coming out of the grocery store, or work.

He could even use magic to command the Dursleys to drive him somewhere where he could be ambushed. In his darker moments, Harry sometimes thought it wouldn't even take magic. If the people who were after him were anyone but Wizards, they'd have given him up gladly.

Luckily they were stubborn and wouldn't give Wizards the time of day even if they were Harry's enemies. Unfortunately, they wouldn't likely be given a choice.

The only thing that had saved him so far was that the Death eaters were just as prejudiced as the Dursleys. The idea of using Muggles for anything would never even occur to them.

Harry thought that having a team of Sniper might make the whole Wizarding war much easier. From what he'd heard, the bullets killed you before the sound ever reached you. Unfortunately, that was why Wizarding society in general would turn on anyone who used Muggles as weapons of war.

If he'd been a Dark Lord, Harry suspected that he'd have sent Muggleborns and Halfblood followers to serve in the military. Wizard snipers would be even more deadly than Muggle snipers, and they'd be marginally more acceptable also.

As Moody took him from his house, Harry reflected that it was a good thing he wasn't a dark lord.
It was a hidden house that only revealed itself to those who'd been given the secret. As Harry entered, he wondered if he'd have been forced to live in a place like this if he'd been given to a Wizard family. Undoubtedly there were a lot of Death Eaters after the war who would have loved to have killed the baby who had banished their master.

Mrs. Weasley was waiting on them and she rushed him up the stairs. Apparently there were wizards here already who were having a meeting, and Harry wasn't invited.

Considering that he was one of the people who were at the top of the Death Eaters' list of most wanted murder victims, he'd have thought that he deserved a chance to speak up on his own behalf.

The fact that Ron and Hermione were here already made his irritation flare up even more. He'd been left out in the open with his Muggle relatives, bait for Voldemort or his minions to take up where they left off while Ron and Hermione were here, safe and sound?

It wasn't until he saw Steven standing behind them that he felt a little better. Steven had to be at least as high on the death list as he was; after all, he'd been responsible for the death of Quirrell and he'd almost given Voldemort a concussion and revealed him to the world earlier than he'd planned."

"Hermione was staying with me and the gems for part of the summer," Steven said, "When Dumbledore started the Order up again. Since he asked Pearl and the others to join, we came with him, and Ron came with his mother."

"What's the Order?" Harry asked. "There was something on a piece of paper Moody made me read, but..."

"The Order of the Phoenix," Hermione said. "It was Dumbledore's group that fought in the last war. Your parents were members, and so were Ron's."

"I'd have thought the Ministry would have done something," Harry asked blankly. "Don't they have Aurors out looking everywhere? They went crazy when Sirius escaped, and he was just an escaped lunatic as far as they were concerned."

Hermione scowled and her face had a sudden dark expression. "Things have gotten bad, and it's not Voldemort doing it as far as we can tell. If the Ministry keeps treating regular Wizards the way they have been, they'll have a war on their hands, just not the war they expected."

"Fudge has declared martial law." Ron said. "Suspended elections until You Know who is found. He's started doing things..."

"He's putting people in Azkaban without trial," Hermione said bluntly. "And not just Death Eaters either. Anybody who says anything against the Ministry is assumed to be on the side of the enemy."

Harry stared at the others; he'd read issues of the Daily Prophet, even if he'd only skimmed the headlines and gotten the issues a week late. He hadn't heard anything about any of this.

"Can he do that?" Harry asked. "Can't somebody stop him?"

Hermione shook her head. "Wizarding society doesn't have any checks and balances; if he was charged with a crime the Wizengamot could depose him, but under martial law that's unlikely to happen."

"He's hoping that Voldemort gets captured," Steven said, glancing at Hermione. "Then he can say that it was all for the greater good and he's likely to be popular again."
"We're in hiding as much from the Ministry as from the Death Eaters," Ron admitted. "Fudge was always threatened by dad, and dad says it wouldn't take much for them to trump up some kind of charges."

"We'll probably be ok in school," Hermione said. "Handcuffing children without very good reason might be just enough to push people over the edge."

It was a lot to take in.

"I'm surprised that Rita Skeeter hasn't been all over this," Harry said.

Hermione glanced at Steven and looked a little guilty. "She's been indisposed all summer."

Ron smirked. "She's an unregistered animagus...turns into a beetle. Amethyst bubbled her and has been entertaining her all summer."

Terrorizing her, more likely, given Amethyst's behaviors toward people she didn't like.

"We'll probably let her out soon," Hermione said. "I doubt she'll like what's been happening any better than we have."

After a summer at the mercy of someone who was worse than the Weasley twins, Harry didn't see how they'd get Skeeter on their side. Of course, being an unregistered animagus involved jail time, and there were no trials currently, so she couldn't exactly accuse them of anything.

Glancing back at the stairs, Harry said, "So who's in this Order?"

"Snape's in," Steven said. His tone indicated that this vindicated his opinion of the man, an opinion that Harry didn't share.

"My parents," Ron said. "Sirius...we think there's at least twenty of them, but they don't let us into meetings, and since mom found out about the extendible ears the twins invented, we haven't been able to listen in either."

"I blame Sapphire," Hermione said, scowling.

"You can't blame Sapphire for everything," Steven protested. "I'm sure one of the others would have figured it out eventually."

"I'm sure they did in the future and told her about it, so she stopped us from doing it in the past...um...present."

"Sapphire...?" Harry asked.

Steven's face lit up. "Oh! Sapphire finally reformed, and she said it's just a matter of time before Ruby wakes up. Everybody's going to be ok!"

A voice came from behind him, "The meeting is over, and everyone can come down for dinner."

Harry turned and stared. A small woman floated at the top of the stairs. She had blue skin an blue wavy hair that completely covered the top of her face so that he couldn't see her eyes. She didn't have a nose at all. She was wearing a blue floor length dress and he wouldn't have known she was floating at all except that she'd missed the top step and was floating a foot back from where she should have been.

"You're welcome," she said, although Harry hadn't said anything. "We're going to be very good
friends."

All Harry could do was stare as she floated down the stairs.
Passing a row of House-elf heads on the wall, they entered a room with plywood covering one part of the wall. It looked new, as though something had happened to the wall and someone had shoddily tacked up wood to cover the hole.

"What happened here?" Harry asked.

Hermione grimaced. "There was a horrible painting there permanently stuck to the wall. It liked to scream at everyone and curse at anyone it thought inferior."

"Which was everybody," Ron said. He'd found a hunk of cheese from somewhere and was chewing on it even though they were heading for dinner.

"Amethyst warned her," Hermione continued.

Harry had seen what Amethyst's whip could do on a small scale. The hole in the wall was a lot bigger than a simple painting would have covered.

"It was inevitable," the woman floating ahead of them said, even though she didn't seem as though she was listening in on their conversation.

"We were glad to see her go," a voice came up from up ahead. "It was even worth losing the wall."

Harry straightened as he recognized Sirius's voice. Sirius stepped around the corner, and he smiled at Harry. He'd found time to get a shave and a haircut and he was dressed well, at least for a wizard.

"We think he's trying to impress Pearl," Hermione murmured in his ear.

"Welcome to my house," Sirius said. He gestured expansively. "I'm the last of the Blacks, so all this is mine. I was happy to offer it as a headquarters for Dumbledore; it was the least I could do after everything he's done for me."

Although his tone of voice was congenial, there was a bitter undercurrent. With Peter Pettigrew dead, Sirius's chances of ever becoming exonerated were vanishingly slim, especially considering the current political climate.

The fact that Dumbledore had left him to rot for more than a decade without even trying to get him a trial had to sting, but at least he was doing what he could now to fight the real villains.

Mrs. Weasley was a better cook than the house elves, or maybe it was just the company. After a summer spent with the Dursleys, any food tasted delicious.

Harry found himself watching Amethyst and the new Auror Tonks as they kept trying to top each other with the shapes they twisted their faces into. They'd already done Dumbledore and Snape and most of the teachers at Hogwarts.

Snape, fortunately wasn't eating with them. Hermione said he never did, even though Steven had tried to get him to do so.

Unlike Amethyst, neither Pearl nor Sapphire ate anything. They simply sat at the table and listened to the conversation. Sirius spoke to Pearl in a low voice, and occasionally she gave an amused chuckle.
Sapphire didn't say anything at all.

Once the final course of the meal was finished, and the plates had been whisked away, Sirius spoke. "It's been decided," he said, with a glance toward an irritated looking Mrs. Weasley, "that it's better to discuss certain matters with you than to let you take action without knowing what you are up against."

"It would be inadvisable," Sapphire said quietly.

"I still think they are too young," Mrs. Weasley said disapprovingly.

"This affects me and Harry," Steven said, "More than anybody. If it's something that affects us, we need to know."

Undoubtedly the gems would tell Steven everything anyway, although Harry did recall hearing Steven talking about them trying to hide things from him in the past so as not to worry him.

"Unfortunately, some of what we will be talking about involves Order secrets," Sirius said. "So Harry and Steven and Hermione can stay. Everyone else needs to leave."

"Why can Hermione stay and I have to leave?" Ron protested, even as Ginny and the twins chimed in after him.

"First, because your mother doesn't want you involved in this," Sirius said. "Second, because Hermione made herself a target the moment she fused with Steven during the ball last year, and because she already knows enough of what we are going to say to make partial information dangerous."

"They'll just tell me whatever you say," Ron said. He glanced at Harry and Hermione pleadingly.

Harry's first impulse was to agree loyally, but a glance at Hermione, who shook her head slightly kept him from saying anything.

"They'll tell you some of it," Sapphire said. "But some secrets they'll have to keep."

"She creeps me out," Ron muttered.

A moment later, he and the others were ushered out of the room along with Mrs. Weasley, who went with them, undoubtedly to make sure that they weren't listening in.

To Harry's surprise, even some of the Aurors stood up and left the room, including an Auror named Fletcher and Tonks.

In the end they were left in the room alone with Sirius, Pearl, Amethyst and Sapphire. It was only in that moment that Harry realized how bare the walls were. The rest of the house was covered in paintings and knick knacks; house elf heads and other strangeness. The walls here were bare.

Maybe they didn't trust even the paintings to keep their secrets.

"There are secrets we'd like to be able to share with you," Sirius said, "But there is a concern that You-Know-who might use his link with you to steal secrets from your mind."

The thought had never occurred to Harry, although it probably should have. No wonder no one wanted to tell him anything! Voldemort could use anything he knew to hurt the people he cared about.
"Dumbledore considered asking Snape to teach you Occlumency," Sirius said. At Harry's look, he said, "It's the art of protecting one's mind from outside influences. Snape is the best at it of anyone."

Harry scowled. The thought of having anything to do with Snape outside of school was hard enough. This, though seemed like it would involve some kind of mind reading, and the last thing he wanted to do was allow Snape access to his thoughts.

"It was brought up, however," Sirius said, glancing at Sapphire, "That your relationship might make learning difficult. It's been decided that Remus and I will alternately teach the three of you Occlumency."

"You two know about it?" Steven asked. "Hermione told me it was a pretty rare skill."

Sirius looked smug. "How do you think we got away with as much as we did as Marauders. Dumbledore was a legilimens and we had to learn it to keep up."

Which might be part of the reason they didn't want the Weasley twins to listen in. Learning to protect their minds from mind reading would make their pranks even harder to unravel.

"Why not Ron?" Harry asked.

"Occlumency is a difficult subject," Sirius said. "It was thought that Ron might not have the drive to learn it. Besides, teaching it to three people is going to be difficult enough, even with two teachers, given the time frame we have."

"Are you and Amethyst and Sapphire going to be learning with us?" Steven asked Pearl.

Pearl smirked. "It turns out that gems have a natural resistance to that kind of magic. Being inorganic might have something to do with it. Also, even if a human wizard gets through, he'd have thousands of years of memories to sift through. Humans aren't designed for that kind of thing."

"Snape had a migraine for three days after he tried it on me," Amethyst said. "And Pearl and Sapphire are both at least twice as old as I am."

"Shouldn't that make me immune too?" Steven asked.

"Sorry dude," Amethyst said. "You think like a human and you've got a meat brain."

"You saying I'm a meat head?" Steven asked, pretending to be outraged. The slight smile on his face gave away his true feelings.

Hermione giggled, and Harry glanced at her, startled. Hermione didn't giggle.

Teaching the three of them made sense anyway. Harry had a feeling that the gems were involved in whatever secrets the Order was hiding from him, and if they were it was likely that Steven already knew about them. He needed to learn occlumency then almost as much as Harry. Hermione would doubtlessly learn it faster than either of them and she could tutor them both.

"Time's short?" Harry asked, thinking back to what Sirius had been saying.

Sirius glanced at Sapphire again for a moment before nodding. "It's not just the Death eaters we have to worry about. Fudge considers Dumbledore a threat to his power, and he's likely to take it out on anybody in the Order that he can find."

"What about Voldemort?" Harry asked bluntly.
"He wants you and Steven dead," Sirius said. "And he's likely to send assassins after you, especially
Steven, since it's thought that he wants to defeat you in front of his followers."

"We'll keep you guys safe, though," Amethyst said. "You've got nothing to worry about."

There was no way she could guarantee that, and Harry knew it. It was another empty promise like
the promises adults had been making his entire life.

"That might have been good to know before I was sent to live with my Muggle family!" Harry said
angrily, ignoring Amethyst, although after the incident with the rock it had almost been inevitable.

"There are blood wards on your house," Sirius said. "That will keep you safe until you become an
adult as long as you stay there at least part of the year."

Harry stared at him for a moment. That would explain a lot; certainly why he was required to go
back to the Dursleys when Sirius was his godfather and had been more of a family member than his
actual blood family ever had.

It still didn't explain why the Death Eaters didn't simply have someone follow Uncle Vernon's car
back to their house when he came home from Hogwarts, then kill them when they weren't in their
house. Blood wards hadn't protected him from dementors after all.

Wizards were idiots.

"What has Voldemort been doing?"

"No one is sure," Sirius said, and this time he did not glance at Sapphire. "It's suspected that he's
gathering his forces in secret. You forced his hand early, but the Ministry has been playing into his
hands by cracking down on everyone. They haven't caught a single Death Eater, but they've rounded
up a lot of innocent citizens."

Harry glanced at Hermione and Steven.

"Voldemort blackmails people," Sirius said. "Or he uses magic to control their minds. He'll kidnap
someone important to them to force them to do what he wants. The last thing he'll do is work out in
the open until he has enough power to face us directly."

Harry sighed. For the first time in a long time he did not have any stupid optimism that this would be
the year that everything turned around and finally got better.

At the rate he was going, he'd be lucky to make it to Halloween.

Dolores Umbridge was the worst Defense professor they'd ever had.

Even Quirrell with his stutter and Lockhart, fraud that he was, had taught them at least some magic
despite their best efforts. Umbridge had flat out stated that she wasn't going to teach them any
practical magic at all.

"The Ministry is worried about a rebellion," Hermione said soberly. "The last thing they want to do
is teach Wizards how to fight."

That seemed short sighted to Harry. Even if Voldemort and his followers hadn't been an issue, where
were they going to get new Aurors if nobody learned how to fight in school? Old Aurors died all the
time; most of them weren't nearly as lucky as Moody, and he looked like he'd been through a cheese grater.

"They're afraid that Dumbledore is creating his own private army," Hermione said. As outrageous as what she was saying was, she didn't smile at all. She wasn't joking.

For some reason Hermione had managed to stay calm in Umbridge's class, even as incredulity had spread among the rest of the students. No one had believed that Umbridge wasn't going to teach them anything, but Hermione hadn't even looked surprised. It was almost as though she'd known in advance what was going to happen.

He'd been about to protest when she'd cast a cheering charm on him under the desk. That had made it possible for him to ignore Umbridge's suggestion that he and an unstable abomination had somehow accidentally resurrected Voldemort.

The fact that she'd as much as called Steven an abomination should have had Hermione steaming, but she'd stayed unnaturally calm through the whole thing. Dean Thomas had not been so lucky, and had been assigned a detention.

"Why'd you stop me?" Harry asked.

Hermione looked away for a moment and then said, "It's not a good idea to confront the Ministry, not yet."

She was lying; he could tell. There was something about her expression that was shifty, and unusual for Hermione. When he opened his mouth to press her, she gave a little shake of her head. She looked a little pale.

Whatever she was hiding wasn't something she was ready for him to know. The frustrating thing was that he didn't know if it was something personal or if it was Order business. There were things no one could tell him while he had an open line in his head leading directly to Voldemort.

"We really need to get started with those special lessons with Lupin," Harry said. Sirius was going to help them too, but he was still on the run and Harry wasn't about to mention him in a school where the walls literally had ears.

He glanced suspiciously up at a painting of Sir Hubert of Agincourt; he was a rather foolish looking Wizard who stared down at them and sniffed. There were spies everywhere here.

"Lupin's not welcome here," Hermione said. "Because of the new Ministry directives, he's been banned from campus."

Harry stared at her in dismay. They couldn't exactly leave campus; there were assassins ready to attack them the moment they left the wards of Hogwarts.

"Don't worry," Hermione said. "We've got it covered."

She pulled him aside and pulled him into an unused classroom to the side. To Harry's surprise, Steven was already there, and so was Winky.

Winky was still wearing the leather hat and apron that Pearl had taught her to make for herself. Steven nodded at Hermione, and then took Winky's hand. Winky snapped her fingers and a moment
later they were both gone.

Before Harry could react, Winky was back. She was grabbing his hand and a moment later the world shifted around him and they were somewhere else.

They were in darkness, and it took Harry's eyes a moment to adjust.

Hermione was beside him a moment later.

They were in the temple, although not a part he'd explored before. Everything was quiet and dark, lit only by glowing crystals in the distance.

"You can't tell anyone about this, not even Dobby," Hermione said.

"Dobby?" Harry said. "Why not?"

"Do you know why Dobby had so much trouble finding work? Given the prices he was asking, you don't think somebody like Ron's family would be delighted to hire him?"

Harry shook his head.

"Just because he says he's free doesn't mean he actually is," Hermione said. "A House-elf's owner can tell them to lie and say they've been given clothes."

"You've been giving him clothes every Christmas since he was freed," Harry said dryly. "And I watched him being freed myself."

He'd been instrumental in it, a fact that he was particularly proud of.

"You know that, but what about the people he was trying to get jobs from?" Hermione said. "A house elf is a perfect spy. It can bring people right through your wards and if you trust one, you can wake up with your throat cut."

"Dobby is trustworthy," Harry said.

"He works for Hogwarts now," Hermione said. "And there is a good chance that Dumbledore's days as Headmaster are numbered."

Harry stared at her, aghast at the idea. For some reason it didn't seem to bother her at all.

"If the Ministry gets control of Hogwarts, they'll be able to use the House-elves as spies," Hermione said, "No matter what the house-elves think about it."

"Dobby is a free elf," Harry said.

"They'll shove Veritaserum down his throat faster than you can say expelliarmus," Hermione said. "According to the Ministry non-humans don't have any rights."

Harry nodded slowly. Winky didn't work for the school; she worked directly for Steven. As long as she stayed out of sight, staying mostly in the Temple, the Ministry wouldn't be able to get at her.

"The spell on this place will even keep house-elves out," Hermione said. "They can't transport themselves someplace if they don't know where it is, and none of them were ever allowed inside the Temple on Dumbledore's orders."

Dumbledore had foreseen the need for all this even when he'd given Amethyst permission to start
creating the temple way back in second year. The man had plans within plans.

"The sooner we get good at this, the sooner we can tell you what's going on Hermione said."

They walked through the darkness for a short period before stepping out into a wider section of the cavern. Harry didn't recognize this part of the cavern either, and he wondered if the gems had been expanding the temple.

Other than as a place to store all Amethyst's junk, why did they need so much space anyway?

Sapphire was waiting for them.

"Watch your step," she said.

Harry was about to ask what she meant when he stumbled over a large, unlit crystal on the ground. He grumbled to himself as he recovered. It might have been nice to have had a little more warning.

She led them through piles of junk and past a fountain that was definitely new. Swords were hovering above the fountain, and he could see Pearl dancing at the top.

It was oddly graceful; she looked like a ballerina.

"You get used to it," Hermione said quietly. "She can do things with her body that no human dancer could even think about doing."

There was a table nearby with several chairs. Sirius was sitting on one chair, staring up at Pearl as she moved gracefully atop the fountain, which Harry realized had to be twenty feet tall at least.

For some reason Steven had been apparated directly to the table; he hadn't had the short walk Harry and Hermione'd had.

"Steven needed to talk to Mr. Black for a moment," Sapphire said.

Harry stared at the gem. He hadn't even had a chance to ask the question when she'd answered it. He wondered for a moment whether she could read his mind.

From what he'd been told, Snape and Dumbledore and Voldemort could all read his mind. The thought that other people might be able to do it was creepy.

Occlumency might be the best thing for them after all.

"I'm your instructor for today," Sirius said. He grinned at Harry and said, "Remus is busy with Order business."

If he and Harry's father's other friends had been able to fool Dumbledore back in their Marauder days, then Harry felt confident that they'd be able to teach him how to block his mind from Voldemort.

"Take a seat," Sirius said.

Harry did so, and Hermione sat down next to Steven.

"The fastest way to teach occlumency is to batter away at your mind while you try to shield yourself," Sirius said. "But there is a risk that it could traumatize you and make it impossible for you to learn it at all. For that reason we're going to be trying something different. We'll be going more slowly and we're going to start learning early."
Harry noticed Hermione and Steven glance at each other. If it could make it possible for them to stop keeping secrets from him, it'd be worth it.

"Let's get started," Sirius said.

Even with Sirius's slower and supposedly kinder methods of teaching, Harry had left the session with a blazing headache. It just didn't feel natural for him to hide his emotions away; he'd always been the kind of person who lived with his heart on his sleeve.

Living with the Dursleys should have taught him to hide how he felt; instead he'd just learned to protest and fight back.

It was even worse for Steven, whose emotions were always at the surface.

Hermione, of course, was the star pupil. She'd managed to make her mind blank and empty faster than either Steven or Harry, although she'd had trouble keeping it that way. Apparently her mind was always active, and she was always thinking.

Steven had never managed to make his mind empty, although he'd managed something almost as good. He'd created a beach scene in his mind and he'd focused on the waves to the exclusion of everything else.

Harry had tried to follow, but he'd struggled. The quietest place he could think of was his cupboard in the dark, but he didn't want to use that image in front of Sirius. It would tell him too much about the past that Harry had only shared in bits and pieces with his friends.

He certainly didn't want Voldemort seeing his cupboard.

His assignment for future lessons was to find a safe place he could use in his mind for times he couldn't make it empty.

As Harry took a bit of his breakfast bacon, he wondered if he'd ever get it. Snape would have undoubtedly told him his mind was already empty.

He grabbed the copy of the Daily Prophet Hermione had left on the table and turned it face up.

He felt himself flushing as he stared at the headline. The Ministry was seeking educational reform? If by education they meant teaching nothing, they were reforming it.

Worse, Umbridge had been appointed High Inquisitor, whatever that was. Even Harry could see that was just the beginning of a Ministry takeover.

How had Hermione known?

Over the next two weeks, lessons continued at a rate Harry wouldn't have expected, approximately once every two days. The lessons alternated between Sirius and Remus, and somehow there was an sense of urgency to the training that everyone seemed to understand but Harry.

It was frustrating to be the one person who was not informed about anything. Harry hated being kept in the dark, but he understood. The idea that Voldemort might be snooping around in his mind the same way he'd been doing was chilling. The thought that whatever he found might get someone
Harry cared about killed was even worse.

Umbridge was stalking around the school, enjoying her new found sense of power. She observed teachers classrooms and seemed judgmental. Even worse, she seemed to sense that something was going on with Harry.

Time after time she tried to get him to respond. She would insult him or his parents, or Hagrid or Steven. Somehow, though, either Hermione or Steven was there every time, and they always found some way to defuse the situation.

From what Harry heard from others, Umbridge was worse on Steven than she was with him. With Harry she pretended to be polite, even as she insulted him quietly. With Steven she was openly hostile, talking about how he shouldn't even be allowed at the school.

Somehow Steven managed to avoid getting detention, although Harry had no idea how he managed it. If it had been him, he'd have lived in detention.

It bothered him that the two of them were working so hard to keep him out of trouble. They didn't seem to bother with any other teacher, not even Snape.

When Hermione started hinting around about forming a Defense club in order to counter the lack of schooling they were getting, Harry resisted. The Occlumency lessons were taking up a lot of his free time, and he was feeling frustrated with Umbridge. The teachers all seemed spooked and on edge, and that attitude spread to the students as well.

The news from outside was growing even worse. Wizards were being imprisoned without trial, and Umbridge as much as suggested to students who stood against her that the same thing might happen to their parents.

Fortunately, Harry wasn't particularly worried about the Dursleys. Given the way they had treated him, he didn't have any great love for them anyway. More importantly, this administration didn't seem to consider Muggles as being fully human.

He never once heard a Muggleborn being threatened with their parents being imprisoned. Instead they suffered from detentions from which they came back pale faced and trembling.

Hermione warned him not to put anything sensitive in the mail, especially to Sirius. The mail at Hogwarts was being censored, and information that children were sending to their parents was being used against them.

One Slytherin first year actually vanished after most of his family was imprisoned after one letter. Hermione thought that her remaining family had fled with her to Eastern Europe.

Harry could see the attitude of the student body growing uglier and uglier. Privately he thought Umbridge was a fool to be this openly vicious. She was in a school with a thousand people who knew how to do magic. Poison recipes were in the library, and not always in the restricted sections.

There were warnings in the regular textbooks about what not to do lest a regular potion become a deadly poison. Harry could think of a half dozen potions he could turn to poison just from his textbooks this year. With magic, slipping poison into pumpkin juice would be the easiest thing.

Furthermore, there were all sorts of spells that weren't even Dark that could be used to kill. The slicing spell was not meant to be used on living beings, but it could.

The only thing that had kept her from being murdered already was the fear that the Ministry would
send someone worse.

Hermione kept pestering him about a defense club. What Harry didn't understand was why it was so important, and why it had to be him who ran it.

When she pestered him, she got that look she got when things were important.

He suggested Steven, but she disagreed. In a real fight, they'd be even, or Steven might even be ahead given his reflexes and strength. But much of what Steven did couldn't be taught. No Wizard could create a bubble, or especially a shield capable of deflecting an Avada Kedavra.

Harry was better at Defense because it was important to him. He'd been the target of repeated assassination attempts since he was eleven years old, and knowing how to stay alive had been one of his top priorities other than Quidditch.

Better yet, he was actually capable of teaching what he knew. The more he saw Umbridge strutting around, the angrier he got and the closer he came to agreeing.

"Wake up," Steven said quietly.

Harry blinked. What was Steven doing in his room. It was after hours and he shouldn't be in the Gryffindor quarters at all.

He looked around; the others were sound asleep.

"What's going on?" he asked.

For a moment he felt suspicious; he'd already been targeted once by a polyjuiced assassin on the way to Hogwarts. He relaxed after a moment, though. Polyjuice couldn't be used to duplicate a half-human or non-human.

Out of everyone in Hogwarts, Steven, Flitwick and Hagrid, assuming he ever came back were the only ones he could trust to be who they said they were.

"I need your help," Steven said. He looked flustered.

Harry stared nearsightedly at him for a moment, then sighed. He reached for his wand and glasses and quickly began to get dressed. He moved as quietly as he could, but still stumbled a bit as he slipped on his trainers.

They slipped down the stairs and quietly out of the Gryffindor entirely.

Even the paintings on the walls seemed to be sleeping. Harry felt relieved that he'd thought to bring his invisibility cloak. Given the glee that Filch was taking with the new powers given him by Umbridge, getting caught by him wouldn't be pleasant.

"Where are we going?" Harry whispered.

"We're going to get brooms," Steven said grimly.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked, putting his hand on Steven's arm. "You're not talking about leaving the grounds, are you? There's a world of assassins out there just waiting for us to step foot outside."

"It'll be fine," Steven said. He grimaced. "I wish I could tell you, but..."
He glanced up at the paintings around them. Even though most of them seemed to be asleep, it was possible that some of them were faking.

"Fine," Harry said. "But you are going to tell me."

It occurred to him that he was being monumentally stupid going anywhere with anyone no questions asked, even Steven. After all, someone could have used the Impirius on him, even if he was resistant to magic.

They reached the broom shed by the Quidditch pitch. Harry wondered why Steven hadn't asked him to bring his Firebolt, although carrying it through the halls might have given what they were doing away. Harry thought that the invisibility cloak would have probably covered it, but maybe he hadn't wanted one of Harry's roommates to find him and the broom gone.

After all, Harry missing might just be a trip to the loo, but Harry missing with his broom was something completely different.

Steven used his wand to open the broomshed, and he pulled out two brooms.

"I'm sorry about all of this," Steven said. "There's so many paths that she misses some sometimes, and there's nobody else."

Harry had no idea what he was talking about, but a moment later he found himself flying through the night sky, high over the Forbidden forest. He couldn't help but feel a clenching in his gut as he left the familiar environs of Hogwarts behind.

There were giant spiders below, he found himself thinking, and he found himself wondering if they were flying over the spot where he and Steven had confronted Quirrell for the first time.

They'd flown for ten minutes before finally reaching their destination, a large clearing in the woods.

There was farmland below him; it looked huge despite being surrounded by the Forbidden forest. Harry wondered for the first time just how large the forest was.

As they landed, he froze. They were in some kind of village, with buildings that looked a lot like Hagrid's hut all around them. There were neatly planted rows of vines on hills all around them, and there was even some kind of waterwheel in the distance.

Harry felt even more uneasy, and he pulled his wand silently as they landed.

Figures stepped forward in the darkness; there were dozens of silhouettes, possibly hundreds. They were all short and Harry wondered if he was in a goblin village.

Steven lifted his wand and said a quiet word. His wand lit with a pure white light and suddenly, blinking, Harry could see.

There were hundreds of Watermelon Stevens staring impassively at them.

"What did you do?" Harry asked, staring. Only two watermelons had been sent into the wilderness. He had no idea how this many could have been created. It took him a moment to realize what the crops growing in neat rows on the hill were; row after row of baby watermelons.

"They did it on their own," Steven said quietly. There was a sound of quiet pride in his voice. "I created them to defend me and the kids at Hogwarts, and they decided that two of them wouldn't be able to do that on their own."
"So how..."

"One of them sacrificed himself for seed," Steven said. He sighed. "I never would have asked them to do it, but they did."

This was exactly what the Ministry had been afraid of, Harry realized. After only three years there was already an army of them with more of them growing all the time.

"Could you take over the light for me?" Steven asked.

Harry nodded, casting a quick Lumnos on his own wand.

"Expecto Patronus!" Steven said, waving his wand. A moment later, Lion appeared. It stared impassively at them, then bowed, its head lowering to the ground.

The watermelons began to line up and a moment later they began to march into Lion's mane.

"What are we doing?" Harry asked, staring as Watermelon after watermelon entered Lion, like something out of an old American cartoon.

"We're about to stop an uprising," Steven said grimly.

"What?" Harry asked. He stared at Steven, and he wondered if the expression on his face was as stupid as he felt.

"Giants," Steven said. "We're going to fight giants."
Giants

Over the next two weeks, lessons continued at a rate Harry wouldn't have expected, approximately once every two days. The lessons alternated between Sirius and Remus, and somehow there was an sense of urgency to the training that everyone seemed to understand but Harry.

It was frustrating to be the one person who was not informed about anything. Harry hated being kept in the dark, but he understood. The idea that Voldemort might be snooping around in his mind the same way he'd been doing was chilling. The thought that whatever he found might get someone Harry cared about killed was even worse.

Umbridge was stalking around the school, enjoying her new found sense of power. She observed teachers classrooms and seemed judgmental. Even worse, she seemed to sense that something was going on with Harry.

Time after time she tried to get him to respond. She would insult him or his parents, or Hagrid or Steven. Somehow, though, either Hermione or Steven was there every time, and they always found some way to defuse the situation.

From what Harry heard from others, Umbridge was worse on Steven than she was with him. With Harry she pretended to be polite, even as she insulted him quietly. With Steven she was openly hostile, talking about how he shouldn't even be allowed at the school.

Somehow Steven managed to avoid getting detention, although Harry had no idea how he managed it. If it had been him, he'd have lived in detention.

It bothered him that the two of them were working so hard to keep him out of trouble. They didn't seem to bother with any other teacher, not even Snape.

When Hermione started hinting around about forming a Defense club in order to counter the lack of schooling they were getting, Harry resisted. The Occlumency lessons were taking up a lot of his free time, and he was feeling frustrated with Umbridge. The teachers all seemed spooked and on edge, and that attitude spread to the students as well.

The news from outside was growing even worse. Wizards were being imprisoned without trial, and Umbridge as much as suggested to students who stood against her that the same thing might happen to their parents.

Fortunately, Harry wasn't particularly worried about the Dursleys. Given the way they had treated him, he didn't have any great love for them anyway. More importantly, this administration didn't seem to consider Muggles as being fully human.

He never once heard a Muggleborn being threatened with their parents being imprisoned. Instead they suffered from detentions from which they came back pale faced and trembling.

Hermione warned him not to put anything sensitive in the mail, especially to Sirius. The mail at Hogwarts was being censored, and information that children were sending to their parents was being used against them.

One Slytherin first year actually vanished after most of his family was imprisoned after one letter. Hermione thought that her remaining family had fled with her to Eastern Europe.
Harry could see the attitude of the student body growing uglier and uglier. Privately he thought Umbridge was a fool to be this openly vicious. She was in a school with a thousand people who knew how to do magic. Poison recipes were in the library, and not always in the restricted sections.

There were warnings in the regular textbooks about what not to do lest a regular potion become a deadly poison. Harry could think of a half dozen potions he could turn to poison just from his textbooks this year. With magic, slipping poison into pumpkin juice would be the easiest thing.

Furthermore, there were all sorts of spells that weren't even Dark that could be used to kill. The slicing spell was not meant to be used on living beings, but it could.

The only thing that had kept her from being murdered already was the fear that the Ministry would send someone worse.

Hermione kept pestering him about a defense club. What Harry didn't understand was why it was so important, and why it had to be him who ran it.

When she pestered him, she got that look she got when things were important.

He suggested Steven, but she disagreed. In a real fight, they'd be even, or Steven might even be ahead given his reflexes and strength. But much of what Steven did couldn't be taught. No Wizard could create a bubble, or especially a shield capable of deflecting an Avada Kedavra.

Harry was better at Defense because it was important to him. He'd been the target of repeated assassination attempts since he was eleven years old, and knowing how to stay alive had been one of his top priorities other than Quidditch.

Better yet, he was actually capable of teaching what he knew. The more he saw Umbridge strutting around, the angrier he got and the closer he came to agreeing.

"Wake up," Steven said quietly.

Harry blinked. What was Steven doing in his room. It was after hours and he shouldn't be in the Gryffindor quarters at all.

He looked around; the others were sound asleep.

"What's going on?" he asked.

For a moment he felt suspicious; he'd already been targeted once by a polyjuiced assassin on the way to Hogwarts. He relaxed after a moment, though. Polyjuice couldn't be used to duplicate a half-human or non-human.

Out of everyone in Hogwarts, Steven, Flitwick and Hagrid, assuming he ever came back were the only ones he could trust to be who they said they were.

"I need your help," Steven said. He looked flustered.

Harry stared nearsightedly at him for a moment, then sighed. He reached for his wand and glasses and quickly began to get dressed. He moved as quietly as he could, but still stumbled a bit as he slipped on his trainers.

They slipped down the stairs and quietly out of the Gryffindor entirely.

Even the paintings on the walls seemed to be sleeping. Harry felt relieved that he'd thought to bring
his invisibility cloak. Given the glee that Filch was taking with the new powers given him by Umbridge, getting caught by him wouldn't be pleasant.

"Where are we going?" Harry whispered.

"We're going to get brooms," Steven said grimly.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked, putting his hand on Steven's arm. "You're not talking about leaving the grounds, are you? There's a world of assassins out there just waiting for us to step foot outside."

"It'll be fine," Steven said. He grimaced. "I wish I could tell you, but..."

He glanced up at the paintings around them. Even though most of them seemed to be asleep, it was possible that some of them were faking.

"Fine," Harry said. "But you are going to tell me."

It occurred to him that he was being monumentally stupid going anywhere with anyone no questions asked, even Steven. After all, someone could have used the Impirius on him, even if he was resistant to magic.

They reached the broom shed by the Quidditch pitch. Harry wondered why Steven hadn't asked him to bring his Firebolt, although carrying it through the halls might have given what they were doing away. Harry thought that the invisibility cloak would have probably covered it, but maybe he hadn't wanted one of Harry's roommates to find him and the broom gone.

After all, Harry missing might just be a trip to the loo, but Harry missing with his broom was something completely different.

Steven used his wand to open the broomshed, and he pulled out two brooms.

"I'm sorry about all of this," Steven said. "There's so many paths that she misses some sometimes, and there's nobody else."

Harry had no idea what he was talking about, but a moment later he found himself flying through the night sky, high over the Forbidden forest. He couldn't help but feel a clenching in his gut as he left the familiar environs of Hogwarts behind.

There were giant spiders below, he found himself thinking, and he found himself wondering if they were flying over the spot where he and Steven had confronted Quirrell for the first time.

They'd flown for ten minutes before finally reaching their destination, a large clearing in the woods.

There was farmland below him; it looked huge despite being surrounded by the Forbidden forest. Harry wondered for the first time just how large the forest was.

As they landed, he froze. They were in some kind of village, with buildings that looked a lot like Hagrid's hut all around them. There were neatly planted rows of vines on hills all around them, and there was even some kind of waterwheel in the distance.

Harry felt even more uneasy, and he pulled his wand silently as they landed.

Figures stepped forward in the darkness; there were dozens of silhouettes, possibly hundreds. They were all short and Harry wondered if he was in a goblin village.
Steven lifted his wand and said a quiet word. His wand lit with a pure white light and suddenly, blinking, Harry could see.

There were hundreds of Watermelon Stevens staring impassively at them.

"What did you do?" Harry asked, staring. Only two watermelons had been sent into the wilderness. He had no idea how this many could have been created. It took him a moment to realize what the crops growing in neat rows on the hill were; row after row of baby watermelons.

"They did it on their own," Steven said quietly. There was a sound of quiet pride in his voice. "I created them to defend me and the kids at Hogwarts, and they decided that two of them wouldn't be able to do that on their own."

"So how..."

"One of them sacrificed himself for seed," Steven said. He sighed. "I never would have asked them to do it, but they did."

This was exactly what the Ministry had been afraid of, Harry realized. After only three years there was already an army of them with more of them growing all the time.

"Could you take over the light for me?" Steven asked.

Harry nodded, casting a quick Lumnos on his own wand.

"Expecto Patronus!" Steven said, waving his wand. A moment later, Lion appeared. It stared impassively at them, then bowed, it's head lowering to the ground.

The watermelons began to line up and a moment later they began to march into Lion's mane.

"What are we doing?" Harry asked, staring as Watermelon after watermelon entered Lion, like something out of an old American cartoon.

"We're about to stop an uprising," Steven said grimly.

"What?" Harry asked. He stared at Steven, and he wondered if the expression on his face was as stupid as he felt.

"Giants," Steven said. "We're going to fight giants."

Before Harry had a chance to respond, the last of the Watermelon Steven's was entering Lion's mane. For the first time Harry noticed that they were all carrying spears and shields made of thick, heavy oak, as well as massive rolls of super thick rope. He doubted that he would have been able to pick up one of the shields even with both hands, but the Steven's seemed to have no problems with it.

A moment later, Steven was pulling him on top of Lion. It shocked him, just how powerful Steven's grip was. There was no way he would have been able to resist, even had he tried.

There were times, sometimes as long as weeks at a time that Harry forgot that Steven wasn't completely human. Moments like this reminded him.

"Wait," he finally protested; unfortunately it was too late. Lion was already moving. He roared, and a
moment later they were someplace else.

He grabbed Steven's shirt and held on as tightly as he could. The idea of falling off and being lost forever in this place that was not a place didn't appeal to him at all. He wasn't sure that even Lion could find him if that happened.

A moment later they were back in darkness.

His eyes were still trying to adjust when Lion sat down and Steven hauled him off.

They were at the rim of a valley near the mouth of a cave, and below them there was chaos. Dozens of giants were fighting each other, and the sound was enormous.

"Steven...Harry...what'r ye doin here?" Hagrid's voice came from behind them.

Harry spun around and saw Hagrid and Madam Maxine behind them. They were standing together at the lip of a cave.

"She sent us," Steven said from the darkness beside him.

Hagrid must have known what he meant, because his expression cleared.

"You'd better stay here by me," he told Harry. "The giants don't have to mean to hurt ye to do it."

Harry noticed that Hagrid didn't say anything to Steven. Of course, after several years of fighting monsters with him, he had to have a good idea of what Steven was capable of.

The Watermelon Stevens were already exiting Lion's mane. They moved quickly and in an orderly fashion.

Given the village they'd been in, they had to be more intelligent than the automatons he and Ron had assumed they were when Steven had left one in his room. It crept him out a little, actually. If they were smart enough to be farmers on their own, they were Beings at least.

"We're not trying to hurt them," Steven said to the Watermelon soldiers as they stood before him. "But we're not going to let them hurt each other either."

The Stevens simply stared at him before lifting their spears in unison.

"Go," Steven said. "You know what to do."

A moment later, the Stevens charged silently down the slope. The giants below didn't even notice as they slipped into the battle.

The giants seemed to be fighting each man for himself. Unlike them, the Stevens worked as a unit, each man part of a team. They ducked and rolled, agilely avoiding giant legs and feet as they prepared themselves.

It shouldn't have made much of a difference. There were eighty giants and only a hundred Stevens, and despite the plants' supernatural strength no one of them was close to a match for a full grown giant. Individually, each was probably a little weaker than Hagrid.

Teamwork made all the difference. They worked in teams of six, using ropes as thick as Harry's calves to trip giants and then tie them up. They didn't have the numbers to attack the entire battlefield at once, so they started with the fifteen giants closest to the cave.
It was shocking how quickly they managed to take the giants down.

The first set of giants involved no casualties among the Stevens; they'd attacked with surprise and had been able to overwhelm their enemies without opposition.

One giant gave a surprised cry, and it was enough to warn the others of the danger.

The battle became harder then. It took them twice as long to subdue the second set of giants, and there were a couple of casualties, exploded into juice and seeded watermelon flesh. Harry had a moment to wonder if the seeds would sprout and create a whole new generation of these sentient watermelons.

Finally alert to the danger, the giants stopped fighting each other entirely even as a little over half their numbers were on the ground.

Harry realized that Steven was no longer beside him. He blinked as he realized that he was somewhere down in the middle of the chaos.

As strong and powerful as the giants were, they couldn't match the watermelon's speed and agility. Each watermelon was at a quarter as strong as the giants, and while they didn't have the mass that the giants had, they were everywhere.

Some giants were quicker than others; they managed to avoid being tripped, because once off their feet their greatest advantage against the Stevens was gone.

Despite everything, the giant's numbers dwindled. There were thirty, then twenty, then ten and fifteen. Harry finally spotted Steven. He wasn't actually fighting; instead he was transfiguring massive piles of rope from plants and detritus on the ground.

As much rope as the Stevens had brought with them, it couldn't be nearly enough to tie up eighty giants. Harry wondered where Steven had learned to transfigure rope and why.

One giant saw him and attempted to attack, but he was swarmed by a dozen Stevens and he went down in the space of a moment.

Madam Maxine murmured something to Hagrid that Harry didn't catch. Hagrid simply grunted in assent.

Within twenty minutes, the last of the giants fell. There had been casualties among the watermelons; as close as Harry could see, at least a dozen had been destroyed.

The Stevens were doing something now; at the edge of the battlefield they were clearing out a space and building a structure; it took them almost five minutes. It took time for Harry to realize that it was a throne.

Steven lit fires at the top of torches surrounding his throne.

Harry jerked as he felt a touch on his hand. He looked down and saw one of the Stevens gesturing for him to follow.

He glanced up at Hagrid, then sighed. He followed the Steven, slipping down the steep slope leading into the valley below.

The throne was sized for a giant, and Steven gestured for him to sit.
His remaining Stevens gathered behind him in a line four Stevens deep on each side of the throne. They began to strike their spears against their shields in unison, growling in unison.

Harry was shocked. He hadn't even realized that they were able to speak.

A moment later, Steven put this wand to his throat, and he spoke. His voice was amplified so that it spread across the valley.

"Voldemort's men have told some of you that Wizards are weak, that they are divided. Their side will win, and they will bring justice to giants."

He paused, looking at the silhouettes on the ground all around them; shadows of prone forms.

"They lie." Steven said. "Voldemort hates his own kind; what makes you think he has any room in his heart for any other beings?"

He stood and said, "Dumbledore has an army; you've seen the beginnings of it tonight. In the whole world there are only three people Voldemort fears...Dumbledore, Steven Universe, and Harry Potter."

Fears was probably an exaggeration, Harry reflected. However, from what he remembered about giants, they respected power. That was probably part of the reason they'd sided with Voldemort during the first war.

"He's put out a bounty on the three of us because he's afraid to fight us on his own," Steven said. His voice rang out across the valley. "Two children and an old man, and he fears us enough to hope that someone, anyone else could kill us."

He paused and said, "The thing about children is that they get stronger. Voldemort's time is done. He's been trying to kill us for years, and we've only gotten stronger each time."

Harry wasn't entirely sure about that, but he wasn't about to argue. He kept his face expressionless.

"Who do you think the Ministry will turn to when it is over?" Steven asked. "Harry Potter will have saved the world again, and he'll be in a position to make real change."

"Do you want to trust someone who believes non-humans are inferior? Or do you want someone whose best friends include a half-giant."

Steven turned to Harry and asked, "What do you think of Hagrid and of the giants?"

He pointed his wand at Harry's throat.

Caught off guard, Harry stumbled. "I...um...love Hagrid. He's been there for me since I was a baby. As for giants, I don't know any, but Hagrid always said they were strong and brave."

Steven smiled at him and nodded. He turned his wand to his own throat again.

"Harry will work for you; he grew up as a Muggle, and he doesn't have the prejudices some wizards have. I know many of you love to fight; there is going to be a fight no matter which side you choose. Will you fight with Wizards who hate you and will turn on you the moment the fight is won?"

The watermelon Stevens began a low chant, striking their shields softly.

"Or will you turn to the side that will let you fight the people who hate you? The people Harry loves believe in equality for all beings, no matter how small they are or how tall."
The Steven's dragged two giants forward. They released one giant, who immediately lunged forward and struck the other giant on the head.

"Will you work with us?" Steven asked.

The giant stared at them for a long moment. The moment stretched into several moments and Harry started to wonder if the giant understood them at all.

Finally, however, it nodded.

As they landed back beside the broom shed, Harry's mind was full of questions. How long had Steven known that his Watermelons were in the forest. How had he known how to transfigure rope and magnify his voice?

How had he known Hagrid was in trouble, or where he was at all?

Who was the she who had sent them to Hagrid? Hagrid obviously knew who she was, enough to not question sending two children into battle with giants.

What did all of this mean for the future? Was there really going to be a battle? When was it going to happen?

Steven took Harry's school broom and put it back into the broom shed.

A dark figure stepped out from behind the broom shed, and for a moment Harry tensed. They still had prices on their heads and assassins out to kill them.

He relaxed as he recognized Lupin's voice.

"Is it done?" he asked.

Steven nodded. "They were impressed that Harry came out to meet them himself."

Harry suspected that the watermelons had been more impressive, but he didn't say anything. Snape had once told him that he'd learn more by listening than talking. Although it hadn't stopped him at the time, it seemed like good advice now.

Or maybe there was something about the giant culture that valued the personal touch. Steven had spent enough time with Hagrid that he'd know.

Steven turned to Harry with a regretful look on his face.

"I want to tell you that I argued with everybody about this, but Sapphire says we have to do it."

Sapphire?

Before Harry could respond, Lupin's wand was out. "Obliviate!"

Harry woke the next morning with the nagging feeling that he'd forgotten something. For the life of him, he couldn't remember what.

"We're not taking Slytherins!" Ron said.
"They're members of Steven's band," Hermione said composedly. "And a few others. It'll be fine."

Harry didn't know why she seemed so sure, or why she and Steven had refused to allow Marietta Edgecomb, a Ravenclaw in their year or three of the Slytherins, but seemed fine with allowing seven other Slytherins into the group.

"Whose families do you think the Ministry is persecuting?" Hermione asked, when Ron looked particularly stubborn.

"Everybody!" he said.

"The Slytherin families have it the worst of anybody," Hermione said. "There's not one of them that haven't had family members jailed already, and they are all just waiting for the axe to fall on the rest of their family."

"Good!" Ron said. "They're all dark anyway."

"Slytherins are ambitious," Steven said quietly from the corner. He looked tired. "They don't care about being famous like Gryffindors, or making friends like Hufflepuffs, or even being proved right like the Ravenclaws."

"That's why we shouldn't trust them!" Ron said, leaning forward. "They're going to go with whoever has the most power, and that's the Ministry or Voldemort."

"They'll go with whoever gives them and the people they care about the most power. The Ministry is purposefully cutting them out of the loop; we're including them," Hermione said.

"The Ministry IS pushing a lot of people to side with Voldemort." Steven said soberly. "But not everybody is going to feel safe with that. Half-bloods, or people whose families went too far to satisfy the Ministry during the last war, making them look disloyal. They're going to be too scared of what he'll do to them to go back."

"More importantly, we're teaching them to defend themselves, which is something neither Voldemort nor the Ministry is doing." Harry said. "Steven says none of these guys are Pureblood fanatics, and that they can be trusted. The only question is whether you believe him."

Ron stared at him for a moment, then looked down at the table. He grimaced. "Fine; but if they betray us to Umbridge don't blame me."

"We've got a way around that," Hermione said. "A jinx that will let us know whether anyone betrays us or not."

She and Steven shared a significant look.

It occurred to Harry that both of them were looking tired. If he hadn't known better, he'd have thought they were using those Time turners Hermione was going on and on about. She'd admitted that she'd thought of using them during her third year before Steven had convinced her that taking Muggle Studies and Divination was crazy on top of the load she was taking.

Those only allowed time back for five hours anyway, and one couldn't actually change anything that had actually occurred, so Harry didn't see the point in using them.

It did seem like the kind of thing Hermione would do while preparing for this, but he couldn't see Steven either doing it or allowing it.
They’d planned out every aspect of this; this wasn’t just meeting in Hogsmeade where anyone could overhear them. This was going to involve planning, and given the numbers they were wanting to include, Harry felt himself becoming anxious.

He would have thought that actually seeing Voldemort with their own eyes at the Triwizard tournament would have driven students away. Instead it only seemed to make people feel a fanatical need to learn how to protect themselves.

Looking at the list, Harry didn't see how they were going to include seventy people in their group. There was no way they'd ever be able to keep a group that size secret; even if no one intentionally betrayed them, it would be too easy for someone to be followed to their meeting place.

"This will work," Hermione said. That same, strange certainty shone in her eyes that she'd had at other times, and he found himself wishing desperately that his occlumency lessons were going faster.

The certainty that she and Steven both had was something that he envied deeply. He was anything but certain. There were assassins out for his blood, and worse, Voldemort and his men. Worse, people seemed to expect him to be some sort of leader.

It was as though they expected him to lead them against Voldemort when all he wanted was to get through another school year without being killed.

Given his charisma and power, he would have expected Steven to be the leader, but instead Steven always seemed to defer to him. Harry didn't understand why Hermione and Steven kept trying to push him into the spotlight.

Worse, he didn't know anything about public speaking. There were going to be people in the group from years ahead of him, including Cedric Diggory and the Weasley twins. How was he supposed to tell upperclassmen what to do when they were going to be teaching him?

The greatest mystery was how they'd gotten him to agree to it.

Getting the group together in the Room of requirement was a logistical nightmare. Having seventy students avoiding Filch and Mrs. Norris was hard enough without Umbridge strutting around and Snape scowling everywhere.

Somehow, Steven and Hermione always seemed to know where the watchers were going to be, even without the Marauder's map, which the twins were using to help other students toward their goal.

The fact that they looked even more exhausted than before was only part of the mystery.

The more important thing was what Harry was going to say in front of everyone. How was he going to convince everyone that he was the one to listen to, even if others knew more about Defense than he did.

As he stared out at the crowd of faces before him, Harry felt himself sweating. This wasn’t some kind of informal group; this was almost ten percent of the population of the school! Steven and Hermione had gone over each name carefully before agreeing to admit them. They'd ignored Ron, who’d generally wanted to cut Slytherin names and include more Gryffindores.

Harry sighed as he heard the crowd growing restless. He felt Steven's reassuring hand on his shoulder and he stood up.
"You all know who I am," Harry said. "And you all know what happened at the end of the Triwizard tournament. A lot of you would rather be anywhere other than at this school."

He paused and looked out at the expectant faces.

"I don't particularly want to be here either. The thing is, it's no safer outside than it is here. From what I'm hearing, it's actually worse. There's nowhere to hide, and the Ministry is doing everything they can to make sure we can't defend ourselves."

Harry shook his head. "Umbridge tells us that we don't need to know how to do spells; she thinks that if we learn we'll be a threat to the Ministry. Voldemort doesn't want you to learn so that when he conquers Britain it'll be easier to herd us like sheep to the slaughter."

"The thing is," he continued. "Is that nobody has asked us what we want."

He hesitated. Hermione and Steven had gone over this speech with him over a period of several days, looking more tired every time they'd returned with suggestions about how he should change it. In the end he'd felt like he'd practiced more for this than for finals in his first two years.

"We have a right to defend ourselves, and the only way it will happen is if we teach ourselves. I know I'm asking a lot, especially of upper years, but this is the only way we'll be ready. It's not a matter of if the Ministry or Voldemort come knocking at your door, it's a matter of when."

"We need to be ready."

Everyone was silent for a long, interminable moment, as though they were waiting for him to say something else. Harry simply stood and watched them. Hermione had insisted that silence was as important as what was said, which was ironic given that she hadn't shut up for the entirety of first year.

The crowd exploded with questions.

What struck Harry was that no one was objecting to the idea. Everyone seemed excited about it, even people he would have expected to be ambivalent.

Maybe it was seeing Voldemort. Most of his classmates had been babies during the war. They'd grown up with Voldemort as the boogieman, as the tale told to terrify them in the night. Now they knew in their bones that he was real. They'd seen him with their own eyes, and that had terrified a lot of them.

Seeing the power that Voldemort and Dumbledore had wielded against one another had to have made them aware of their own powerlessness.

Harry would have expected more of them to be too afraid to fight back, especially those outside his own house. Of course, Gryffindor didn't have a monopoly on bravery.

Other than the seven Slytherins, there was also a Hufflepuff contingent. Predictably, they were all sitting together, clumped around Cedric Diggory. He was the most popular Hufflepuff secondary only to Steven himself.

"So what are we going to call ourselves?" Cedric called out.

"Ginny had an idea," Hermione said, grinning. "Fudge is terrified that Dumbledore is going to teach us magic and turn us into an army, so why not give them what they want?"
Dumbledore's army was voted in as their name before the session was out.

Everyone had questions; some were about his and Steven's experience with Voldemort. It was something that Harry didn't really want to relive, but he did anyway. It was important that everyone understand that while Voldemort was powerful, he wasn't unbeatable. He and Steven had stopped him with a rock and the element of surprise.

All it would take was one wizard to have a good day, and Voldemort would be dead again. That had to be part of the reason he hadn't shown himself again. He was afraid.

Harry had a sudden flash of Steven saying something about Voldemort being afraid, but after a moment it was gone.

The meeting went on far longer than Harry had intended; everyone wanted to make sure they were heard. In the end, everyone agreed to signing and making themselves subject to the jinx that would punish them if they betrayed the group.

As the group filtered out; guided by Steven and Hermione's newfound ability to predict just where teachers would be and the twins with the Marauder's map, Harry found himself standing alone with Luna and Neville.

Neville looked almost as afraid to talk as he had their first year when he'd lost his toad.

"You need to tell him," Luna said, pushing Neville. "If you don't, you'll just keep gathering wrackspurts, and you can't afford any more."

Her face had lost its dreamy look and her expression was sharper than she'd ever seen it.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I had detention with Professor Umbridge," Neville said nervously. He refused to look Harry in the eye.

"What's it like?" Harry asked. For some reason Steven and Hermione had been conspiring to keep him from getting detention with her all year.

"She makes us do lines," Neville said.

"That doesn't sound too bad," Harry said. "At least you aren't cleaning up frog bile, like with Snape."

"Show him," Luna said.

Reluctantly, Neville lifted the sleeve of his robe.

There were scars on his arm. Some looked older while others were still red and weeping. They formed words.

"I will not tell lies."

Harry's mind went blank.

Steven and Hermione...had they known this was happening? How could they know and not do anything about it?

What was wrong with them?
"They just want to get you off the grounds so they can kill you!" Hermione said angrily.

Harry didn't understand why Hermione looked so frightened. She'd spent most of the term looking composed and unworried about the future, with some kind of knowledge that everything would be all right.

"The gems are away on some kind of secret mission for Dumbledore," Steven said. "There isn't time to check and see if it'll be O.K."

Neville's parents were in St. Mungo's, a place they'd been since Neville was a baby. They'd been tortured by magic until their minds had stopped working. Harry hadn't known about them at all until recently; Neville didn't like talking about them much.

Someone had attacked St. Mungo's and intentionally injured both of Neville's parents beyond the healers ability to repair. They were both dying.

"If I don't try to heal them, I'm just letting Neville's parents die," Steven said.

"And what happens to the rest of us if you die?" Hermione asked, her voice dropping. "People depend on you."

"It doesn't matter how well you plan it," Steven said. "There's always a chance that something will go wrong. If you let fear rule you it'll drive you crazy."

"It's crazy to go someplace you know they're going to try and kill you!" Hermione said.

"Moody's agreed to go," Steven said. "And Tonks and Harry."

"Harry's decent with a wand, but he'll be up against full grown wizards," Hermione said. "How could Moody agree to all this? It doesn't make any sense."

Staring at Hermione, Harry shook his head. Sometimes he wondered if she really was a Gryffindor. She was brave enough where it counted, but she wanted to plan everything. Gryffindors liked to follow their hearts.

"They're after both of you," Hermione said. "It doesn't make sense for both of you to go."

"If I don't, they'll all be going after Steven," Harry said.

Hermione frowned. "Then I'm going too."

"It's too dangerous," Steven said. He carefully pulled her arm away from his arm. "I really shouldn't be letting Harry go."

"Fuse with me," she said. "They won't be looking for her."

It took Harry a moment to realize what she was saying. He flashed back to the exotic creature that had made the night of the ball so memorable.

"You can't know that," Steven said. "And if we die when we're fused, we both die."
He frowned and concentrated, and a moment later his form was twisting and changing. He actually shrank a little and his thick head of hair vanished.

A moment later he was hunched over and looked old.

"I've been practicing this," he said. Even his voice sounded different. "Trying to learn how to control how old I feel."

Hermione stared at the elderly version of Steven with an expression Harry couldn't interpret. Harry wondered if Steven had been trying to grow up for her, not temporarily like when he stretched his limbs, but permanently.

"I'll wear my cloak," Harry said. "We'll be fine."

For some reason Hermione didn't look convinced.

Sneaking through St. Mungo's wasn't as easy as Harry had thought. There were crowds of people passing through and it was quite busy.

Steven was dressed in what Harry assumed were healer's robes, although they didn't really look like what Madam Pomfrey wore. Moody seemed to approve, so he assumed they were all right.

Tonks had changed to a male form, looking like a tall and slender man who was scowling at the people around her. That helped a little; people gave her an unconscious berth.

Of Moody there was no sign. His looks were too distinctive; anyone who saw him would be placed on alert. He'd assured them that he'd be watching, although Harry wasn't sure if it was going to be enough. If he was too far away, would it even matter if he saw what was going to happen?

Of assassins, there was no sign.

There wasn't even any signs of Auror presence in the wake of the earlier attacks. Harry felt a moment of suspicion, wondering if there had even actually been an attack. Just the rumor of one might have been enough to pull them out of Hogwarts, while leaving hospital security not on high alert.

Moody was paranoid to have checked though. Given his nature, he was probably hoping to trap the assassins instead of leaving them to try something else. The last thing Harry needed was for them to attack the Dursleys or someone he knew back in school.

The Longbottoms were already waiting for them.

After Tonks checked the room and closed the door behind her, she closed the door carefully and locked it.

Neville's grandmother started as Harry pulled his cloak off and Tonks and Steven returned to their previous shapes.

Neville waved at them using a subtle gesture they'd worked out among themselves. Harry relaxed. Neville was actually himself. At Neville's sudden look of suspicion, he and Steven returned the wave with the appropriate countersign.

Oddly, they'd gotten the idea from an old spy movie Steven had seen.

"I understand it was something of an inconvenience for you to come here," she said. "Whatever
happens, I want to thank you."

"Neville is our friend," Steven said. "We couldn't not help if we could do something."

She nodded, almost imperceptibly.

Neville sniffled, then looked up at Steven. "I hope you can help. The healers here can't do anything."

Given the limits of Wizardly healing, it might be a real challenge to save his parents. Harry had once seen someone have entire bones regrown and most injuries were repaired overnight.

The fact that Neville's parents were here at all proved that there were limits to Wizardly healing though.

If Steven could just get them stabilized, the healers might be able to take Neville's parent's the rest of the way. Harry only hoped that Neville wasn't disappointed.

"I don't know if it'll work," Steven said. "But I'll try."

There were two beds, on which were laying an unfamiliar man and woman. They both looked as pale as death, and for a moment Harry couldn't see their chests moving.

He wondered if they hadn't died already, but finally he realized they were moving.

"They were stabbed in the shoulder with a poisoned blade," Mrs. Longbottom said. "The healers don't know what was used, and nothing they have tried has helped at all."

Steven nodded.

"I'm sorry about this," he said to the unconscious couple. He pulled their sheets down, exposing their shoulders, which were bandaged.

He grimaced and carefully pulled the bandages off.

Harry couldn't help but crane his neck and stare at the wounds, which were raw and hideous looking. Thankfully they were no longer bleeding, but the wounds looked infected.

He licked his palm and placed it on Neville's father's shoulder, then licked his other palm and did the same to his mother.

Although he wasn't sure why, Harry expected the wounds to glow somehow. Maybe it was watching Muggle television shows, or maybe it was the way a lot of Steven's other magical abilities glowed. It had certainly glowed when he'd fused with Hermione.

Instead, the wounds just began to reverse themselves. The lattice of black lines stretching out from the wound began to retreat, and a moment later the cuts themselves began to vanish.

Within moments the wounds were gone entirely.

The man opened his eyes and said, "What's happening? Where am I?"

Neville stared at the prone figure of his father, and his face became as pale as a ghost. He trembled, his eyes wide.

"Alice?" the man was asking. "Is my wife here? Is she all right?" His voice was frantic, and he sounded as though he didn't know where he was. However, his eyes were clear; this wasn't the
endless confusion that had filled Neville's parents throughout his life. This was something else entirely.

"She's here, Mr. Longbottom," Steven said. "And she's going to be O.K."

The older woman stepped toward them, the expression on her face unreadable. "They said his condition was going to be permanent."

"Steven can do things," Harry said. "Things ordinary Wizards can't do."

"It's because he's an abomination," Alice Longbottom said quietly. Her wand was out even though Harry hadn't seen her pull it and she was already pointing it at them.

"Avada Kada-" she began, but the air behind her was already shimmering.

"Stupify," Moody said. His wand was in her back and the woman froze and crumpled to the ground in a head.

"What..." Harry began, but he stopped himself as he realized what had happened. Moody had been here all along under a disillusionment spell, waiting for Mrs. Longbottom to make her move.

"How did you know?" he asked.

Moody shook his head, even as he cast a spell making the woman immobile. "If the Longbottoms had been openly attacked, security around the hospital would have been tight. It was "Mrs. Longbottom" who sent the message of the attack to Neville. The whole thing stank from the minute I got here."

Harry had to admit that he'd wondered about it himself.

Neville had given the correct sign, but Mrs. Longbottom wasn't in their group. She had no way to prove that she was herself...or that she wasn't. Neville had doubtlessly met his grandmother at the hospital and had been so worried that he hadn't asked any questions.

"Don't let this get you off your guard," Moody said. "We don't know that there's just one assassin."

"Do you think my grandmother is all right?" Neville asked.

"They had no reason to attack her," Moody said. "It wouldn't earn them any kind of bounty. They've had house elves stealing hairs all over the place for polyjuice potions. They don't need the people they are replacing."

Steven nodded and turned. He leaned over the bed and patted Neville's mother on the arm. Neville's father was already struggling to sit up, although he seemed weak and a little confused.

"Mrs. Longbottom?" he asked quietly. "There are people here who would like to see you very much. It's time to wake up."

Even with his superior speed and reflexes, Steven didn't have time to react as the woman lunged out of the bed and drove a knife into his side.

"It's my fault," Harry said. "The whole reason I was there was to protect him, and I let my guard down."
Ron didn't say anything. He just looked at the floor.

Harry hadn't seen Hermione yet; Ron had been there when she'd gotten the news. Harry couldn't imagine what it would be like; she'd been so close to him that they'd actually been the same person for a short period.

It was hard enough for Harry to process, and he hadn't worn the same skin as Steven or known what he thought. He hadn't spent a quarter of the time with him that Hermione had.

Ron hadn't told him how she'd reacted, but from the way he was avoiding looking at Harry, it couldn't have been good. Ron hadn't said much, which was unusual for him; he still looked a little shocked. Harry imagined that he probably looked the same way.

Harry wished he could have stayed at St. Mungo's, but the risk of more assassins coming had been too great. Moody had told him that his presence was going to put Steven in even more danger.

So now he sat waiting with Ron in the Great Hall. They were there because it was the only place they wouldn't run into other students, not at this hour. Going back to the common area was out of the question; his classmates were sure to have questions the moment they saw his face.

The library was out, and the Room of Requirement was known by anyone in the Defense Association.

"Wait till his aunts here about it," Ron said finally. "After the way Hermione reacted, I wouldn't want to be the person who told them."

The gems hadn't even occurred to Harry. Now that Ron mentioned it, he felt his guilt growing even more intense. The gems were Steven's family, far more than the Dursleys had ever been for Harry. The thought of the look in their eyes was even more painful than the thought of what they might do, and that was bad enough.

He heard the rustling of robes, and he looked up.

Snape had managed to get within a few feet of him without Harry even noticing. It only highlighted how foolish he'd been to think he could bodyguard anyone, much less Steven.

"How is he?" Harry asked. He felt himself tensing as he waited for Snape's answer.

Snape was silent for a moment before saying, "He's alive; any normal Wizard would have expired hours ago from the wound alone, much less the poison on the blade."

Apparently the bit about the unknown poison was actually true, although the assassin had wounded herself superficially her wound wasn't poisoned, and so far neither prisoner had been willing to talk. Under Veritaserum they'd admitted that they didn't know what the poison was; they couldn't reveal what they didn't know.

Someone had supplied them with the poison, and Sirius and Lupin were out searching for the ones who had done it, even though the Ministry was actively looking for Sirius.

Snape had been helping the Mediwitches at St. Mungo's. He had more knowledge of gem physiology than anyone outside of the Ministry, and they, for some reason were not releasing records.

Harry thought it was because he wasn't human and they didn't care what happened to him. It was typical Ministry shortsightedness.
Frank Longbottom wasn't the only Auror permanently disabled. If Steven could recover even a portion of them, he'd do a huge service to their families and to the Ministry itself.

"There are going to be questions," Snape said. "The Daily Prophet is already preparing an article questioning why you were placed at risk."

"I don't care about that," Harry said. "Is Steven going to be O.K?"

"No one knows," Snape said. He scowled. "We won't know more until his "aunts" get back from their trip with Dumbledore."

Harry nodded. He supposed the gems would know more about Steven's physiology than any human. Snape had only been studying Steven casually for a few years. The gems had known him for his entire life.

It was the waiting that was going to be the hardest.

"If you can't do it at a time like this, there is no way you'll be able to stop Voldemort from breaking into your mind to get at our deepest secrets." Sirius said quietly.

Sirius had summoned him to the temple, which made Harry a little nervous. He didn't particularly want to be here when the gems returned, especially if they hadn't yet heard what had happened. Sirius didn't seem worried, though.

"Shouldn't you be out looking for the source of the poison that they used on Steven?" Harry asked.

"We got him," Sirius said. "He's a minor death eater, an apothecary who specializes in poisons. He may have immunized himself against veritaserum and some of the other methods, but Snape is trying Legilimancy now."

"I thought Snape was better at Occlumency," Harry said.

"He is, but out of the three of us he's the best Legilmens," Sirius said. "Remus is helping him. In a group like that three is too many."

"So this is just a way to keep me busy?" Harry asked.

Sirius shook his head. "There are likely secrets that need to be revealed, and soon. Given what's happened, I'd imagine that things are likely to get ugly."

Harry nodded, slowly. From what Steven had told him, the gems had sworn to protect humanity. However, that was in another universe, and that was a humanity that hadn't killed or almost killed the child they loved.

It was possible that they'd go after Voldemort before they were ready, and that would lead only to disaster.

"Fine," Harry said. "We've been at this for months."

"You almost had it last time," Sirius said.

Hermione had mastered it almost a month ago. They no longer took lessons together. After this, harry wondered if they would again.

"Legilmens," Sirius said, letting him know they were beginning.
"You've done it," Sirius said. "and just in time."

The familiar popping sound of apparition told him that someone was in the part of the cave not covered by the Hogwart's wards.

Now that Harry thought about it, apparating to the Chamber of Secrets then sneaking into Hogwarts would be one way to get around the wards; he'd have to mention it to Dumbledore the next time he spoke to him.

It was the gems, and Dumbledore and Hermione were with them. Although she looked pale, she didn't look devastated, In point of fact, she looked much calmer than he would have expected, especially given what happened to Steven.

Sapphire seemed as calm as always, although Harry hadn't really seen her that often. Pearl on the other hand looked distraught. He hands were trembling, and she was biting her lip. Peridot, for all she normally seemed unconcerned with human emotions looked worried.

Amethyst simply looked murderous.

Harry found himself taking a step back despite himself. He'd seen the damage Amethyst could do on multiple occasions, and the last place he wanted to be was on the receiving end of her anger.

"So there are paths where he will be all right, and paths where he won't," Hermione was saying to Sapphire. "What do we have to do?"

"I can show you," Sapphire was saying. "Some of it depends on Steven and the choices he makes."

Harry stepped out into the light, and Hermione stopped. Her expression tightened as she caught sight of him, but she didn't say anything.

She'd warned them, but they hadn't listened, and now Steven felt guilty.

"He's ready," Sirius said.

Sapphire stared at them both for a long moment before finally nodding.

"There's a secret," Sirius said to Harry. "The deepest secret held by the entire Order. We've been waiting to tell you until we knew you were ready."

"Until you knew I wouldn't accidentally betray you to Voldemort," Harry said, scowling. "What is it?"

The gems glanced at each other, their faces expressionless.

Hermione glanced back at them, then she said, "Sapphire's a seer."

"Like Trelawny?" Harry asked. He wasn't quite sure why having the ability to make a vaguely accurate prediction once or twice in a lifetime was such a big deal, but Hermione seemed to be impressed.

"Nothing like her," Hermione said. "She can see the future perfectly."

Harry stared at her. It would explain how they'd been able to divert attention from the Defense meetings when more than a tenth of the school was going to them. It would also explain Hermione's smug confidence throughout the year.
"Why didn't she see this, then?" Harry asked angrily. "You used it to keep me out of trouble all year, but you couldn't use it to keep Steven from getting hurt?"

He couldn't help the anger in his voice. He'd gone over what had happened in his mind a thousand times, thinking about the things he might have done differently. He could have reacted a little faster, or he could have made Steven be a little more cautious.

If he'd only been watching, been more alert, more constantly vigilant.

He'd wished he'd had a time turner, although they couldn't actually change what had already happened, which made them seem useless to Harry.

Dumbledore gestured, and a large table and numerous chairs shimmered into existence. He hadn't even used his wand.

He sat down heavily. Whatever they had been doing had taken a toll on him; he was visibly exhausted. He gestured for Harry to sit, and after a moment he did.

"Her visions of the future are accurate, but they are only visions of possible futures," Dumbledore said. "Imagine you are following a river. Sometimes it will split and branch off, and you have a choice about which branch to follow."

Harry frowned. "I don't understand."

Hermione took a seat. "Every time you make a decision the future changes. Maybe you turn right instead of left, or you decide to practice Quidditch instead of studying for your test. Most of the time it doesn't make much of a difference, but sometimes..."

She looked down at her hands. "Sometimes it can be the difference between life or death."

"Travel too far down one path in the river and you don't have time to investigate the others," Dumbledore said. "Often it is better to investigate many pathways nearby than one further down the line."

Sapphire floated toward the table. "When I was younger, my people had little free will. They performed as they were designed, and so I believed there was a single, immutable future. It wasn't until I came to Earth that I realized that the future was not set in stone."

"Yeah," Amethyst muttered. "Humans are crazy unpredictable."

"So you were busy looking into...whatever you were looking into and didn't notice what was going to happen to Steven until it was too late," Harry said.

Dumbledore nodded. He looked down at his right hand and subconsciously rubbed his ring finger. "It's important work, and it's already saved lives."

"What about Steven's life?" Harry asked. He looked at Sapphire. "Is he going to be O.K.?"

She glanced back in the direction from which they'd came.

The sound of someone apparating was followed by rushed footsteps. Lupin staggered into the room; he was clearly out of breath.

"We managed to learn what kind of poison they used, and Snape got Steven the antidote," he said. Harry felt a sudden feeling of relief.
"But the Ministry arrested Snape and took Steven into protective custody, even though the mediwitches warned that he was still too injured to be moved."

Harry stared at him; he could understand Snape; it was known that he was a former Death Eater and considering that he was also one of Dumbledore's supporters, it made sense that he would be arrested. He didn't understand why they would have taken Steven, who hadn't done anything.

"The Ministry just passed a law saying that half-humans have no more rights than non-humans, and they've reclassified beings as beasts."

This was going to mean war; not just with the goblins, but with the giants and vampires and werewolves and centaurs.

"You're telling me he's immortal," Harry said flatly.

Dumbledore was silent for a moment. "As long as he has a single surviving horcrux, he can return. Sapphire has been looking into futures where we successfully sought out the locations of the horcruxes, and we have been going there directly."

"How many did he make?" Harry asked.

"We believe he has split his soul into seven parts," Dumbledore said.

In front of Harry were five objects. He recognized two of them- the Diary that had been destroyed by Ginny Weasel with the basilisk's fang and part of the spine of a large snake. There was also a ring, a locket and a kind of crown. All had been destroyed.

"It surprised me that Steven's Patrons was able to destroy his snake," Dumbledore said. "Under ordinary circumstances, destroying one takes something extraordinary, like Fiendish, or basilisk venom, or objects of great magic."

He was talking about Lion.

"I don't think it's an ordinary patrons," Harry admitted. "It existed on the other side and it can do things..."

He hesitated. "Are we going to get Steven back?"

He had a bad feeling that Dumbledore was revealing these secrets now as a way to distract him. Adults did that kind of thing, when they didn't outright lie. Of course, if he had known about the horcruxes as a first year he might have given up entirely.

"Preparations are being made as we speak," Dumbledore said quietly.

"Sapphire is just floating there." Harry nodded toward the blue gem. "And I've seen her kiss several people, including Hermione, which is a little weird."

"She can share her gift that way," Dumbledore said. He looked down at his right hand, flexing it self-consciously. "She's already saved my life."

Harry purposefully kept from asking again why she hadn't seen what was going to happen to Steven. Apparently some futures were less likely than others, and she couldn't look through all of them. He wasn't sure just how useful that made it, although the objects in front of him certainly suggested it
might be useful.

"She's searching the future now, or sharing the future with others, seeking out the way to free young Steven that will result in the fewest casualties."

"Where's he being held, then?" Harry asked.

"He's in the Ministry," Hermione said. She looked pale.

Harry knew he should ask about the two remaining horcruxes, but at the moment he didn't particularly care. All he cared about was making sure his friend was returned safely.

"Sapphire says it's your turn," Hermione said. She didn't look at him.

"Sirius!" Harry bolted upward, only to realize that somehow he'd fallen to the ground.

He'd never realized that Future Vision was like that; it wasn't like anything Professor Trelawny had taught. There was no gazing into crystal balls or tea leaves, no making guesses based on patterns that likely didn't mean anything.

There was no shouting out true prophecies you didn't remember later.

Instead, it was like the Muggle movie he'd seen Dudley watching on videotape while he was cleaning, the one involving a groundhog. He'd lived the day over and over, but unlike in the movie, things changed sometimes even when he didn't do anything differently. People made decisions that took a split second, and there was no way to predict them.

This wasn't predicting a teacher's unhurried path down a hallway, or Harry's entirely too predictable tendency to be disrespectful to teachers he thought deserved it. This was something else entirely.

A real battle involving real adult wizards was chaos.

He's thought he was good; compared to most of his classmates he was. But the wizards in the Ministry were professionals, and they were ready and willing to kill.

Worse, Voldemort's people were there, and Bellatrix was almost as fast and accurate as Voldemort. She was a monster, and three out of the five futures Harry had seen had involved her killing someone he cared about.

Even Voldemort didn't have that kind of impact, probably because he was too busy fighting Dumbledore. They were titans, but they canceled each other out, leaving Bellatrix to dominate the battlefield.

"This isn't another future, is it?" Harry asked.

Hermione looked at him, her face grim. "We're about out of time. Future vision takes real time to go through, even if it's just a fraction of the future we look through."

This was why she and Steven had looked so exhausted before every meeting of the defense association. They'd gone through the future over and over, looking for times when they were betrayed, or when someone was stupid and got caught.

Every time Hermione had kept him from getting a detention with Umbridge was a time when she had gone through the futures multiple times.
Steven had done the same thing, running himself ragged for Harry and his friends. This wasn't even his world, really, and he'd sacrificed so much for all of them.

"All right," Harry said, even though he would have liked to go through the battle at least a dozen more times so he could find some way of protecting everyone. He thought he had a chance, but he'd seen just how much of a role luck played in everything.

"It'll be all right," Hermione said.

"I keep feeling Ron should be here," Harry said.

"We checked the future to see how good a student he'd be at Occlumency," Hermione said. She scowled and shook her head. "He never took it seriously enough."

Harry could understand that. Ron didn't have people trying to kill him all the time like Harry, or a family to protect like Steven. He didn't even have an...interest in someone else or a crazy drive to succeed like Hermione.

He was smart enough when he understood how important things were, but this wasn't something he'd have seen as important. After all, who'd go rummaging through his mind?

The fact that Harry was now having to hide things from his best friend was painful, but there wasn't any helping it.

"It's probably for the best if we keep him out of it," Harry said. "His dad works for the Ministry...having a son attack it would likely get him sacked."

"He's a known associate of ours," Hermione said dryly. "It's not as if the Ministry cares about guilt or innocence."

"It's why we're going in disguise," Harry grinned. "One of the good things about Steven is that he's made enough friends that no one will be sure exactly who is trying to spring him."

"They'll know Dumbledore," Hermione said. "He's too powerful for it to be anyone else."

They'd know who the gems were too; there was no way to disguise their powers or even their looks. They'd be fugitives from the Wizarding world after this, although Harry suspected that they didn't really care. All they cared about at the moment was getting Steven back.

"You guys need to get ready," Peridot said. "We're moving out soon."

She was wearing some kind of stilts to extend her legs, and some kind of body armor. She looked a little like a Muggle soldier, wearing camouflage pants and carrying some kind of futuristic rifle obviously built out of junk, with wires leading to a backpack.

On the good side, no wizard would know what to make of it. Harry certainly didn't; he hadn't seen Peridot fight in any of the futures he'd been through.

Peridot looked determined in a way harry hadn't seen before. She looked like she was willing to take on the world. It was a look mirrored on the other gems' faces, and even on Hermione's.

Sirius was more impassive, as was Dumbledore. Sirius looked a little pale, probably because of what he'd seen in his own visits to the future.

Harry had died once in one possible future, so he knew how he felt. Sirius had died three times,
though, probably because Bellatrix was targeting him in particular.

"This is a trap," Harry said to Peridot.

She'd gotten her own glimpses into the future, so she had to know it as much as he did, but she just nodded and then grinned. "It'll be a trap for them. I've got a few tricks up my sleeve nobody has seen yet."

Harry hoped so, because the futures he'd seen had been pretty bleak.

"They'll never know what hit them! Primitive screwheads!" She grinned, and her expression wasn't pleasant. "Show them not to take Steven."

Harry had a feeling that Peridot cared the least about humans of all the gems. From what Steven had said, she'd never really lived among humans until she'd reformed in this universe. In his own universe she'd had limited contact. That meant that of all of them, her mindset was the most alien.

Grabbing a set of robes from a nearby table, she thrust them into his hands. She gave another set to Hermione.

"Get dressed," she said.

Harry blinked as he recognized the robes from his visions. They had hoods and would magically create the appearances of masks; at first it would look like a Death Eater attack on the Ministry. It helped that Snape, having actually been a Death Eater knew how to copy their outfits.

Once Voldemort's forces attacked, they only had to tap their wands to the robes once and they'd be transfigured. The star symbol that adorned the crystal gems would appear on their breasts; according to Hermione, it was actually the sign of Rose Quartz.

Since Rose Quartz was in some way Harry didn't understand actually Steven, the star was his sign as well.

In the heat of battle they needed to be able to identify each other, or they might run the risk of attacking their own people. Still, Harry couldn't help but feel that the star was going to be like wearing a big bulls-eye right on his chest.

Harry slipped the robes on over his regular clothing. He pulled the hood up and slipped the mask on. To his surprise, it wasn't like wearing a Muggle mask. He'd secretly tried on a mask Dudley was going to wear for Halloween one year; he'd known he wasn't going to spend Halloween anywhere but inside his cupboard but he'd wanted to try it once.

He'd had trouble seeing, and the heat and moisture of his breath had made his glasses fog up. He hadn't cared for it at all, and he'd wondered how Dudley was going to see well enough to not get run over by a lorry. The fact that Dudley was practically the size of a Lorry might have helped.

This mask, though seemed to be different. He could see out of it almost as well as if he wasn't wearing it. He didn't have an unpleasant rubber band strapping it to the back of his head. Somehow it seemed to attach on its own.

His spectacles weren't fogging up either.

It made sense, though. The Death Eaters had to wear masks like this during the last war, and they'd had to fight in them. Ordinary Muggle masks simply wouldn't have done the job.
Harry hoped these would; if their identities were discovered, his schooling at Hogwarts would be over for good, and he'd be on the run as a wanted fugitive.

The knotting in his stomach wouldn't go away; he'd seen too much in his glimpses of possible futures to think that everything would go wonderfully. Battle was ugly, especially when it had three sides.

All he could hope was that no one he cared about was permanently hurt.

"All right," he said to Hermione, who had dressed in her own outfit. "Let's go."
Security at the Ministry should have been better; in no future Sapphire had shown him was there any kind of resistance from the Ministry, at least at first. A few cloaks and a decent story shouldn't have gotten them past the first gate, much less into the inner sanctum.

The Ministry was at war; it should have been protected better than Gringotts. Instead getting in was just as easy as Harry had foreseen.

Getting out was an entirely different matter. He'd seen that as well. The Ministry's greatest defense was probably the fact that it was a maze of departments and finding any one place wasn't easy. In two futures Harry had seen, they'd gotten lost.

They'd had to capture a Ministry employee and have Sirius use Veritaserum to find out where Steven was in the first future. They already knew where to go in the second future, but finding it wasn't easy.

Now they all knew exactly where to go, as well as what to expect when they got there.

Harry tried to imagine what it must have been like for Hermione and Steven, going through future after future all year to keep everyone safe. Only someone as obsessive as Hermione or as Loyal as Steven would even try it, especially as there was no guarantee that the futures they saw would be the one that actually occurred.

Still, he had to respect Sapphire's power. They'd gained valuable information from the Ministry employee without ever having to do anything to him. It was worlds away from anything he'd ever learned in Divination class.

They were in the lift which rattled and shook. Harry's stomach clenched as the doors finally opened.

In contrast to the times he'd been here before, when the halls had been filled with Wizarding humanity, now everything was quiet and still. The only sound was the crackle of nearby torches and the sounds of rustling robes from his companions.

No one had bothered to put on the masks yet, only the hoods. There was no one around to see them and Wizards didn't use security cameras.

Harry led the way; behind him all four gems, Sirius, Hermione and Dumbledore fanned out. They moved with the assurance of people who knew exactly where they were going.

They moved into a circular room of polished black stone. The moment the last of them entered and closed the door behind them, the room began to spin. It was designed to be confusing, and was part of the reason they'd gotten lost in two of the futures.

There were no problems now, though. They knew exactly which door to enter, and also which doors to return through.

They avoided the room with the floating brains. Harry slipped into another room, followed by Dumbledore. He moved straight to the one prophecy that only he could access and he smashed it on the floor.
Dumbledore did something with his wand to ensure that the prophecy could not be reconstructed. He'd already played the prophecy for Harry in a previous future, and there was no reason to go through it again.

The fact that Voldemort wanted to know what the prophecy said was more than enough reason to deny it to him. Even better, it would infuriate him. Part of the reason they were here was to force him to reveal the prophecy.

The other reason they were here was to kill Steven.

Everyone slipped on their masks. It might not be enough to fool anyone, especially once the gems started using their weapons, but they had to at least have plausible deniability.

They returned to the circular room, moving through another door. This led to a long hallway. Harry grimaced as he realized where they had to pass through.

The Veil whispered as it always did, calling seductively. Harry's lips tightened as he pushed forward as quickly as he could. The memory of what had happened...of what might happen to Sirius in one possible future still haunted him.

The Veil couldn't just lead to Steven's world; the voices were proof of that. It had to lead to multiple places, some of which were terrible and inhuman. Crossing that barrier had taken every bit of Steven's power, and Harry couldn't imagine what it would do to a human being.

He'd asked Steven once what he'd seen as he'd passed through the Veil. Steven had paled and become suddenly quiet. He admitted that he tried not to think of the things he'd seen, but they sometimes gave him nightmares.

They pushed through the room holding the Veil and found themselves moving through a different hallway at the end of which was a doorway which was warded against every form of magic known to Wizardkind. Dumbledore himself couldn't get through that door, although he probably simply would have gone through the surrounding walls.

Against Pearl's spear and Amethyst's whip it hadn't held up well at all. Harry suspected Muggle explosives would have worked just as well.

This time it was Peridot who stepped forward, her makeshift blaster pointed at the door. There was a high pitched whine and a moment later there was no door.

They all moved quickly; the guards would have heard the explosion. There hadn't been anything they could do to muffle the door; the wards on it prevented silencing charms from penetrating, and muffliato, which Sirius had taught them created a buzzing noise which would have alerted the aurors anyway.

Knowing how the enemy was likely to react made it easy.

Harry closed his eyes tightly as Dumbledore lifted his wand. Even through his eyelids the light that flashed seemed blinding, leaving spots. To the aurors inside it had to feel like looking into the sun.

Casting two quick stunners, Harry saw that the others were already done with their opponents. The Ministry hadn't assigned their best and brightest to guard duty, but they'd still assigned ten men to guard one small boy. It was a sign of the fear they had of nonhumans, and of Steven in particular.

They hadn't broken his wand yet. It was supposed to happen in the morning, an example of how the Ministry was going to treat other non-humans.
Harry grabbed Steven's wand from the table where it was being kept even as Amethyst flicked her whip at the heavy, metal door. They'd learned from experience that none of the guards had a key. The aurors had been specially chosen from those who had not had contact with him in the past and who had no current family members at Hogwarts.

It wasn't just Steven's physical strength the Ministry feared. It was his popularity. He was universally popular with the aurors who had been assigned to him when he'd first arrived in this universe through the Veil. He was seen by the families of many as having saved their children from either a Troll or a basilisk.

According to the Ministry official they'd interrogated in a future that now would no longer happen, the Ministry was paranoid about Aurors turning on them in Steven's favor, and so they'd taken every precaution they could.

It seemed ironic to Harry that some of Voldemort's servants were treated as being less dangerous than one half-human child.

Amethyst called out a warning, and then flicked her energy whip. The door exploded inward.

Steven was inside, waiting for them. He'd already freed himself from the wall; apparently his bubble or maybe his shield was strong enough to slice through metal chains heavy enough to hold a giant.

He still looked a little pale. Despite Wizard healing methods, he probably still had some pain from the wound in his side.

Harry wondered if he could heal himself. Probably not; it would have been one of the first things he would have tried.

"Hey," Steven said.

He didn't seem surprised to see robed figures standing over him; most likely he'd recognized Amethyst's voice.

Sirius pointed his wand and a moment later the shackles fell away from Steven.

Harry tensed and turned. He'd been through this scenario in three possible futures, and he knew what was coming next.

The wall of the cell exploded; Voldemort's followers had been waiting for them to come for Steven.

It was a confined space, which meant it was harder to dodge spells and easier to be caught in the backlash of a spell cast at the person nearby. It should have been an easy slaughter for Voldemort's crew, shooting fish in a barrel.

Instead, Peridot threw a round metallic object into the middle of Voldemort's group, who suddenly realized that they were in a space that was almost as confined as Harry's group was.

The sudden explosion changed the course of the battle.

Harry lashed out at Bellatrix with a cutting spell; she'd killed Sirius in at least three futures and he wasn't going to let it happen again.

She'd been one of the few death eaters quick enough to shield herself from the explosion, and she managed to shield herself from Harry's spell as well. Sirius lashed out at her as well.
Barty Crouch junior licked his lips and sent an Avada Kadavra hissing toward Hermione, but Steven was there, and his shield deflected the spell upward.

Dumbledore and Voldemort were already trading spells. A jet of fire from Voldemort's wand was splashing off Dumbledore's shield, but the reflected heat was making Harry's face burn, even through the mask. The stonework on the floor between them was bubbling and hissing. Harry knew they had to get out of the enclosed space or they would soon all be in danger.

The one place he didn't want to go was back to the room with the Veil, but they didn't have much choice. He heard a rumbling sound, and a piece of stone from the ceiling almost hit him.

Amethyst and Pearl were moving forward suddenly. He knew them by their heights more than anything, as well as the way they moved.

Peridot was firing her rifle ruthlessly into any Death Eater who showed signs of reviving.

The heat from the fire was growing worse, and it was now that Sapphire floated forward. She gestured, and a thick coating of ice suddenly covered the floor and walls of the Death Eater side of the room. The remaining Death Eaters were suddenly slipping and falling, and where the ice impacted the molten rock, there was a sudden hissing sound.

The room was suddenly filled with thick, cloying steam, obscuring everyone's vision.

"Let's move," Harry shouted.

A moment later, they were retreating back into the guardroom even as Voldemort was transfiguring a bridge over the molten stone in the center of the room.

Voldemort pushed forward, as did Bellatrix and Barty Crouch Junior. Two other Death Eaters had managed to remain standing despite the grenade, which had rendered fifteen of the lesser Death Eaters unconscious or worse.

These were the fastest and most deadly of Voldemort's followers, and despite Pearl and Amethyst's power, they managed to survive.

Harry stepped backward, an uneasy feeling as they entered the chill of the chamber holding the Veil. This was the place where Sirius had died time after time. From the pale expression on his face he knew it as well from his own glimpses into the future.

They spread out as they entered the chamber.

Harry grimaced as he heard the footsteps coming from behind them. The Ministry Aurors were coming, and they weren't likely to take sides. They'd start attacking everyone, which was just the distraction Voldemort's people needed.

"Steven!" he heard Hermione say. She threw his wand, which went flying through the air.

He plucked it out of the air even as Pearl hurled her spear, not at Voldemort or any of his people, but at the archway above them. With a groan, the archway collapsed, dropping tons of stone on Voldemort and his most powerful followers.

"Expecto Patronus!" Steven shouted.

Light flared in the room, and a moment later Lion was there. He bowed, and the gems dove for his mane, disappearing inside, followed by Steven. Steven kept only his face sticking out in a way that
was creepy and disturbing to Harry.

That left Harry, Hermione, Sirius and Dumbledore to crowd onto Lion's back. It was crowded, and Lion struggled to stand with all of them.

Harry could see the pile of rubble moving. Voldemort had been fast enough to shield at least himself from the falling rubble, and he was still coming.

The sounds of footsteps racing from the other direction told him that the Ministry was coming as well. Anti-apparition wards were presumably up; Sirius had told him once that it was standard procedure for the Ministry when dealing with Wizards.

Lion finally stood. He roared, and a gateway appeared before them. Anti-apparition wards apparently didn't affect him any more than they affected house elves.

A moment before the Aurors entered the room they were gone.

"There's no way we can go back to school," Harry protested.

They were gathered in the Temple; the lights had been dimmed so that the only light came from glowing crystals. It made the cave walls look a little like stars, which, given where the gems were from was probably the point.

Hermione nodded. "Harry's right. The Ministry isn't stupid. We'll be the first people who get questioned."

With occlumency there was a chance they might be able to resist Veritaserum, which was one reason it wasn't used for every court case. It wasn't certain, however, and with time, Harry had no doubt that they'd crack.

Dumbledore and Sirius glanced at each other.

"There's no need to worry," Dumbledore said. "Your classmates were all in bed before our venture into the Ministry; no one will know anything."

Hermione was the first to catch on. "No...you want to obliviate us?"

She glanced at Harry with a guilty look, and he wondered why. She had nothing to feel guilty about. It was Dumbledore who was talking about stealing their memories.

"But why?" he asked.

"Education is important," Dumbledore said gravely. "And there is work that still needs to be done in the shadows."

"You're going after the last of the Horcruxes," Harry said flatly. "Without us."

"There is no need for you to endanger yourself before the final battle," Dumbledore said. "And the final battle will come, sooner rather than later."

He seemed so certain that Harry wondered just far ahead into the future Dumbledore had looked with Sapphire's help.
"You're leaving the school undefended," Harry said. "From Umbridge or whoever else the Ministry sends."

"There is nothing to fear," Dumbledore said. "All will be revealed in time."

The thought of losing his memories bothered Harry. It seemed like the worst kind of violation. There had to be another way.

Before Harry could react, Dumbledore had already lifted his wand. The last thing he saw was Steven's face, looking guilty and worried.

The Daily Prophet screamed about the attack on the Ministry; four Death Eaters were dead, including Bellatrix Lestrange, who had been crushed to death beneath a mass of stonework while defending her master.

A dozen others had been captured, although Voldemort and his other most important minions had managed to escape, including Barty Crouch Junior.

Harry looked at Hermione, and he saw his own worry reflected in her face. Had Voldemort's men broken into the Ministry and taken Steven?

He'd been tired this morning, almost as though he hadn't actually had the full night's sleep he remembered having. Had he been plagued by dreams of what Voldemort was going to do and simply hadn't woken up in time?

He'd once heard that dreams that happened when someone was asleep were not remembered later. Had his studies of occlumency caused him to not see something vital?

The worry on Hermione's face was even worse than his.

What was worse was that Dumbledore had disappeared. He wasn't at the head table at breakfast and he was nowhere to be seen. That wasn't usual; neither was the look of smug satisfaction on Umbridge's face as she declared that Dumbledore was wanted for questioning by the Ministry and that she was taking over as Headmaster.

That look of satisfaction vanished as a group of Aurors entered the great hall.

"Dolores Umbridge!" the lead Auror said. "You are under arrest."

If it had been Harry, he'd have waited until he was closer to make the announcement so she'd have less time to get away.

Fortunately, her first impulse was to bluster. "What is the meaning of this? I answer only to Cornelius Fudge."

From behind the Aurors came the sound of a cane clicking against the flagstones. Lucius Malfoy stepped out from behind the Aurors with a smirk on his lips. He was obviously aware of the impact his presence was having on everyone in the great hall, and he looked as though he was enjoying himself.

"I'm afraid that Mr. Fudge has resigned his position, effective this morning," he paused for a moment, and his lips quirked. "I was fortunate enough to be voted into his place as Minister during the interim."
Harry glanced at Hermione, whose face had turned as white as a ghost.

"I have sworn affidavits that you used a prohibited Dark Item on a number of children from Pureblood families," Lucius said. His expression tightened. "Including my own."

Harry couldn't help but glance toward Draco, who kept his expression carefully neutral. It hadn't occurred to him before, but Draco had been somewhat less hostile toward Harry since they'd figured out a way to replace Umbridge's blood quill earlier in the year.

"I was simply providing discipline!" she protested. "These...students...need to learn to see the error of their ways."

"Perhaps if you had confined your attention to... riff raff...the Ministry might have been willing to turn a blind eye. However, you tortured children from good families. I think you will find that the Ministry now will not be nearly as merciful as it was in the past."

He gestured with his cane, and a moment later the Aurors swarmed Umbridge.

If Steven and the twins hadn't come up with a way to replace her Blood Quill, it really would have happened for the entire year. However, it had apparently happened to enough members of Slytherin that they had a look of intense satisfaction.

Or maybe it was the fact that Lucius Malfoy was now Minister.

Did that mean that Voldemort had taken over entirely? How had Dumbledore and the others not foreseen this happening? What did it mean for Harry?

"Bring Harry Potter, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasely to the Headmaster's office, now," Lucius Malfoy said. He smirked a little as his eye caught Harry's.

Harry glanced at his friends again; he was sure that the worry he saw on their faces was reflected on his own.

"I don't know anything about the attack on the Ministry," Harry said.

He felt a little woozy; being forced to take Veritaserum after being stunned by one of the Aurors when he initially refused.

"You didn't participate?"

"I spent all night in bed," Harry said. He was relieved to be able to answer truthfully. "What's this all about?"

"You have no knowledge of where the...gems...might be?"

Harry frowned. He'd met with them several times...it was somewhere deep and dark, but for the life of him he couldn't remember where it had been or how he had gotten there. How odd.

"No," he said. It was true as far as it went. Even if he'd remembered where he'd met with them, there was no guarantee that they were there now.

It bothered him that he couldn't remember. It wasn't natural that something so important would have gone out of his head.

"You have no idea what Dumbledore plans to do?"
Harry opened his mouth again. He should have known...it was on the tip of his tongue, but somehow he couldn't recall it at all.

Finally he shook his head. "No."

There was a reason Veritaserum wasn't used all the time in Wizarding court cases, he realized. It only forced someone to tell what they thought was the truth. If their memories had been oblviated or changed, there was no guarantee that what they told would be the truth at all.

The questioning went on for some time, but somehow all the information that Harry was certain they'd once had was gone, not just from his memory, but from that of Ron and Hermione.

The Aurors seemed satisfied with this, and eventually they left, taking a protesting Umbridge with them.

This left them alone with Lucius Malfoy.

"I wouldn't get too comfortable," he told them. "It's useful to have the facade of warring factions, and for the moment it may even be true."

He reached out and picked up a cockroach cluster from a bowl on Dumbledore's desk. He popped it in his mouth and chewed on it with an audible crunch.

"There will come a time when everyone will be...appropriately loyal. When that happens, I fear your days will be numbered."

He was careful with his words, even though he knew they understood what he was implying. He probably didn't want them using a pensieve to show him admitting to being a Death Eater.

"The Malfoys are a proud family, and we always pay our debts. Losing me the services of a house elf whose family had served my family for generations was an insult that has yet to be repaid."

Lucius Malfoy hesitated. "However, what you did saved Draco pain."

Umbridge had been targeting Slytherins and Gryffindors more than any other house; Harry hadn't realized that Draco had been one of the targets although he should have. Umbridge was a jealous shrew of a woman, and given power over children from formerly powerful families, she would have taken out her anger on them disproportionately.

"I understand that you were never the recipient of her...attentions," Lucius said.

Harry nodded numbly.

"Then what you did for Draco matters. I now have enough authority that I could bring you in to the Ministry for questioning, and no one would ask any questions. Should you disappear...such things have been known to happen."

Harry glanced at Hermione and Ron, who had instinctively moved toward each other. He'd have to train them out of that habit should they ever resume defense classes.

"Consider my current mercy as payment in full for helping Draco," Lucius said. "Don't expect any in the future should our paths cross again."

"Go back to your classes," he said after a long moment. "Enjoy the little time you have remaining."

Numbly, Harry turned and headed down the stairs leaving the Headmaster's office. He didn't want to
turn his back to Malfoy, but he didn't have a lot of choice.

Thankfully they all reached the hallway outside without an Avada Kedavra to the back.

There was an Auror waiting outside. Presumably this was part of the excuse Malfoy was going to use to Voldemort for restraining himself. Most of the Aurors probably hadn't been subverted yet, and the death of the Boy-that-lived at the hands of the Minister would raise questions Voldemort's camp wasn't ready to answer yet.

It might even be believed. Malfoy was still risking the Cruciusatus, and Harry had to respect him for that.

Malfoy left, followed by the Auror. As he walked down the hall, he whistled a tune that sounded oddly familiar to Harry.

"Do you know what that was?" Harry asked Hermione.

She nodded grimly. "It's a song called 'Time it's on my side," by a Muggle musical group.

Malfoy listened to Muggle music? It didn't seem likely. Was he trying to send them a message that he wasn't as against all things Muggle as he presented himself, or was he simply trying to intimidate them?

Whatever it was, the message was clear.

War was coming.

Umbridge's trial happened with amazing swiftness. Over the course of the next week, classmates vanished from class, only to return with stories of giving testimony before the court,

With Fudge dead, Umbridge had become the symbol for his administration, with the newspapers crying out for the maximum punishment to be administered. Pictures in the paper showed her looking haggard; prison didn't seem to agree with her, and for once Harry couldn't find any sympathy for her.

Lucius Malfoy gave speeches about how the trial was an example of how his administration was re-establishing the justice that Umbridge and Fudge's administration had denied everyone.

It made him look magnanimous, and at least in the halls of Hogwarts he was increasingly popular. Classmates who weren't even Slytherin were hoping that this administration was better than the last one.

Harry knew better, but he also knew better than to openly decry Malfoy as a Death Eater. Martial law was still in effect, and slandering the Minister of Magic was still a punishable offense.

Malfoy's changes in Ministry policy over the next few days were the only thing the papers could talk about outside of Umbridge's trial. Although he didn't end martial law, Lucius Malfoy stopped imprisoning people without trials. He stopped random searches by Aurors of ordinary citizens.

Raids on the homes of ordinary wizards were reduced; Malfoy pledged no more would happen without creditable evidence of wrongdoing.

If Harry hadn't known better, he'd have agreed with his classmates. He'd have thought Malfoy was a massive improvement over the previous administration. Death Eater attacks dropped to almost
nothing, and Malfoy attributed this to good work by the Aurors.

The truth was that Voldemort didn't need to attack much; just often enough to keep the Wizarding population afraid of him. They'd flock like sheep to anyone they thought would bring them safety, unless they thought that person was even worse.

By making his administration look good in comparison to the preceding one, Malfoy tightened his control over the populace much more than Fudge ever had. If people began to question any of his policies, Harry had no doubt that another attack by Voldemort would be forthcoming.

In the meantime Voldemort had time to consolidate his forces. Harry had no doubt that those in the Ministry were being threatened, bribed and coerced by magic into changing sides even as the populace sat by unaware.

They wouldn't show their true selves until everyone was suborned and there was nothing the populace could do about it. The average wizard never kept up with combat magic, and they were no match for a trained Auror or a Death Eater.

Harry redoubled his work with Dumbledore's army; it was harder now that they didn't have sapphire to tell them when teachers would be coming, but the Marauder's map sufficed well enough. Harry suspected that Snape knew what was going on, but he acted as though he didn't know any better.

If anything, Snape seemed distracted in his new role as Headmaster. The Weasley twins had become more of a nuisance than usual, and Snape wasn't as well liked as Dumbledore, so there were small signs of rebellion everywhere.

If Harry hadn't known Snape was on their side, he'd have been one of the people tormenting him. However, his time with Steven had softened his view on Snape slightly, and he did his best to remain neutral. Neither he nor Snape really liked each other, but at least they were on the same side.

Instead of joining the rest of the student body in finding ways to snub Snape, Harry spent most of his time in defense association meetings and the rest of his time consoling Hermione, who was out of her mind worrying.

She worried that Steven had been captured by Voldemort's forces and that he was being tortured, or worse that he was already dead.

Harry had a feeling that that wasn't the case at all, although he couldn't put his finger on why he thought that way. Maybe it was just that they hadn't heard anything from the gems; if Voldemort had Steven the gems would be attacking Death Eaters all out in an effort to find him.

The kinds of attacks they used would be obvious, possibly even in the Muggle world. They'd probably be covered up by the Ministry as gas explosions, or possibly even attacks by Irish terrorists.

He'd heard nothing like that, not even from those few Muggleborn who were in close contact with their families.

Hermione agreed with his logic to a point, but she couldn't help but worry. Her nature was to worry and control that worry by planning. With schoolwork that meant she was always a step ahead, but in a situation like this there was no way she could possibly plan anything. The only thing that was left was for her to fret.

In the end, all he could do was to convince her to feverishly research new and better combat spells. They practiced them over and over in the room of requirement, and Harry didn't present a new spell to the class until he was sure that he had the spell mastered.
He was surprised to discover that two weeks after Umbridge's arrest, they had a new Defense teacher. He was more surprised when he realized who it was; Frank Longbottom.

"We don't have much class time before the end of the year," Frank Longbottom said. "And it's not likely that I can teach you a year's worth in two weeks."

Frank Longbottom looked like a man weighed down by grief. Although Steven had been able to free him from the Malady that had kept him from recognizing anyone for more than fifteen years, the assassins had simply killed his wife and hidden her away.

To him, the intervening time simply hadn't passed. It was like waking up in an older body and finding out that your wife and many of your friends were dead.

The only time the grief in the man's eyes lightened was when he looked at Neville. Then his shoulder's relaxed, and hints of a smile appeared on his lips.

"Do we even need a teacher?" Ron asked. "We've been doing all right for the past two weeks."

"Self study is a wonderful thing," Professor Longbottom said. "But magic isn't something to play with recklessly."

He glanced at Harry with a strange look in his eye.

He'd been a member of the original order of the Phoenix. While it was possible that he'd come simply to keep an eye on his son, it was also possible that he was still working for them. If that was true, he might be Harry's one link to Dumbledore, Steven and the others.

After all, Snape wouldn't tell him anything, out of spite if nothing else. More importantly, if Harry's occlumency failed, Snape couldn't afford for Voldemort to see him helping Harry in any way that mattered.

Harry wasn't even sure how Snape had excused hiring Professor Longbottom. Maybe he'd excused it as proving to everyone that Voldemort's people weren't running the show. At least some people had to be questioning Malfoy on the grounds that he was a former death eater leading the Ministry against his old comrades.

Malfoy would probably spin it as revenge against the people who had controlled him, since he'd claimed to be impiused during the last war anyway.

Maybe he'd be able to find out what had happened when Dumbledore and Steven disappeared. Harry couldn't help but feel that he was being excluded from something that was vitally important in his life.

"We haven't had much choice but teach ourselves," Harry said. "Umbridge didn't teach us anything."

"Let's see what you've managed to teach yourselves then," Professor Longbottom said. "Everyone pick a partner."

Harry perked up. Maybe defense class wouldn't be a joke.

He'd have to find a time after class to approach the professor. He wasn't sure whether he needed to include Hermione or not. She was too anxious about what was happening to be objective.

On the other hand, Harry didn't want to treat Hermione like Dumbledore was treating him; it
infuriated him that he was being kept in the dark for his own good.

"Aurors make the best defense teachers," Ron said. He was covered with sweat but had a self satisfied look. He'd actually done well in his duel with Dean Thomas; all the extra practice he was getting with Harry and Hermione outside of Defense meetings was paying off.

Given the time that he'd volunteered to be a test subject for whatever new spell Harry was learning, Ron had gotten very good at dodging and very quick at lashing back with a counterattack.

Harry glanced over at Ron. "Well, Moody was really good, but I think Lupin was better, and he wasn't an auror."

"He was practically one," Ron said. He looked around. "Considering who he worked for."

Professor Lupin had been a member of the Order of the Phoenix, just like Moody and Longbottom. They'd all fought in the last war, and they had first hand experiences with curses and the dark arts.

Harry gave Ron a warning glance. There weren't many places in Hogwarts where it was really safe to speak freely. There were magical paintings everywhere that would be all too happy to tell the Headmaster anything juicy.

Harry wondered suddenly if this was how Dumbledore always seemed to know what was happening to Hogwarts, even before Sapphire had come into the picture. He had the perfect spy network in the form of the paintings, and most students didn't think anything of talking around them.

From what he'd heard, the paintings had refused to cooperate with Umbridge; she hadn't even been able to get into the Headmaster's office. That had been a large part of what had made Dumbledore's army possible.

Of course, most student infractions were probably too minor for the Headmaster to bother with. Harry reminded himself that he needed to ask the twins how they had managed to keep their pranks a secret.

Behind them they heard the sound of rapid footsteps. Given his worries about assassins, Harry had practiced paying attention to that kind of thing. He carefully turned, his hand on his wand.

It was Colin Creevy, and he had a newspaper in his hand. His face was flushed. He'd obviously been running at least for a while.

"What's going on?" Harry asked.

"There's a special evening edition of the Daily Prophet," Colin said. He paused to catch his breath. "I was going to show it to Hermione, but I found you guys first."

Dramatically, he held the paper out in front of him.

"ROBBERY AT GRINGOTTS!" The headline screamed in bold letters.

This was the second time in five years, Harry thought. It wasn't until he glanced down and saw the picture below that he froze.

Steven Universe glanced over at the cameraman and gave a small wave to the camera. In his other hand he was carrying a small golden cup with engraved badgers on the sides.

"Is that Helga Hufflepuff's cup?" Ron asked, looking over his shoulder.
Harry stared at Ron. "How would you know that?"

"It's on her painting;" Ron said. "And it's not like I haven't had to clean it often enough when I've got detention with Filch."

Ron had spent a lot of his time cleaning during his time at Hogwarts.

What Harry didn't understand was why Steven had stolen it and how he'd gotten caught. It might have been simply a less likely future that Sapphire hadn't shown them.

Harry glanced down at the paper again. Steven didn't look shocked to see the camera. He actually smiled a little as he waved.

They were baiting Lord Voldemort, Harry realized. They wouldn't be doing this unless they'd found the last of the Horcrux and were hoping to draw him out before he was ready.

Harry grimaced. Given Voldemort's nature, it wouldn't be long before he realized what had happened. He was likely to lash out because of this, and Harry doubted that it would take long.

Someone like Voldemort couldn't tolerate challenges to his power. Not only was he arrogant, but his entire network depended on people being terrified of him and believing he was the strongest.

Before Harry could react further, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"You need to come with me," Frank Longbottom said. Before Harry could respond, Longbottom said, "A gem of a lady told me to tell you that they're coming, and it won't be long."
"He's starting to panic," Professor Longbottom said. "He's checking the places he stashed his horcruxes and he's starting to realize that they are all gone."

The fact that the professor was willing to speak about horcruxes as they walked through the halls told Harry more than Frank Longbottom probably meant to. He wouldn't be talking about them at all unless all of them were gone.

"He's hoping that at least some of them still exist; he's going to want to kidnap you and trade you for them."

"Can't he just make more?" Harry asked. He was getting a little out of breath from the pace the larger man was setting.

"He's already split his soul too many times," Professor Longbottom said. "One more time and there won't be enough of him left to cause problems for anyone."

Harry nodded. "So Steven was trying to get him to make a mistake...attack before he is ready."

"The Dark Lord's forces are only getting stronger by the day," Longbottom said. "Attacking now when his forces are only beginning to get stronger would be beyond foolish."

Harry's steps faltered and he looked at Frank Longbottom carefully. "Where did you say you were taking me?"

"To meet with the others," Longbottom said impatiently.

Frank Longbottom was an auror; he and his wife had been tortured by death eaters. Would he really call Voldemort the Dark Lord?

Harry hated being so paranoid, but he'd spent much of the term with assassins out to kill him. The fact that he was in Hogwarts and supposedly safe wasn't any excuse to become complacent. After all, he'd had attempts on his life within the walls of Hogwarts every year.

Worse, although they'd worked out ways to identify each other in case someone came polyjuiced, he hadn't worked anything at all out with Frank Longbottom. It was possible that this wasn't him at all or that he was being controlled with magic.

"Where are you taking me?" Harry asked, stopping.

"I'm taking you to a safe place," he said. He glanced back at Harry and then he too stopped.

"Oh," he said. "I forgot."

He glanced around at the paintings on the wall, and then he pulled his wand.

Harry stiffened, his hand on his own wand, although he kept it by his side. He couldn't be seen threatening a teacher, even if he was just going to be at school temporarily. However, he wasn't going to let the older man stun him or worse either.

Frank Longbottom waved his wand and cast a quick spell designed to muffle what they were saying so it couldn't be heard from very far away. Fortunately, none of the portraits were likely to know how to read lips, although there was a portrait of a deaf wizard on the fifth floor who probably could.
"Sapphire said this might happen," Professor Longbottom said. "I'm sorry I forgot to tell you. Since I don't have my own code word, Sirius volunteered to let me borrow his. He says it's about time you switched it up anyway."

Harry was already relaxing. If Frank Longbottom knew about Sapphire, then he already knew the Order's greatest secret. He was himself at least, although he could have been impiriused.

"The code phrase is 'Mischief managed,'" Professor Longbottom said. "I'm not sure what it means, but they reassured me that it would mean something to you."

"Where are we going then?" Harry asked.

"To the astronomy tower," Professor Longbottom said. "We'll be able to see the battle from there. More importantly, they'll be able to see you, and that will cause them to focus most of their attacks in one area."

Harry nodded. They presumably wanted to minimize casualties.

He found himself wishing that they'd waited another year or two. Dumbledore's army wasn't close to ready. Another couple of years would have gotten everyone closer to being able to fight full grown wizards.

Of course, in two more years Voldemort's army would have swelled immeasurably. They'd be facing overwhelming force. Sapphire apparently thought their best chances were now, so who was he to argue?

Frank Longbottom waved his wand, ending the spell.

They began racing up the corridor again, when they saw Snape and Professor McGonegall coming down the hallway, their expressions grim.

"How close are they?" Professor Longbottom asked Snape.

A voice boomed throughout the castle. "BRING ME HARRY POTTER AND BRING ME THE ABOMINATION AND YOU SHALL BE SPARED. DO NOT, AND I WILL RAZE THIS SCHOOL AND ALL WITHIN IT TO THE GROUND. YOU HAVE THIRTY MINUTES."

"So we've got twenty minutes," Harry said. Voldemort seemed like the kind who would cheat on time just to see them squirm.

"I'll gather the students into the Great Hall," Professor McGonegall said.

"I fear my time as Headmaster has to visibly end," Snape said. "Or my use as a spy."

"Dumbledore is waiting for you in the courtyard," Professor Longbottom said. "He's more than ready to accommodate you."

Snape nodded, turning with his robes billowing to head down the stairs.

Professor McGonegall hesitated. "Are you going to be all right Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "It wouldn't be Hogwarts if Voldemort wasn't trying to kill me."

With that, Professor Longbottom grabbed his arm and a moment later they were making their way up the hallway, headed for the astronomy tower.
Before they stepped outside, Professor Longbottom had Harry slip his Invisibility cloak on. There was no reason to begin the battle early because he was spotted coming outside.

The stairs to the tower seemed longer than they usually did during astronomy class, maybe because Harry wasn't all that anxious to get to the top. Facing death was easier in the abstract and becoming bait was the last thing he really wanted to do.

He reached the top of the stairs out of breath, but he was there in time to see a massive explosion down below. Snape's cloak looked like a black bat's as he flew out of the courtyard and toward the gathered army below.

Harry's heart sank as he saw the army that Voldemort had somehow amassed in a short time. There had to be hundreds of wizards outside. Worse, they had dozens of trolls, a half dozen three headed dogs and hundreds of Runespoor, three headed snakes from Africa.

"They couldn't get any giants," Professor Longbottom said, grim satisfaction in his voice. "So they had to improvise."

The trolls were going to be dumber and harder to control than the giants, but there were more of them.

"He's got to be really desperate," Professor Longbottom murmered. "Or he'd have waited until tonight, when the werewolves would be more useful, and the vampires."

Harry nodded, then realized the other man wouldn't see his gesture. "How did he get so many so soon?"

"The Ministry made it easy," Professor Longbottom said, staring over the battlement at the gathered army. "People starting flocking to Voldemort to protect them from their own government. Half these people don't really want to be here, but they're afraid not to be."

"Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater," Harry said. He hesitated. "Are we just going to sit here? Or is there something else we should be doing to get ready?"

"When things get hot this is going to be the place everyone will be trying to go," Professor Longbottom said.

There was a shimmering in the air and a moment later Steven stepped into view, with one hand in Winky's. Dobby appeared also, with Hermione, and flying in on some kind of glider thing was Peridot.

There was a roar from the crowd below; they'd caught sight of Steven.

"We're ready to get started," Steven said, unnecessarily.

Hogwart's wards were holding, but spells from hundreds of wands were impacting it visibly. Harry could tell that it was only going to be a matter of time before the wards broke, and then there would be wizards apparating inside everywhere.

Peridot was watching the battle and muttering to herself.

Professor Longbottom was busily inscribing anti-apparition runes on the stones of the battlements. He was working quietly and quickly. Hermione was helping him, and for the first time Harry found himself wishing he'd taken Ancient Runes as an elective.
Once the wards over Hogwarts went down, there would be hundreds of wizards trying to apparate to the top of the tower. Undoubtedly there would be wizards flying on brooms.

At least with the anti-apparition runes, they'd have a better tactical situation.

Steven looked at him, with an oddly guilty expression on his face. "I'm sorry all this is happening to you."

"It was going to happen sometime," Harry said grimly. "I just wish it was in a couple of decades maybe."

Part of him wished exactly that, but another part of him was almost looking forward to the battle. If he won, it would finally be over. The death threats, the constant attempts on his life...he'd been living on borrowed time since the moment Voldemort had heard about the prophecy.

The idea of a time after Voldemort seemed too remote to even comprehend.

"We're finished," Hermione said finally. She stepped back and hugged Steven. "Why didn't you get in touch with me? You could have owled."

"Sapphire said it wasn't safe," Steven said. He looked away. "And the last thing I wanted was to put either of you into even more danger."

Harry shook his head, about to say something, but then his expression tightened as he looked past Steven.

"The wards are down," he said grimly.

A moment later they all felt it, the change.

The army down below surged forward heading for the bridge. Wizards disappeared only to reappear in the same place, splinched. Apparently Hermione and Professor Longbottom's wards were holding.

Peridot was watching intently as the first of the wizards reached the bridge. They cautiously stepped onto it, obviously waiting for a trap. When nothing happened, and seeing no one waiting for them they began to move forward followed by a swarm of others.

They almost seemed to fight each other to crowd onto the bridge, running as quickly as they could to reach the other side so they could start murdering as many people as possible. Harry hoped that McGonagall had everyone ready.

Harry could see the wizards in the lead stop suddenly, only to be plowed into by the wizards behind him. The whole bridge shuddered as more and more wizards piled on.

A moment later, the bridge collapsed, falling into the deep crevasse, and taking a hundred wizards with it.

Peridot grinned and held up what Harry assumed was some kind of cutting torch. "I finally got technology to work here!"

The battle was already turning vicious. Harry's heart dropped as he realized it was going to get a lot worse before it got better.

Trolls began moving forward, having torn down trees from the Forbidden Forest and stripped them of branches. These were large trees, with trunks two feet thick and each took several trolls to carry
them.

For a moment Harry didn't understand what they were doing, but a moment later he saw it. They were making their own bridges, and when they were done the enemy was going to make its way across without any problems.

Peridot cursed under her breath, using terms Harry didn't understand. She spoke into something that looked like an oversized walkie talkie. Harry wondered if it had to be that size to work within Hogwarts, or if it was oversized because she'd made it from junk.

Either way, something was happening down below.

Dozens of house elves popped into existence down below. Gesturing in unison, they all blasted the near ends of the logs in unison, causing them to fall into the crevasse with the people who were making their way across the logs. Before the wizards had a chance to attack them back, they'd already disappeared.

"I taught them that," Peridot said smugly. "Sapphire helped, showing them what to do."

A green light flashed through the air and she ducked behind a crenelation. She grimaced as she saw that at least some of the wizards had brought their own brooms.

Twenty wizards were flying toward them on brooms at a high rate of speed, wands outstretched. Peridot lifted her backpack mounted blaster and began to fire at the wizards on the brooms, laughing maniacally. "Eat blaster, Clods!"

Now that Steven was visibly here, there was no reason to keep Harry alive. Harry suspected that they were looking for the reward that was being offered for the first to kill either of them.

It didn't matter, though. Harry glanced back at Steven and Hermione. To his surprise they were dancing together in a strange half waltz. Before he could ask them why they were dancing in the middle of a battle, they began to glow.

A moment later they were gone, replaced by the same strange amalgam of the both of them that had made the night of the Yule Ball so entertaining.

Harry could only think that Steven had done it to protect Hermione. He was fast, but given the number of Avada Kedavras being launched toward them...

Before he could react, the creature lunged toward Harry, with a shield of rose colored force interposed between Harry and a green colored blast coming from behind him through the massive window; someone had gotten on a broom and circled around.

She lifted her shield and moved it over one of the crenelations, pulling backward with a sudden jerking motion. The stone shattered into smaller chunks.

The creature that had once been two of his friends reached down to one of the pieces of stone and took a firm grip on it. It had to be a five pound chunk of stone, put she picked it up like it didn't weigh anything. She pitched it underhand. It looked like a deceptively soft throw, but the wizard coming toward them suddenly plummeted off his broom.

She grimaced, but a moment later she was picking up other stones and was pitching them at the wizards on brooms, ducking behind the wall.
The walls provided fair cover, but her shield was better.

Harry crouched behind her shield, wand outstretched. He cast stunners at the wizards, which at the heights they were flying could be lethal. They easily blocked his spells, but their shields had a much harder time dealing with five pound chunks of stone.

Steven...Hermione...whoever she was kept throwing rocks, a grim expression on her face. Wherever she threw, a wizard generally fell. She looked increasingly sorrowful.

Her shield was deflecting avada kedavras, but cracks were appearing in it, and the avada kedavras flew in all different directions.

A stray shot hit Peridot, and her body vanished. The blaster fell to the ground along with the backpack and some of her other tools.

The amalgam whipped out her wand. With a flick Peridot's gem flew through the air. She looked at the gem for a moment, then gave a sigh of relief.

Apparently the beam hadn't gotten her in the gem and she was going to be all right.

There were only three wizards left in the air now. They'd gotten a lot more wary, and these were the best at dodging in midair.

"Hit the ground!" the amalgam said.

With a glance at her, Harry dropped to the floor of the tower. A moment later, the amalgam threw her shield, which was already breaking apart.

It slammed into the first wizard; a five foot wide shield was harder to dodge than a small rock, especially at the speeds it was being thrown.

What surprised Harry was that it bounced off the falling wizard, hit the second, and narrowly missed the third, who'd moved at the last second.

The amalgam cursed under her breath as a green beam of light smashed into the top of the tower, not a foot from where she and Harry stood.

"Stay down!" she said to Harry, shoving him through the door leading down below.

A moment later she was dodging, beams of light flashing through areas she had just been. She moved gracefully; it looked a little like the dance Harry had sometimes seen Pearl performing in the background as he'd studied Occlumency in the Temple.

The wizard on the broom was good at dodging. Once, twice, three times he missed being hit by a thrown stone by inches. He'd have made an excellent Quidditch player, given his skills on the broom.

Harry glanced at the stairs below him and wondered how safe he really was. In his imagination enemies were already making their way up the stairs to hit them in the back.

He glanced back at the battle, and the wizard was gone.

Harry stood slowly and headed back onto the walkway.

"What do I call you?" he asked.
She shrugged. "I was Stevonnie when I was with Connie. I'm someone different now. Hermeven doesn't sound right. Stevionne? Does it matter?"

Sounds of screaming came from below. Harry rushed toward the rampart, carefully looking over the crenellations.

He felt the blood running from his face as he looked at the scene below.

Giants were fighting trolls, smashing each other with wild abandon. One of the cerberuses was dead already; the other two were tearing away at giants.

Watermelon Stevens were everywhere, and what they were doing to the enemy wizards...

Stevionne was suddenly beside him, and her face turned whiter than Harry's.

"I didn't want any of this," she said. Harry could see tears welling up in her eyes. "There had to be a better way."

She began to glow, and a moment later Hermione and Steven were different people again.

"It's not your fault," Hermione said quietly as she hugged Steven tightly. "They chose this."

Harry wondered if Stevionne's will to kill had come from Hermione. Steven certainly didn't seem like he liked what they'd been forced to do.

"We should be better than this," Steven said. He glanced down at the battlefield and he winced. "I never wanted to hurt anyone."

"Didn't your mother have to fight to protect the Earth?" Harry asked suddenly, surprising himself. He'd been hearing Steven's history in bits and pieces for the whole of the time he'd been in school.

Steven looked up, then nodded.

"Sometimes you have to hurt the people who want to hurt other people," Harry said grimly. "If we don't, even worse than this will happen."

Steven was quiet for a moment, then sighed. "I just wish it could be different."

As Harry glanced back at the battlefield, he found himself wishing the same thing.

Watermelon Stevens were slaughtering Wizards, but they in turn were being slaughtered. It was ugly and brutal, and Harry wondered if this really was how things had to be.

The worst part was the the watermelons were losing. They just didn't have the numbers; the wizards outnumbered them four to one, and even though they killed one wizard and brutally injured another, they were falling faster than the wizards were.

The fallen decorated the battlefield like a drops of rain. Splashes of red were everywhere; not just blood but the crimson interiors of melons.

A greenish glow came from Hermione's pocket. She pulled out the Peridot gem, which began to glow and form.

Peridot reappeared. Her face looked oddly misshapen, and Harry thought that one of her legs looked longer than the other.
"What did I miss?" she asked. She seemed unconcerned that she had just been killed, even if only temporarily, or that she'd come back subtly wrong.

She glanced over the rampart, and nodded to herself.

Peridot raced over to her discarded equipment and barked out quick, incomprehensible orders into the walkie talkie.

Suddenly Harry could feel a rumble coming through the flood beneath him. He glanced over the edge of the rampart and he found himself staring.

A huge mechanical robot was rising from the ground, sending dirt flying everywhere. It was huge; at least four stories tall. Where it's head should have been was a tiny cockpit.

Before Harry could say anything, Peridot went flying over the side of the ledge. A moment later he saw her land inside the cockpit, a protective canopy sliding over her.

Her amplified voice exploded across the battlefield. "LAY DOWN YOUR MAGIC STICKS AND SURRENDER, CLODS!"

Although the Wizards paused for a moment, no one seemed to take her up on her offer. They simply turned back to fighting. A moment later the robot was wading into the battle. It grabbed a troll and threw it into the chasm.

A simple swing of its leg send dozens of forms flying through the air. Her voice cackled through the loudspeaker, and avada kedavras didn't penetrate the thick metal shell of the robot.

The remaining two cerberuses charged toward her, and suddenly she began to sing.

"LOVE AND DEATH AND WAR AND BIRTH, AND PEACE AND LOVE ON THE PLANET EARTH."

Steven sighed and said, "I think that's the only song she knows."

It was working. Even at the vastly magnified volume, it had an immediate effect on the cerberuses, who stumbled to a stop.

Peridot's robot continued its brutal work for almost two minutes more, tossing trolls and sweeping entire groups of combatants away with swings of its arms.

The wizards were beginning to regroup, however, now that watermelon Steven's were few and far between on the ground. Seeing that avada kedavra didn't work, they began to blast away at Peridot's robot with reducto spells, blasting away small chunks of metal.

Others began to blast at the base of the tower.

Harry felt the tower vibrating beneath him, and he felt a sudden feeling of alarm. Reducto spells could rip apart a stone wall, if enough of them hit it. Given the number of wizards below, all they had to do was keep blasting away and eventually the tower would come tumbling down.

Peridot's robot fell to one knee, one leg having been blasted all the way through.

The wizards kept up the firepower, blasting away at the arms and the legs, moving efficiently and ruthlessly.

The machine groaned and fell, and the assembled Wizards cheered.
They moved closer, blasting away at the robot. The reawakened cerberuses were tearing away at the armor, and Harry felt himself tense.

Even if Peridot became a gem again, a stray reducto could shatter her gem as easily as it could the stone of a wall.

A moment later, the dome which served as the cockpit exploded into the air, looking a little like one of those American astronaut capsules from the sixties that Harry had once seen on the telly while he was cleaning the Dursley living room.

A moment after that the robot exploded in a massive fireball that incinerated the cerberuses and anyone within a hundred feet.

"EAT FIRE, CLODS!" Peridot's voice came from the capsule, which was high in the air now, followed by cackling laughter. A parachute exploded from the capsule a moment later, but winds made the capsule drift to the east.

Her capsule disappeared into the distance.

Although only one fifth of Voldemort's army remained, those left behind cheered. Most of the giants had fallen back to the walls of the castle, and the watermelons were gone.

It looked as though the only defenders left would be children and a few teachers.

A dragon roared, and Harry stared as he realized that Voldemort was riding it. Given that he knew Voldemort could easily fly under his own power, this had to be to impress his followers.

An even louder roar came from the walls of the castle. Harry turned and stared; clinging to the walls of Hogwarts was a thirty foot tall monstrosity with magenta skin and six arms. It had thick green hair and multiple mouths.

It roared.

"Garnet's back," Steven said softly.

"That's Garnet?" Harry asked, disbelievingly. He couldn't understand how Steven could have been raised by a monster that size. It was large enough that even Hagrid would look like a toddler next to it, much less someone like Steven, who was smaller than usual.

Steven shook his head. "No..that's Alexandrite. That's all of the gems, together."

Alexandrite wasn't any larger than the dragon Voldemort was riding, but from the moment she appeared it dominated the battlefield. A giant bow appeared in her hand and she send a bolt of energy arching toward the dragon Voldemort was riding.

Before the bolt even had time to reach Voldemort, she was already sending bolts arching out across the field. The remaining two cerberi went down in the space of a moment, followed by the few remaining ogres.

Although Voldemort managed to avoid the bolt, pulling hard on the reins of the dragon, the Forbidden Forest behind him exploded, a line of trees a hundred yards deep suddenly gone. Even from here Harry could hear screams of pain from those at the back of the army; shrapnel had injured many of them and some of the injured began to apparate away.

Voldemort tried to blast the giant fusion with his wand, but she wasn't there. Harry wasn't sure even
Voldemort's spells would have much of an effect even if he hit her. Steven was at least as magic resistant as Hagrid, and he was half human. His spell resistance came from his gem, and Harry assumed that full blooded gems had to be even more resistant to magic than he was.

However, from the distance Voldemort was trying to cast his spells, even Harry could have dodged. Alexandrite didn't even try to dodge spells. Instead she simply began to race across the battlefield, too quick for anyone to target it even given her massive size.

A giant whip lashed out as she ran nimbly across the battlefield; everywhere it hit a monster exploded and died. Viscera exploded from trolls and other non-human creatures, leaving the Wizards around them looking shocked and shaken.

It took Harry a moment to realize that the fusion was only targeting monsters. Not once did she target a human being. Even as she ran nimbly across the field, she was careful of her footing. She didn't step on a single human, or even any bodies that might still be clinging to life.

Most of the wizards she passed didn't even try to cast spells after her. They simply stared.

Harry scowled. Most of Voldemort's army was composed of wizards. There weren't many monsters left on the field. Steven had once told him that the crystal gems considered themselves the protectors of humanity, but if they refused to attack humans he didn't see what good they were going to be.

Peridot hadn't had any trouble attacking humans, and neither had the fusion of Steven and Hermione, although Harry suspected that the willingness to kill had come from Hermione. Harry wasn't sure that Steven by himself or his "aunts" would be willing to kill humans.

Fortunately, Voldemort no longer appeared to be human.

Voldemort's dragon was racing directly for the huge fusion, fire blasting from it's mouth. The fire washed over the fusion, and Harry stared, horrified. The fusion kept moving though, ignoring the fire as though it didn't even exist.

Voldemort cast spell after spell, but casting from dragonback wasn't conducive to aiming, even when the target was thirty feet tall and should have been lumbering and slow. Instead, Alexandrite was at least as fast as the dragon.

Before the dragon could reach her, Alexandrite was already forming another weapon...this time a giant wrecking ball composed of two hands and a familiar looking whip.

Voldemort apparated away the moment he saw what was going to happen. The moment after he left the ball slammed into the dragon, which simply exploded.

As blood and gore rained across the battlefield, everyone stopped and stared for a long moment. Their leader had fled, and their most dangerous beast hadn't just been killed in a single blow, it had been annihilated.

All over the battlefield wizards began to apparate away, apparently afraid that without any more nonhuman targets, the giant creature would turn on them.

A third of the remaining wizards vanished; probably those who had joined the ranks recently and weren't really all that loyal. Harry wondered how many of those were already lying on the battlefield, but he couldn't find it within himself to feel too sorry for them. They were attacking a school filled with children after all, and although the gems had mercy, Harry himself didn't.
Only three wizards remained for every twenty wizards in Voldemort's army. Many had fallen or fled, but those who remained were the most dedicated and the most skilled. They began firing at the giant fusion, randomly at first, but quickly with greater precision.

Alexandrite responded by swinging her wrecking ball. It landed on a patch of bare earth, but the impact knocked several wizards off their feet.

A familiar figure appeared at the base of the tower. Dumbledore was there, and behind him were a dozen others, including Lupin, Sirius and Molly Weasley. They had grim looks on their faces, and they too moved like a single organism. For some reason they all seemed to be wearing what looked like wizarding versions of muggle sunglasses.

The enemy wizards had turned to attack Alexandrite, and Dumbledore and his twelve followers took quick advantage of that. In a handful of seconds almost twenty enemy wizards fell dead. As they realized their danger, they turned, and light suddenly exploded from Dumbledore's wand.

It was light brighter than the sun, and Harry felt himself falling back, blinded by the brightness of it. Even when his vision returned, there were bright white spots obscuring parts of his vision.

He looked quickly around him and he saw that Hermione and Steven had been just as blinded as he was. When he looked back at the battlefield he saw that the situation had changed. The enemy forces were in disarray, and Dumbledore's men were using their enemies temporary blindness to good effect.

There were less than sixty enemy wizards left, and they had lost the discipline that had made them so terrifying.

However, they still outnumbered Dumbledore and his men five to one.

Spells began to fly from the enemy again, lashing out toward Dumbledore and his men. It was only a matter of time before some of them hit and men began to drop. As skilled as Dumbledore was, he couldn't take on an army by himself.

Something flashed by Harry, and it took him a moment to realize what it was. Mandrakes still in the pots were flying across the battlefield, headed for the back of Voldemort's army. Alexandrite had somehow disappeared, and Harry wasn't certain when she'd gone missing.

As the pots landed, they exploded, and the mandrakes inside began screaming. Harry winced and clapped his hands over his ears. Even at this distance the mandrakes' cries were painful; from up close they would be lethal.

He looked over at Steven and Hermione, both of whom looked dazed.

Looking down at the castle walls, he was startled to see Neville and Professor sprout and a dozen members of the defense association. They all had protective earmuffs, and they were preparing more pots to levitate across the battlefield.

Looking back, Harry saw that almost a dozen of the enemy were dead. He knew that the supply of mandrakes were limited, and green light winked across the battlements as Death eaters tried to fire at those who were attacking them.

They blinked out of the battlefield and began to apparate onto the battlements. Harry stiffened; his friends wouldn't be any match for fully trained Death Eaters.

A dozen Death eaters appeared on the battlements, wands outstretched.
Looking pale, but determined, Neville and Professor Sprout and the others pulled their mandrakes from the pots.

The Death Eaters dropped where they stood, but Harry didn't see it. He felt his vision darkening and he felt himself falling. Keeping his eyes open was difficult, and he saw Hermione on the tower floor three feet away. Blood was coming out of her ears.

Steven was still somehow conscious, and before Harry knew it he felt himself being thrown over Steven's shoulder as they were dragged deeper inside the tower.

Harry's mind wouldn't work for what seemed like an eternity, and when it did, the realization struck him. If the mandrakes had been even a little bit closer he and Hermione would be dead.

As he was becoming more aware, there was still a shrill ringing in his ears and everything seemed muffled. He could hear the sounds of explosions from outside; the remaining Death Eaters were putting up a fight even with most of their army whittled away to nothing.

Steven was muttering something that Harry couldn't make out as he walked down the long flights of stairs. If Peridot had still been around they could have used her radio to summon Dobby and Winky. They could have apparated out.

Harry wondered if there was some other way to summon the house elves, but as they passed by a window he looked out and saw that the house elves were busy.

Dozens of house elves were on the battlefield riding in the heads of makeshift robots, riding in clear transparent domes where the heads should have been. They didn't look as though they were very good at piloting, but simply by flailing around with superhuman strength they were damaging the enemy.

The domes seemed resistant to enemy spells too, although Harry saw three suits go down as their armor was cracked before the house elves inside could disappear.

More of the wizards were apparating off the battlefield in self defense if nothing else, but Harry worried that meant they were inside the castle. The last thing they needed was Death eaters facing defenseless students.

They were halfway down the tower, facing a window that did not face the battle when Harry saw a shadow flash by at the corner of his vision.

Steven didn't see it, whatever it was. He simply kept plodding down the stairs. He was puffing by this time; his superhuman strength still wasn't matched with superhuman endurance, and the only exercise he got during the school year was Quidditch.

Harry tried to open his mouth to warn Steven, but he was still too stunned from the screams of the mandrakes to do more than move helplessly.

As they passed by the next window, Harry realized what he'd seen before.

The black robed figure of Voldemort was floating in empty space outside the window. Harry tried to open his mouth to warn Steven, but it was too late.

"Accio abomination!" Voldemort said in a firm, clear voice.

Steven was jerked off his feet, pulled by the power of Voldemort's magic out into open air. He still clutched Hermione over one shoulder, but Harry found himself landing painfully onto the stairs, his
glasses flying off his face as he landed with his face to the floor pointed downwards.

He could hear Steven screaming as he fell, and a moment later he saw the edge of a robe landing on the staircase slightly below him. He found himself staring at the tip of Voldemort's boot.

A hand grabbed the back of his hair and lifted his head so that he was facing Voldemort, his ghastly pale face only inches from Harry's own.

"It didn't have to come to this," Voldemort said. "All this death and destruction. A generation of wizards died today so that you could avoid the fate that was always going to happen."

"I'm going to take your head and parade it around every wizarding community in England," Voldemort hissed in his ear, "So that everyone knows that resistance is ultimately futile."

Harry tried to say something, anything, but before he could say anything Voldemort pointed a wand at his face.

"Avada Kedavra."

The last thing Harry saw was a flash of green.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!