The Reclamation of Black Magic

by ShayaLonnie

Summary

Harry Potter's family isn't only at Number 4 Privet Drive. Unaware to even Dumbledore, an upheaval is approaching. The Ancient and Noble House of Black is reclaiming their power and changing the future of the magical world.

*Updated Sporadically—Not Abandoned*

Notes

This story is going to be epic length, spanning quite a few years including all seven years of Harry's time at Hogwarts. It also is told from the POV of multiple characters, so you might not see some of the main characters/pairings listed for a number of chapters. That being said, I hope you stick it out. ♥

Dedicated to my lovely readers, who—if they are reading this right now—followed me over from FFN.
And to the Alpha/Beta team who helps me write the whole thing: Beta Love: LadyParongsny, LJ Summers, RavenclawMidwife, Brightki, Worthfull1, SableUnstable, More-to-it-than-blood, Mags0607, MaryRoyale, BirdieMing, GaeilgeRua, bookworm4life0812
WIZARDING BRITAIN CELEBRATES FIVE YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF YOU-KNOW-WHO'S DEATH!

The small community of Godric's Hollow is usually a quiet village. Despite being the birthplace of Godric Gryffindor, one of the Hogwarts Founders, this quaint magical community is made up of average citizens of Wizarding Britain just like you and I. They live their lives, they raise their families, and they go to work. Once a year, however, Godric's Hollow becomes widely remembered as the place where we were freed from the lurking darkness of a brewing civil war, one that You-Know-Who might've won, had it not been for the miracle that was Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived.

It has been five years since the destruction of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The magical citizens of Godric's Hollow have erected a statue in memoriam of the Potter family, whose sacrifices have given us respite from danger these past years. James Potter and his wife, (Muggle-born) Lily Potter nee Evans, were murdered by You-Know-Who on October 31st, 1981, leaving behind their infant son, Harry. The child, miraculously, is the only person to have ever survived the Killing Curse in ways unknown to most, though many suspect that Albus Dumbledore, current Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, knows more than he has led on in the past.

The present location of Harry Potter is unknown, and Albus Dumbledore has taken drastic measures to ensure that information is locked up tight, even with Ministerial records and, as we at the Daily Prophet expect, sealed the file with goblin magic. Gringotts refused to give comment, leaving us only to speculate.

Where is the Boy Who Lived? How did he survive the Killing Curse and defeat You-Know-Who? What is Dumbledore hiding? And how are they both celebrating this momentous anniversary?

October 31st, 1986
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Albus Dumbledore sighed in disappointment as he finished reading the article. He folded the paper neatly and reached across his desk to slide it beneath Fawkes's perch. The phoenix ruffled his feathers, and the old wizard could not help but smirk when the bird shat on the headline.

Albus knew, of course, that the focus would be on the anniversary of Voldemort's demise. It was, however, a sore spot considering his paper on the twelve uses of dragon blood had finally been published. His great discovery had been allocated to page fourteen beneath an advertisement for Mrs Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover, something he found ironic considering dragon blood could be used as a stain remover as well as an oven cleaner.

He supposed there could be worse things reported in the newspaper that were deemed more important than his revolutionary discovery. It was, after all, only five years ago that the news was reporting mayhem in the streets of Wizarding Britain, the torture of half-bloods and so-called "blood-traitors", and the outright murder of Muggle-borns. There was a time, Albus recalled, he had worried that perhaps not even Hogwarts was safe from Voldemort, especially considering the self-proclaimed "Dark Lord" had been recruiting his Death Eaters from within the school. Frowning, Albus could not help but recall the names of each young individual that he had lost to Voldemort's cause. So many young Slytherins had taken up the title of Death Eater, though quite a few were left unnamed in the aftermath of Voldemort's destruction. Even more lives, on both sides of the war, had been lost in battle.
Charms alerted him that someone was approaching his door, and Albus looked up, smiling and twinkling at Minerva, who sent him a withering expression. "Ah, Minerva. I trust that all the students have been sent off to bed, hopefully eager to sleep off the excitement caused by such a splendid feast?"

If she had been a young and more impertinent witch, he was certain that she might have rolled her eyes at him. As it was, she scoffed, pushed her spectacles up the bridge of her nose and pursed her lips.

"Celebration," she said scathingly. "You can do all the celebrating you'd like, Albus. While you're busy celebrating with your sweets," she hissed, narrowing her gaze down at the bowl of lemon drops on his desk, and Albus reached out, pulling the bowl closer to him protectively; it would not be the first time that she had blasted the thing to pieces in a snit, "I'll be down in Hogsmeade, doing my level best to make sure your Potions Master doesn't drink himself to death."

Albus frowned. "Severus still grieves."

"Grief, guilt, I don't care what you call it, but last year he was almost banned from Rosmerta's for causing a scene."

"We cannot expect more of him. We all mourn in our own way, Minerva." He was, however, quite concerned about the young man. Only twenty-six years old and yet he carried the anger and weight of a life filled with decades of scorn and hatred, and a bit of self-pity, though Albus was not one to mention such a thing. Severus Snape was talented, a prodigy even, and the poor lad had been reduced to a professor—and one that had a dislike for children. It was a shame that the Ministry could not see what Albus saw in him. They saw a former Death Eater, sometimes without the former. Albus saw potential, redemption, a man in need of atonement.

The binge drinking every Halloween, of course, was going to need to come to an end.

"I'll not be responsible for what might happen if he tries to make a fuss in the Hog's Head." Minerva's nose twitched in irritation, and Albus could almost imagine her whiskers. She had the same look on her face in Animagus form. "Or would you like to be the one to step between Severus and your brother?"

He did his best to not cringe at the thought. No, Minerva would have an easier time in handling Severus, especially if Aberforth ended up involved in the Potion Master's annual bender. "Perhaps a softer approach would be best," he agreed. "Severus has always taken well to you. Will you both be returning to the castle tonight?"

Minerva shook her head. "No. I've yet to put my cottage to rights. I'll set him up there for the night. I imagine he'll want his privacy. Besides, he prefers that horrid cognac that Elphinstone used to keep in the cabinets. I won't touch the stuff, but I'll not throw it out. Best let the lad drink it."

"Minerva, if there's anything that I can—"

"My husband is dead, Albus. Just like the handful of children I raised and sent off to war at your insistence; just like the rest of my family; just like James and Lily. And one day we'll be dead too. Nothing can be done about that." Her eyes were hard, which was not a surprise considering she had been a bit colder than usual since Elphinstone's death months earlier.

Resigned to her temper and knowing better than to provoke it further, Albus held his hands up in supplication. "Do let me know if Severus is in need of anything," he said, emphasising the name so as not to incur more of her wrath. "Happy Halloween, Minerva."
When she closed his office door upon leaving, Albus sighed in relief, letting the tension drain out of his shoulders. Few wizards had the ability to frighten him, but only a fool would not shirk under the stern gaze of an angry witch, especially one that quite literally had claws. At the thought, he glanced down at the side of his chair that previously had been upholstered but now looked like a proper scratching post. He was not exactly certain how Minerva had spelled the damned thing to prevent him from repairing it with magic. Still, he had suggested that she take time away from the school to mourn her husband properly, and apparently, that was entirely the wrong thing to say. Her reply had been unsparring: "I was married to my work before I married a wizard. If you think I'll give up one when the other has been forcibly taken from me, you have another thing coming, Albus!"

Pulling his attention away from the scratching post that his chair had become in the wake of a widowed feline, Albus waved his wand against the bottom drawer of his desk and smiled when it opened accordingly. Setting his wand aside, he reached into the drawer and, one by one, pulled out a large book and a glass bottle of brandy. Pouring his drink into a small glass that he wandlessly conjured, Albus closed up the bottle and pushed it to his left, then opened the book.

The inked words filled the pages, and when he found the one he was looking for, Albus smiled.

There, right between Sally-Anne Perks and Oliver Rivers, was Harry Potter.

Albus smiled and raised his glass. "To you, Mr Potter. Five more years, and you will begin a most hopeful adventure, my boy."

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November 1st, 1986
Dillonsby Centre for Magical Disease and Disorders

"Did you read this codswallop in the bloody paper!?"

Ivor Dillonsby threw his copy of the Daily Prophet across the table, scattering chess pieces to the floor in the process. He ignored the heavy sigh of frustration from his great-grandson, and continued to angrily vent, "Rag filled with lies and deceit! Deceit, I say! Are you listening to me, boy? Ham!" He took hold of his cane and poked Hammond—hardly a boy, nearing thirty—in the shoulder with the end. "Are you listening?"

Hammond shrugged away from the cane as he picked up the last two chess pieces, righting them on the board again after pushing away the paper. "Deceit, Grandfather. Yes, I heard you," he said patiently. "Are you talking about the monument in Godric's Hollow?" His eyes were drawn to the front page, where a photograph of a large statue shifted from a World War II memorial to the image of the Potter family. The sight brought forth old feelings of sadness and guilt. "Do you think the Ministry actually raised the funds, or do you think they allocated money from another cause? I heard St. Mungo's had to shut down three of their studies in the last six months."

"What nonsense are you talking about?" Ivor snatched the paper away from Hammond, flipping through the pages. Turning it around once he had found the right article, he tapped his arthritic index finger against a photograph of Albus Dumbledore. "Look at this . . . this . . . PEACOCK!"

Hammond raised a brow. "Albus Dumbledore? Peacock? Well, those robes are rather a bit of an eyesore."

It was, however, easy to see what had caused his grandfather to become so irate. Ivor Dillonsby had spent his life as a well-respected researcher, published many times, but only by magazines and papers owned by more progressive wizards. While the Dillonsby family could trace their magical lineage back centuries, they had never been involved with the nonsense surrounding blood prejudice, and
Ivor's mother had been a Muggle. Admired by his peers throughout the rest of the world, Wizarding Britain was stuck in the past and their prejudices, leaving Ivor's work open to . . . "improvements" because of his supposedly tainted lineage. There, clear as day, was a photograph of the famous Albus Dumbledore receiving acknowledgements for his contribution to magical society for his efforts in discovering twelve uses for dragon blood.

"Stolen!" Ivor shouted.

Someone in the doorway of the hospital room cleared their throat, and Hammond turned to see one of the older mediwitches looking sourly at them both. Ivor was known to get a little out of hand some days, and had lost his very last "give a fuck" at least twenty years earlier. No matter how upset it made the other patients, the man had decided he would shout to his heart's content. Hammond offered the mediwitch a smile of apology, and flicked his wand at the door, activating a temporary Silencing Charm.

"Stolen everything." Ivor glared down at the *Daily Prophet* in his hands. "I spent near eighty years working on that damned research, you know. Dragon's blood. My life's work. I dedicated so much of my life to the study that my first wife left me!"

Hammond could not help but snort at that, rolling his eyes. "She also caught you in bed with her sister."

Ivor grimaced at the reminder. "That was a mistake."

"What about the veela?" Hammond asked, unable to resist teasing the old man.

The grimace quickly gone from his face, Ivor grinned. "You try saying no to a pretty girl! I dare you!"

"I've done that plenty, Grandfather," Hammond assured him, reaching again for the paper. "Let me see this *codswallop*. Hmm . . . He does credit you with—"

"Credit me? What money will I see of this?" Ivor scoffed, looking equal parts angry and defeated. "None, I say. Dumbledore," he cursed the name and then turned his head, spitting on the floor. "I spit on his grave."

"He's not dead."

Ivor huffed. "Then when he dies, bury him there," he said, pointing at the floor. "That's where I spat!"

Ignoring the theatrics, Hammond read the actual list that Dumbledore had supposedly discovered. Eight uses, of course, had been attributed to Ivor, only the final four were of Dumbledore's discovery —two of which were positively ridiculous, despite the way that the author of the article waxed poetic about them. "This list doesn't even go into the minute details of dragon blood depending on the species. Sure, you could clean your oven with the blood of an Ironbelly, but a Chinese Fireball would turn it to ash if left unattended."

Ivor raised a curious brow. "Been visiting your . . . *friend* down at the reserve, have you?"

It had taken years of practise to stop his cheeks from reddening. While his family fully accepted Hammond's choice of partner, they were all a bit overbearing about the seriousness of the relationship, or lack thereof. His mother was dying for a wedding, and she had made complaints to every great-grandparent and fourth cousin twice removed. "Yes, my *friend*, Lionel," Hammond replied, speaking of his on and off boyfriend, a deliciously fit Dragonologist at the Kakadu Dragon
Reserve. "He was recently injured by a Peruvian—"

"Nice boy, your mum says."

Hammond sighed, getting back to the subject at hand. "Grandfather, can dragon blood truly be used to heal? I mean . . . I know it can be . . . To what extent?" It was pure happenstance—a lucky coincidence—that the article on Dumbledore and dragon blood was in the same issue of the *Daily Prophet* as the Potter Memorial, but it had the wheels in Hammond's head turning. He had not been this excited—this hopeful—in years.

Ivor stroked his thinning beard thoughtfully. "Depends how much you replace and with what dragon, of course."

"You can't do a blood transfer from dragon to human," Hammond argued. He knew because he had thought about trying it only to find dead ends at every corner of his research. He could always test, of course, but not with his favourite patient. "They did a study twenty-two years ago with someone in Russia and a Norwegian—" His eyes widened in sudden understanding that would generally make him smack his head over missing the obvious. "The test subject caught a fever and died. Norwegian Ridgebacks develop fire breathing nearly upon hatching, much earlier than other species. Are you telling me that—?"

Ivor scoffed indignantly. "Fools, the lot of them. Never liked Russians. I heard their women don't shave."

Hammond rolled his eyes. "Neither did that witch I caught you with last year. Pretty sure she was a werewolf."

Ivor beamed happily. "She shagged like one."

Ignoring the expression of bliss on Ivor's face, Hammond pressed on, "Grandfather, if I were to use dragon blood to cure . . . an infectious disease," he said carefully, "by replacing the blood of the infected with the blood of a dragon, would that work?"

"You'd have to get a dragon that doesn't burn hotter than others," Ivor answered. "Common Welsh Green, maybe a Romanian Longhorn, or an—"

Hammond's heart raced in excitement. "Antipodean Opaleye."

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**November 15th, 1986**

**Dillonsby Centre for Magical Disease and Disorders**

After looking over his morning paperwork and checking in on his grandfather, Hammond signed off all of his low-risk cases to the mediwitches and interns. He told them all that he had research to do and was to be left undisturbed, lest they all spend the rest of the week scrubbing the Spattergroit Ward the Muggle way—no Cleaning Charms allowed.

He had gone to visit Lionel that very first day after reading the *Daily Prophet* with his grandfather, and—without telling him too many details, like the name of his patient—was able to convince his boyfriend to obtain a significant amount of dragon blood. Luckily, the going rate for ten pints of Antipodean Opaleye was apparently a promise of dinner with the Dillonsby clan, a discussion of potentially moving in together, and a very enthusiastic blowjob.

Hammond waved his wand as he passed through his office, resetting the extra secure wards that kept anyone but him out. The secondary set of wards he launched were actually quite threatening, just in
case people did not take the hint at the first set. The disillusioned door at the back of his office revealed itself with a whispered key phrase, and Hammond took a breath before walking through it.

When he had relocated to Australia to be nearer his family, the only things he had brought with him were his research, his antique gobstone collection, and one very special patient. "Good morning," he said to the comatose witch, as though she could hear him. "You're looking better today."

Her skin, which had been a sickly, translucent green, had finally returned to a pale—but healthy—glow. The purple rash that covered the majority of her body was nearly all gone, and her vitals were better than he had seen them in years. The blood transfusions were slow at first, but when her signs began to improve, he increased the amount every day, watching carefully as she progressed. According to his last blood tests and charms, the dragon blood in her body had almost entirely eradicated the dragon pox that had nearly killed her almost ten years earlier.

Hammond checked on the last bag of dragon blood that was almost empty and took a seat to watch. An hour later, when the final bit of rash was gone, and her temperature had normalised, Hammond cast detailed charms to check all of her vital signs before gulping down his nerves. He was healed. Unfortunately, that meant he would need to wake her and have a very uncomfortable conversation.

Steeling his nerves that had been provided to him by seven years of Gryffindor standards, Hammond gently lifted the layers of charms that had been keeping his patient asleep for so long. He had started her on a regular dose of draughts to rebuild atrophied muscles, as well as a special Vitamix Potion to counteract any potential side effects that the dragon blood might have caused to her internal organs. Her magical core was strong—stronger than any of his other patients, even the ones who stopped in with a mild cold—which gave him immense hope for her ultimate recovery.

His pulse quickened when her eyelids began to flutter. "You're safe," he said calmly. "You're in a hospital, and you've done very well. If you can hear me, will you squeeze my hand?" There was a small squeeze, and Hammond grinned. "That's wonderful. Can you open your eyes for me?"

It took several long moments, but her eyes opened. A dull, tired grey that quickly changed to an opalescent purple when the light hit the irises. "Interesting," Hammond muttered, casting a Lumos and waving it in front of her eyes. "Must be a small side effect from the Opaleye blood." A line formed between her brows. "Oh, I'm sorry. In order to rid your body of the dragon pox, I've given you a heavy blood transfusion. Nearly ninety per cent, in fact. Dragon blood. Antipodean Opaleye, to be precise. They're known to have eyes that change colours, so that might be a trait that was transferred over. Fascinating."

"My . . ." the witch tried to speak, her voice hoarse and small after years of not being used. "My family? My . . . Where is my husband? And my . . . my so—"

Hammond gently took her hand again in both of his and frowned. "You and your husband were admitted to St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries in 1977. Your dragon pox progressed faster than we'd hoped, and the usual cure was not being absorbed into your system. At the request of your husband, you were placed in a magical coma to preserve your core, and a very strong and potentially illegal Stasis Charm was put on you to stop the disease from progressing further. It's . . . it's 1986 now. You've been in my care for quite some time."

Her hands began to shake at the news, and Hammond quickly checked her vitals again. "My . . . my husband?"
"I'm sorry . . . he . . ."

She shook her head—not wanting to hear the rest of the words—and closed her eyes as tears began to form. "Where's my son? Where's James?"

Hammond's own eyes dampened.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Potter . . . *Dorea* . . . James isn't here."
January 1st, 1987

The dragon blood had all but cured her of the disease that had nearly taken her life—the same disease that had killed Charlus in the end. It was the emotional injuries that had forced Dorea to linger in Australia, rehabilitating under Healer Dillonsby's diligent care.

The boy—man, really—had been a Hogwarts prefect when James had started school. While not as close as he had been with his small group of friends, James and Hammond Dillonsby had remained in contact throughout the years. When they had run into one another at St. Mungo's after Dorea admittance as a patient, Hammond had explained that he was apprenticing under a dragon pox specialist—a pureblood Healer, who was ignoring Hammond's theories about the disease due to his "limited background". James, never having held prejudice against anyone with Muggle heritage, eventually transferred both of his parents' care into the hands of his old schoolmate.

Hammond had explained to Dorea that, while she had been swiftly put into the magical coma that eventually saved her life, the original Healer—and Hammond's mentor—felt slighted over the move and convinced James and Charlus to test a new version of the dragon pox cure as a trial run. Dorea had been deemed too weak for the new treatment, but Charlus was determined to get well again so that he could take the weight from James's shoulders.

The new potion, however, had overwhelmed Charlus's system and fractured his magical core, preventing him from being able to fight off the disease in any measure on his own. He had died the summer following James's graduation from Hogwarts.

Gringotts Wizarding Bank, Diagon Alley

"Private Portkey?" Ragnok asked with interest as he sat down in the chair opposite Dorea. "The Ministry doesn't have the ability to monitor those. Those are illegal according to wandholders."

"Only in Britain, and not according to goblins," she retorted with a small smile. "I wished for my presence to remain undetected by the Ministry and will, for the time being. I thought I would prefer to work directly with the bank while seeking information on my family."

It was helpful that the Australian Ministry of Magic did not have the same regulations when it came to Portkeys. Shockingly, Dorea had been able to obtain an International one from Hammond, usually reserved for health emergencies in transferring patients between hospitals. The Portkey had taken her
Amused, Ragnok nodded and flipped open a large book in front of him. "You were declared dead in 1979, did you know?" His finger ran along the written words, documenting the status of the Potter vaults. "Upon the death of his parents, James Charlus Potter claimed the Potter inheritances. There is a note saying that your dower vault would not open to him."

Dorea nodded in understanding. "I was still alive. The vault fell under the Black trust. Once he had claimed his father's title as Potter Patriarch, he would have had no access to my accounts. Not without the blessing of the current Black Patriarch."

Ragnok sneered. "Pollux."

"My brother," Dorea confirmed. "He and I . . ." She let her words trail off. The bad blood between the siblings was more than obvious in her gaze and needed no further explanation. She grimaced at the memory of her older brother, who had drunk himself stupid at her wedding, cursing their parents for allowing her to wed a known family of blood-traitors.

The Black Madness ran deep in Pollux, and it was easily fuelled by asinine traditions of blood prejudice going back centuries. Dorea would not be surprised to learn that her brother had not even sent flowers in his stead upon her announced death. He certainly would not have attended any farce of a funeral. Her sister, Cassiopeia, might have reached out to James, but Dorea could not know for sure. Not yet.

"My son had me declared dead during the . . . the war," she said bitterly. It had merely been rumours when she had fallen ill, and Dumbledore had already been recruiting at the time. She and Charlus had adamantly refused him, saying that the headmaster of a school had no business provoking a self-proclaimed dark lord. "Evidently, James's family was under attack, and with my Healer moving out of country, he thought it best to have me moved with for my protection. Had Pollux known I lived, even in my then state, he could have used me against my son. I suppose it was no secret that the Black family allied with You-Know-Who?"

Ragnok nodded. "Some, but not all. Mostly through their wealth, all of which we have records. You wandholders always forget who keeps track of your coin. Your Aurors didn't even bother having the vaults of supposed Death Eaters audited. High up on their laurels."

"Would I have the authority to have those vaults audited?"

He raised a brow and steepled his fingers in amusement. "Of course not. But you already knew that. The Black vaults are sealed by the family Patriarch."

"And if I were planning to usurp him with goblin aid?"

Ragnok let out a hearty laugh that sounded like a vicious growl, but Dorea knew it was not threatening. She had been dealing with goblins all her life due to the fortune of her dower vault, as well as helping Charlus manage the family finances. "And why, witch, would we help you?"

"Because I will return to the goblin horde the many priceless artefacts that my family has acquired over the centuries. You do not accept charity, nor are you thieves. Your honour is too high to step
into the vault of a wizard and take back goblin-forged materials." She watched as Ragnok's interest grew. "If I were to overpower the Black Patriarchs—plural, as I assume the line continues should Pollux die—I will reclaim my family and have the power to give back to the horde their treasure, with interest, of course."

Ragnok's eyes glinted.

She assumed it was the interest that sold it.

"What do you require, Madam Potter?"

Dorea smiled. "A list of every Black that still lives."

"Bogrod!" Ragnok shouted, and the door to his office opened. Another goblin quickly entered, huffing and puffing as he jogged up to Ragnok's side. "Bring me the records for the Black family vaults, financial and blood." After glancing at Dorea once more, he added, "Marital records and descendants as well. Uproot the whole tree if you have to, and have it done within the hour."

Bogrod looked once at Dorea before nodding in acquiescence to his superior and then speedily left the room.

Alone again, Ragnok returned his attention to Dorea. "Unfortunately, until the usurpation of your Patriarchal line is complete, access to any of the Black vaults, including your dower vault, is prohibited. As is access to the Potter vault."

"Who has access to the Potter vault at present?"

"It rests in the name of your grandson, Harry James Potter."

Dorea fought the urge to cry. She had, in fact, sobbed her heart out when Hammond told her about James's family. Learning about the death of her husband had been terrible. She had loved Charlus since Hogwarts. There was a deeply buried knowledge inside of her that told her Charlus had not survived before she had even asked Hammond about him. The Marital Bond she had shared with him in life was broken beyond repair, and she felt it inside of her—a great missing piece of her magic, long gone. She knew she should grieve more—and likely would for years when memories of her husband entered her thoughts—but a logical part of her said that it was useless to mourn a man that had been dead for years. She carried her grief with her but could not allow it to weigh her down.

James's death, on the other hand, was a shock and a devastation of its own, unlike any pain she had ever before felt. Hammond had needed to give her a Calming Draught, which promptly burned up inside of her due to the dragon blood in her veins. The poor Healer had been forced to subdue her magically until she calmed down, lest she set the room on fire.

It had not made sense at the time; she could still feel James's magic. The bond between mother and child was strong, and the feel of her child's magic was out there, somewhere, both across the world and at the tips of her fingers at the same time.

"Harry," Hammond told her. "James married Lily Evans."

"The Muggle-born?" When Hammond nodded, Dorea said, "Good. Bright girl."

"No one really knows what happened. Only the boy survived."

She had been given little information after that. Her magic was out of control, and there was no way to say how the dragon blood affected it. Hammond had brought her news when he knew of its
authenticity but claimed that the *Daily Prophet* could not always be trusted, as they reported lies and speculation more often than fact.

Unfortunately, that left most of her questions unanswered: Why had James and his family been targeted? Where was Sirius in all of this? Why did the citizens of Wizarding Britain not know the details of the end of their own war? Who was taking care of her grandson?

"And his guardian, I presume? They would have access to the money?" Dorea asked Ragnok, thinking immediately of Sirius. "Harry's only six years old, from what I've been told. I assume his guardian, a godfather perhaps—"

"Albus Dumbledore."

Her eyes hardened. "What?"

"According to our records, Albus Dumbledore has access to the Potter vaults on behalf of Harry James Potter. Although, there has been no withdrawal from the central vault since days after the death of James and Lily Potter. Their wedding rings were returned to Gringotts for safe keeping, and Dumbledore . . ." Ragnok summoned another book to his desk and double-checked the page that he flipped open to. "Ah, yes. Dumbledore checked the status of a side account, one that had been set up in Harry Potter's name for use before his coming of age."

Before Dorea could lose her temper and demand what on earth Dumbledore had to do with her family, her grandson, and her vaults, Bogrod returned. He carried a large book in one hand and a handwritten list in the other. "Sir," he said, handing both over to Ragnok.

"Good," Ragnok said, looking over the document. "Put together a standard blood contract for reparations of goblin artefacts." Bogrod turned and looked at Dorea with a gleam in his eye that she recognised as greed. Or perhaps joy. It was difficult to differentiate between the two when it came to goblins.

While Bogrod worked quietly on the other side of the office, Ragnok held up the list. "Pollux Black stands as current Patriarch of the Black family. Upon his death or disownment, the title would pass to his eldest son, Cygnus."

Dorea cringed at the name of her nephew; the man had all of Pollux's prejudice tenfold. Unfortunately, he had never been very bright, something she attributed to his mother, Irma Crabbe. It was shocking that Cygnus had landed a betrothal contract with Druella Rosier, who had been considered a great beauty. Dorea still suspected foul play there, likely her brother's doing. Cygnus had only been a boy when Druella fell pregnant with Bellatrix. Regardless of personal circumstances, Cygnus had grown into a cruel man. She would have no concern in disposing of her nephew should she need to.

Bogrod handed the contract over to Ragnok, who looked it over thoroughly before turning the parchment and sliding it across his desk to Dorea. "One drop will do," he said with a menacing grin. "Though we would never object to more."

"Your bloodlust is admirable. You would have made a fine Black," Dorea said with a small smile before using her wand to prick the end of her finger. She let it hang over the parchment until two drops of blood fell, soaking into the paper before temporarily glowing gold. Both goblin's eyes widened in awe at the sight. "Dragon blood," she curtly answered. "It's how I survived my illness."

Bogrod stepped around the desk and stared at her. When she narrowed her eyes briefly at him, he laughed. "Opaleye."
"It was," she confirmed.

Ragnok smirked. "Contract is sealed in blood then, Dorea Opaleye. When your Patriarchal line has ended—either in paper or blood—the vaults will open for you. I am curious, how do you plan to usurp your line?"

Dorea stared blankly at the goblin before whispering, "Magic."

Both goblins laughed. Ragnok rolled up the contract and handed it to Bogrod, who turned to leave the office, distractedly staring at Dorea to the point that he almost walked into the door.

"Cygnus never had a son, did he?" she asked, getting back to the matter at hand.

Ragnok shook his head, picking the list of Black family details back up. "None."

"I thought not. Last I recall, he had disowned one of his own daughters and married the other two off to . . ." she trailed off. Dorea had previous associations with both the Lestrange and Malfoy families and could go on at length of her dislike of the lot.

"After Cygnus, the title would pass to his younger brother."

"But Alphard died," she muttered. "Shame. He would've been a good Patriarch." She remembered that, despite being disowned by Orion and Walburga, Alphard had always been kind to Sirius, going so far as leaving him a handsome sum in an inheritance following his death. Dorea and Charlus had tried to help Sirius manage the money, but he had still gone and bought some silly little motorbike that sat in their yard for months on end, while he and James rebuilt the engine.

"With Alphard Black deceased, the title would go to your uncle, Arcturus."

"Because Sirius was disowned," Dorea acknowledged.

The goblin stared at her curiously. "Dorea Opaleye, how much have you been told about the end of the war that took your son and his wife?"

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**Godric's Hollow**

*Azkaban.*

She wanted to go to him, to her boy.

James had been a surprise blessing. She and Charlus had tried getting pregnant for years, once even going to far as to participate in an old Beltane fertility rite that had Charlus blushing to the tips of his toes. Potters were an old family, but the later generations had excitedly gripped progression and advancement by the coattails, while families like the Blacks, Malfoys, and Averys were left behind, digging their heels into the traditions of the past. It made it so that her husband was decently versed in the Muggle world, but when it came to old magic, he was practically a virgin—something she found endlessly endearing.

The fertility rite had not taken. However, a few months later, a Muggle-born intern at the Wizarding Wireless Network began sneaking in Sinatra between Celestina Warbeck and Dahlia Fleur-Peri songs. Charlus Potter's favourite seduction technique was a bottle of bourbon and Ol' Blue Eyes crooning in the background. Six weeks later, Dorea was singing "Fly Me to the Moon" into the toilet. James had been born the following spring.
He had been their miracle, their only child. But then James turned eleven, went to Hogwarts, and came home with a stowed away Sirius Black in his Hogwarts trunk. Dorea had half-expected James to say, "He followed me home, Mum. Can we keep him?" After alerting Walburga and Orion to the location of their missing heir—and seeing the terrified look on Sirius's face as Charlus fire-called his parents—Dorea very nearly said yes to James's unasked question. She did, in fact, want to keep Sirius. A few years later, she did just that.

Remus and Peter were adoring boys as well, one a little more well off than the other, who was often too sick to visit. But it was James and Sirius that were hers. Her sons, plural, because she loved them both just the same. And now she was torn, her heart broken and twisted in ways she could not even begin to comprehend. The idea that Sirius would have had anything to do with the wizard who had murdered James was utterly preposterous, and she would not hear a word to the contrary. Whoever had betrayed one of her sons was still out there, and they were responsible for the incarceration of the other.

Unfortunately, Azkaban would have to wait. There was no way of getting Sirius out of prison without alerting the rest of the world to her presence. If she had any hope of finding Harry and getting her family back together, she needed to remain unseen by anyone who properly gave a damn. So, instead of visiting her living son in prison, she Apparated to Godric's Hollow and placed her hand on the statue bearing her dead son's likeness. He was a man then, grown up with a wife and child. The baby looked just like him, and it tore at her heart. The Muggle-born girl—Lily—who had ignored James's advances for years, looked perfect standing beside him, cradling the child between them.

The graveyard was just a ways down through a kissing gate. Snow still covered the ground this early in January, through wet footprints created pathways to various headstones.

"I'm so sorry, my sweet boy," she whispered, gently touching his name etched in marble. "I failed you. I swear on my blood, on my magic, on my soul, and on your grave . . . I will not fail your son."

Hollyhock Gardens

Dorea ran her fingers gently along the black flowers that hung like vines, encasing the walls that bordered the large cottage within. She had been there often as a young girl and had once asked her mother if she could marry in the gardens if Uncle Arcturus would mind hosting the event. Eventually, because she chose to marry a blood-traitor, the wedding was held at Potter Manor instead. Though Arcturus had few personal issues related to blood status, he was old and had little patience for family strife and would not have dramatics take place on his property. Pollux would have been dramatic. Dorea was confident, in fact, that it was Arcturus who had helped her father bind Pollux into the agreement not to disown her for her choice in husband, while plenty of other witches had seen themselves burned from the tapestry for marrying into known blood-traitor families.

She pressed her hand to the old, iron gate and felt the family magic give, opening up for her. Unsurprising, she found Arcturus sitting in a chair looking over the gardens while a house-elf refilled his tea. At the sight of Dorea, the house-elf gasped, nearly dropping the teapot in its small hands. Dorea offered the creature a gentle smile, and it cowered a little, turning its attention to Arcturus.

"Master has a guest."

"You're looking well, uncle," Dorea said as she moved to kneel before him, an offer of respect for his age and position in the family, despite the official title of Patriarch belonging—misappropriately—to her brother.
"Little Dory," Arcturus whispered, his dull eyes brightening for a moment as he reached out and touched a lock of her hair. The old wizard looked worn from the life he had led, broken down by age and experience, and tired from impatience with others. However, staring into her colour-shifting eyes, he looked kind. "Is it time? Have you come to take me away from this world of piss and shit?"

Dorea sighed and leant into his touch. "No, uncle. I've come to rebirth it."

Blinking, confused, he pulled his hand away from her, widening his eyes. "Dorea?"

"I'm alive," she told him. "It's a long story."

Arcturus listened to every word of her tale, beginning with her sickness, stopping her only to ask to look into her eyes for confirmation of the dragon blood still coursing inside of her. She had known he would be curious; Arcturus had always been enamoured of dragons.

"I went to the funerals, you know," Arcturus said. "Your boy and his Muggle girl."

"I'm told she was a bright witch. Powerful."

"To defeat the Dark Lord, I imagine she would need to be."

Dorea raised a brow. "I've been told since waking, that it is Harry who is being credited with that."

Arcturus scoffed. "An infant defeating a Dark wizard? Preposterous. A likely tale spun by purists who couldn't bring themselves to imagine being saved by a Mudblood."

"Your language is terrible, uncle," she scolded him quietly. "Perhaps you're right. Still, I wonder if it's not Dumbledore who created the lies and spread word of Harry. No one has seen the boy since that night. Not a single photograph or mention outside of fantasy and speculation. The goblins tell me that Albus is his magical guardian, and yet Harry is not at Hogwarts; someone would know about it if he were. I suspect Dumbledore has placed him with Lily's Muggle family. There are records of wards being set up, but the goblins are unable to tell me where and what the precise nature of the security is, only that Dumbledore registered it with the horde for monitoring. Likely a repellant to Death Eaters branded with a mark."

He studied her carefully before asking, "You're wanting to go against Albus Dumbledore? For the boy?"

"For a lot of things, my grandson being first and foremost," she said with fire in her eyes. "But in order to take Harry away from Dumbledore, I need power. I need my family at my back."

"You cannot trust Pollux," Arcturus said immediately. "He's never been shy about his distaste of Muggles. The fact that your husband sympathised with them was one thing, but your boy married one of theirs and made a half-blood child that supposedly killed the Dark Lord. That man promised the old families he would bring back the old ways."

Dorea proposed to bring back something older. "And if Pollux were to die?"

Arcturus's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "The title would fall to Cygnus, but you know this."

"And Cygnus is to be trusted?" she prompted.

The old wizard leant back in his chair, creating a bit of distance between them. "Cygnus sold his own daughter to the Dark Lord. I'm honestly shocked that Aurors didn't arrest the man, at least under suspicion of being in league."
"He's protected by the Malfoys," Dorea said. "Abraxas and Aurora's son married Narcissa, did he not? If Abraxas and his boy were left free of Azkaban, they likely brought Cygnus into their protection as well. Bella—"

"Bellatrix was caught torturing Aurors with that wretched husband of hers and his idiot brother," Arcturus spat. "Never liked the Lestranges, myself." He studied her carefully before asking, "You want Pollux dead and Cygnus imprisoned—"

She confirmed with a nod. "At best."

"There's no young heir to take up the mantle of Patriarch. Not since Walburga lost her youngest and tossed the other one away." A small smile crossed his face when Dorea's eyes hardened at the mention of Sirius. "Do you plan on having someone sneak into Azkaban and murder the boy?"

"I plan on having my son set free," she insisted.

"Despite the fact that people say he sold his brother to his master?"

"I will believe that Sirius is a Death Eater when I see a mark on his arm with my own eyes. I will believe that Sirius betrayed James when I hear his confession with my own ears. I raised that boy since he was twelve and showed up at my home with bruises on his arms. It was only my husband's peaceful nature that kept me from skinning Walburga in her sleep," she hissed angrily. "Unfortunately, the title would not fall to Sirius because of his disownment. You would become Patriarch."

He made a distasteful expression. "I do not want to be Patriarch of this fallen family. Unlike most, I have never wanted such a thing. I thought I could live out my life watching my uncle's progeny fight over the silly title. And what an interesting battle it has been over these many generations."

She knew her family history, of course. The title should have gone to Arcturus years ago; his own father had been Patriarch. The title had been taken from him by his uncle and namesake when his father died. Nothing was confirmed, of course, but everyone suspected one brother had killed the other, likely over the love of a witch. It was considered taboo to speak of such things. Considering Fratricide was a precedent in the Black family, she lingered little on how plotting her brother's murder made her feel. Instead, she focused on the fact that she was technically righting a wrong committed years earlier. Arcturus should have been Patriarch long ago. Not that it mattered now.

Dorea reached out and took his hands in her own. "Would you then willingly give up the title?"

"And end the Black legacy?" he demanded as though she had blasphemed. "There are no more sons, Dorea. If you kill your brother and ruin his son, you will end us all."

"Only the title," she corrected. "Sons carry the name of their fathers, but daughters—"

Suddenly in understanding, Arcturus's eyes widened dramatically. "You would . . . Dorea . . . Such a thing has not been done in . . . in . . ."

"Centuries."

"You would need at least thirteen."

She smiled. "I have a list. I have a plan. All I need now is your vow."

He waited quite a long time to answer her—much longer than she felt was appropriate—but in the end, Arcturus nodded his acquiescence and smiled in approval. "Your father was right not to burn
you from the family tapestry."

"Uncle," Dorea said with a smile, "I'm going to set the tapestry and this world ablaze."
Dorea was grateful that Arcturus still had his Floo Network open to International connections, as her first stop was in France. She stepped out of a fireplace at a pâtisserie; it was certainly much cleaner and more pleasant smelling than the Leaky Cauldron. At the sight of the clafoutis on the counter, Dorea realised exactly why her uncle had kept his Floo Network open, the sugar fiend. After giving a polite nod to the owner and purchasing a bag of croissants, Dorea left the shop and headed down an old, familiar pathway that moved along the River Loire.

She reached out, running her fingers along the magic that separated the pathway from the Muggles, the Repelling Charm was so strong that it actually created an old smell of sewage to anyone non-magical that stepped too close. She scattered buttery crumbs along her path to the pigeons and ducks following her every step. In the distance, she could see Muggles boarding tour buses that drove down through old roads set to pass directly by her eventual destination.

The Château d'Amboise was long past its day of prestige, having been a central location in a number of wars—not the least of which being the French Revolution and the Muggles Second World War. It was that second war, however, that the Black family was able to take possession of the old residence, Obliviating the Muggle government into thinking that the place was condemned due to damage. They would not think of tearing down the place, so the French government opted to make it a historical site, adding it to a tour bus schedule to create revenue for what they presumed would be its eventual restoration. Unknown to the Muggles, the château had been restored within a fortnight thanks to magic, and the Black family had renamed their new home Château Noir.

The large manor looked like it had seen wartime; that is until Dorea stepped through the blood wards and saw, instead, shimmering windows, perfected stonework, lavish gardens, and what she thought might be a small herd of unicorn nestled beneath a canopy of trees.

A polite little house-elf wearing a maid's uniform greeted her at the door and agreed to take her to the Mistress's chambers. "She's expecting me," Dorea lied to the creature.

When they reached the large double doors, the house-elf paused, looking hesitant. "Mistress is . . ."

"Don't worry, dear," Dorea said. "I'm well acquainted with your Mistress's behaviour. I'll see myself in."

The house-elf popped away just as Dorea flung open the doors, bringing light into the otherwise darkened room. There was a small groan that came from the curtain-drawn bed, but Dorea ignored it in favour of approaching the windows and throwing open the curtains. Sunlight bathed the chamber, and two naked men lying on a sofa grumbled as the light woke them.

Dorea turned and eyed them curiously before scanning the rest of the room, which was littered with wine bottles, golden trays of half-eaten fruit, and what she hoped was not semen. "Off with you both," she insisted, shooing the young men. "Honestly, you're no older than my sons. What kind of things has she potioned you with?"

"No potions, Madame. Je veux être avec elle pour toujours," one of the young men declared, gesturing to the bed with a longing expression.
"I'm certain you do."

Dorea scoffed. "Does she know that?" She ushered them out quickly, closing the doors behind her with an irritable sigh. Slowly she turned and stared at the curtain-drawn bed. Reaching into the pocket of her robes, she withdrew a Sober-Up Potion, something she knew to have at the ready.

"Aubry," a woman groaned from behind the curtains, "where's my . . . ? Aubry, make me a mimosa. And don't you dare use that cheap Dom Perignon Muggle shit."

"Good to see that you haven't changed much, Cassie."

After a long moment of silence, the curtain pulled back just enough to reveal grey eyes hidden beneath smeared eyeliner and a lock of blond hair. "You're not my elf."

"Good eyes," Dorea said, rolling her own. She clasped her hands together in front of her, putting the Sober-Up Potion on display. "You look good in blond, by the way. However, the glamour looks to be fading. Unless you've taken up with Muggle products. Or are you letting your roots grow out dark for a reason?"

The curtain swung back completely, and the witch behind it fumbled to pull up the straps of her black nightgown before throwing her legs over the edge of the bed. She stared up at Dorea, one perfectly manicured eyebrow raised as she inspected her. "You look like a dead sister I once had."

Dorea raised her own brow. "Is that so?"

"Mmm. She perfected that same look of utter self-righteousness that you've got. Course, as I mentioned, she's dead. What does the Polyjuice of a dead woman taste like, I wonder?" She eyed the phial in Dorea's hands. "That Sober-Up? My elf give it to you?"

"A stranger dressed as your dead sister walks into your blood ward-protected home, rids you of what I hope weren't Imperiused toddlers," Dorea said indignantly, "and you're so very willing to drink a potion she has on hand? Cassiopeia, have you no self-preservation left in you?" When the blonde just stared at her, Dorea sighed. "At my wedding you confessed that you were glad that I had it at the Potters, because the Muggle-Repelling Curses placed on any of the Black properties at the time would've made it impossible for you to bring your current lover. You told everyone that he was a Venetian merchant in the French Wizarding district, but you told me that he was a Muggle-born accountant. I later found out that he was a Muggle, who owned a bookshop."

Cassiopeia's eyes widened in horror. "I saw your body put to ground."

"My body, or a coffin?"

"Your boy . . . he said that—"

"I imagine James said a great many things. Honourable as he was, being a Potter, he was still my son. If Blacks are known for any one thing, it's protecting their family—be that sacrificing everything for the sake of our children, or damning them for some obscure belief in blood purity," Dorea snapped angrily. "My son and his wife were murdered, the heir to our house is in Azkaban, and Albus fucking Dumbledore has kidnapped my grandson. I am not in the mood to wait for you to sober up on your own, Cassie. Take the damned potion!"

The Blacks were not known to be an affectionate family, so when Cassiopeia sobered up, Dorea was not surprised that she was not greeted with a hug. Instead, Cassie embraced a packet of cigarettes and
made her way to a large balcony while lighting one with the tip of her wand. "Fucking hell, Dorea, you're alive."

"Healer fixed me up quite well. Dragon's blood."

Cassie snorted. "I hear there are twelve uses for that stuff."

Dorea growled. "I'm going to destroy him, you know."

"The Dark Lord? I read somewhere that your little one's already seen to that unpleasant business."
Cassie turned and smiled at her sister only to see Dorea staring out at the River Loire with vengeful— and purple—eyes. "He is dead, isn't he?"

Dorea shrugged lightly. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. You didn't see my dead body, and here I stand. From what I've been told and have read, no body of his was found either. For all we know, he's gone to ground to gather his strength again."

"But they said—"

"Dumbledore said," Dorea corrected. "Every interview given after the death of my son and the supposed destruction of the Dark Lord was given by Albus Dumbledore, who claimed to have been behind the charm securing James and his family. The tale of the entire night hangs on the word of the fool." After a beat, Dorea sighed. "He has James's boy, Cassie. He's put him somewhere that I cannot follow on my own. I need your help."

Cassie shook her head. "Pollux won't allow it. Not for a half-blood child. The Blacks are keeping under the radar, especially after Walburga locked up Grimmauld when she went mad before she died. It was all over the paper, and all that after the business with Sirius. Poor thing. I don't care what he did, I've seen Dementors with my own two eyes, and I wouldn't wish them on my worst enemies."

Dorea closed her eyes. "I can think of a few I'd wish them on."

She blindly reached out, taking Cassie's cigarette from her and bringing the stick to her lips. She'd never taken to the habit, but the smell reminded her of Charlus's old tobacco pipe, and the smell of Sirius's and James's hair when they'd come into the house after hours working on that silly little motorbike. Inhaling, she struggled not to choke, instead relishing the burn in her throat that the dragon's blood seemed to take to almost affectionately.

"Pollux won't be a problem," she said after exhaling. "Neither will his son."

Her tone brokered no argument, nor any hint of subtlety, and Cassie's eyes widened only a fraction. "Pollux has always thought himself a king amongst men. I blame Mother. She spoiled him since Marius turned out . . . Well, you know."

Dorea looked up at the mention of their dead brother. "You can say squib, Cassie. Marius was a squib."

"Marius was also drowned in the pond beneath our tree house for being a squib, if you recall, Dorea," Cassie snapped. "I had to fetch his body out because you didn't know how to swim and Pollux didn't want to get his new boots wet. Gods, this family." She sighed dramatically and snatched back her cigarette. "How do you plan on doing it?"

"Drowning sounds good right about now, to be honest," Dorea said. "But I thought poison."
"For both?"

She shook her head. "Too suspicious. Arcturus has proof that Cygnus supported the Death Eater movement alongside his daughter. If I get Abraxas to give him up, I'll have him sent to Azkaban." It would be nice to think that she could easily exchange her nephew for Sirius, but unlikely considering she would need Arcturus's position as Patriarch to begin the movements necessary to have Sirius released.

"Abraxas? Aurora's widower?"

Dorea turned her head to the side and frowned as she made eye contact with her sister. "Aurora Malfoy died?"

Cassie nodded. "Shame. She was a lovely woman. Made beautiful babies, too. Not that any survived except the boy, of course, but he's as handsome as ever. Can you imagine what his and little Cissy's son will look like when he's all grown?" she asked with a smile. "Heartbreakers, those Malfoys. Of course, if I remember correctly, they're easily heartbroken as well."

Dorea scoffed and took Cassie's cigarette from her mouth, throwing it over the railing of the balcony. "Abraxas survived just fine." When Cassie opened her mouth to retort, Dorea pointed a finger in her face. "And don't you dare bring up Thoros."

Cassie smirked. "Oh, the things a man will do for a pretty redhead," she said and reached out to tug at one of Dorea's locks that had come loose from the braid she kept her hair in. "Both widowers now. Nott lost his wife just six months ago. Pretty little thing, she was. Any thoughts of using old connections to get Abraxas to do your bidding?"

Dorea practically snarled, but did her best to hold back. "I was considering blackmail or threats, actually," she hissed. "I'm not delusional. My husband is dead, but I've hopefully a long life left ahead of me. It's likely that I'll one day hope for new companionship. However, I would rather cut out my own eyes than lie with a man who shook the hand of the monster that murdered my boy, let alone knelt at his feet, kissed the hems of his robes, and let him burn his brand into their arm."

She turned and left the balcony, the fresh air almost stifling in the reminder of the people she would soon need to interact with in Wizarding society. People who bore Voldemort's brand and were still set free; people who financially backed him while still keeping their names unassociated as they sat on the proverbial fence; people who quietly agreed with his propaganda and looked the other way as he and his followers murdered innocents; people who fought him by using children as weapons and shields.

Pulling the top from a crystal decanter, Dorea poured herself a small glass of the amber liquid, glad to see that Cassie's tastes in firewhisky had not changed as much as her tastes in champagne and men. The liquid burned like hot coals at first and then turned to ice in her throat as she swallowed it down. Her anger and grief was an inferno that grew and grew and, like a dragon in wait, it calmed only to observe from a quiet distance until it could roar to life once again.

"Speaking of men," Cassie said thoughtfully as she sauntered back into the room, walking to a vanity and taking a seat to dig through various antique hair combs, "I might have a solution to your Dumbledore problem. The locating your grandson, problem," she clarified. "I assume the killing him problem is an entirely different issue."

Dorea turned to look at her sister curiously. "I never said I was going to kill Albus. I . . . Of course, if I find that he had anything personally to do with James and Lily's deaths, as well as Sirius's imprisonment, I'll make the few decades he has left quite miserable indeed. Killing is for the weak
and the useless."

"Luckily, Pollux is both."

"I don't take pleasure in it," Dorea insisted.

Cassie grinned. "I'll do so for the both of us then. Fratricide doesn't upset my delicate nature."

"What's your solution?"

Securing a diamond comb in her hair and using a wand to place several Sticking Charms to hold certain curls exactly where she wanted them, Cassie turned and crossed her legs, setting her hands on her knees and looking coquettish and innocent all at once. Well, as innocent as any Black witch had any right to be. Only Cassie's age appeared to dim her very dangerous nature. "I know a man who keeps tabs on Dumbledore. He would know who he meets with, where he goes, and perhaps who his Muggle connections are. Albus must have some way of keeping track of the boy, yes?"

Dorea nodded thoughtfully. "It's a start."

Cassie crossed the room and picked up a sleek black dress, stepping into it and gesturing for Dorea to zip her up. "And what about Arcturus? He's not long for this world. He's had the pox as well. Survived it, bless him, but it weakened him terribly. If you put him in place to become Patriarch, are you confident that he'll do as you wish? I know you've always been a favourite of his, but the man is up in his years, and when he dies, the legacy and power of the family goes with him." She turned and grimaced. "Oh gods, do you think he'll try to sire a son? Don't get me wrong, I've slept with men years older than him—some repeatedly—and I know it's possible, but he's always been such a . . ."

"Curmudgeon?" Dorea offered with a small smile.

"Was thinking more cantankerous arse, but yes."

Dorea finished zipping up Cassie's dress, securing the pearl clasp at the top as well. "Arcturus won't be Patriarch for long. He's made a vow to abandon the title just as soon as Sirius is set to be released from Azkaban."

Cassie frowned. "What are you planning?"

Dorea took in a slow breath and let it out through her nose, setting a hard stare on her sister. "Black Magic."

Tilting her head to the side in confusion, Cassie blinked. "Black . . . Wait . . . You don't mean Dark Magic. You mean . . .?"

"I have a list," Dorea reached into her pocket, retrieving an edited version of the list that the goblins had given her. "Names, locations, and generational connections."

Cassie snatched the parchment. "They'll need to be direct descendants, at least to start," she said. "And you're certain there's at least thirteen? Thirteen who will agree with your plans? Take off Alexia Walkin. She's nearly dead and can't remember her own name let alone ritual spells necessary for what you're thinking about. Hesper as well; she'd more than likely try to curse you for this if she had strength enough to lift her wand, the old bat. I see you've already crossed Araminta off the list. Good choice."

Dorea nodded thoughtfully. "She was close with Walburga, from what I recall."
Cassie scoffed. "She was worse than Walburga, if you can believe that." She looked down through the list. "Hmm . . . I'll have to make peace with Lucretia, I suppose."

Rolling her eyes, Dorea reached for the parchment only to have Cassie pull it back once more. "Are the two of you still at odds after all these years?"

"You kiss a witch's husband one time—"

"It was her wedding day."

"She can hold such a grudge. You know two of these witches are burned from the tapestry."

Dorea raised a brow. "Arcturus will have a mighty to-do list during his first day as Patriarch then, won't he?"

"Callidora and her daughter are good picks to go against Dumbledore and after the Dark Lord, should he not be resting in peace," Cassie noted. "Though Cygnus's eldest was responsible for what happened to that family. Lucretia might not be the only witch to hold a grudge."

"I'm hoping justice will overpower vengeance in that case," Dorea said as she took a seat, taking another sip of the firewhisky before setting it back down on a nearby table.

Cassie pointed to another name. "Is this one even old enough?"

"She's at Hogwarts now."

"Hmm. Gryffindor?"

"Hufflepuff."

Cassie sighed but then shrugged her shoulders. "It will create balance at least. And then there's . . . Oh." Her gaze fell to the last name on the list. "Well, that's a stretch."

Grabbing the list from her sister, Dorea frowned and folded it back up into a neat square before slipping it back into her pocket. "She's directly descended."

"And known to be in Dumbledore's pocket," Cassie argued. "Do you really think that—?"

"She's honourable," Dorea insisted. "She'll bring balance, as you said."

Finishing off the rest of the firewhisky in the crystal cup that Dorea had set down, Cassie licked her lips. "Well then," she said with a delighted grin. "Let's go make a coven, you and I."

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**January 3rd, 1987**

**Hogsmeade - The Hog's Head**

Dorea stared disdainfully from beneath the hood of her cloak up at the sign that hung over the dingy pub. "Conquer dragon pox only to die of dysentery."

"So dramatic," Cassie said, flicking a cigarette to the ground and stomping it into the mud with the high heel of her boot. "Do you want your grandson or not?"

Huffing angrily, Dorea pushed open the door to the pub and squinted in the darkness to find a lonely barkeep wiping down dusty mugs with a dirty flannel. She recognised the man instantly, though he did not give her more than a fleeting glance.
"Don't rent the rooms by the hour," he grunted. "Have to pay a whole night no matter how long you stay."

Eyes wide and greatly offended by the implication, Dorea opened her mouth to speak just as Cassie hit her with a Silencing Charm. She spun to glare at her sister, only to watch as Cassie stepped around her, removing her cloak's hood and the scarf that she had draped around her neck.

Opening up her cloak, the blond witch revealed the dip in her little black dress, looking ready to conquer the world, starting with the filthy pub. "Now, now, Abbie . . . last I remember, you were more than happy to let me sleep in your bed for free."

Aberforth Dumbledore turned wide blue eyes up at the sound of her voice, his already white skin paling further. "Witch!" he said as though it were a slur and not a matter-of-fact. "Get out! Get out, you . . . you . . . bloody temptress!"

Cassie grinned. "You flatter." "Wicked siren!"

"Stop," Cassie batted her eyelashes at him. "Harpy!"

"Well, that's just rude, love. And after our wonderful time together?"

Aberforth scoffed. "Wonderful? You drank all my good firewhisky—"

"If you call that good firewhisky," Cassie mumbled.

"—you stole my favourite cloak—"

"You stole my heart," Cassie teasingly accused.

"And I don't know what you did to Beatrice," he snarled, pointing to an old goat who bleated in terror at the sight of Cassie before ducking behind the bar, "but her milk's been sour ever since!"

Cassie sighed irritably. "Then buy a cow!"

Dorea cancelled the Silencing Charm and pulled the hood back from her cloak. "Aberforth Dumbledore, I am Dorea Potter."

He turned and looked at her. "And?"

"I want to know where your brother goes and who he sees," she insisted. "He may be responsible for the death of my son."

Aberforth glared at her, the smallest hint of sadness in his dull, blue eyes. "Yeah, that sounds like Albus. He's responsible for the deaths of a lot of people. Don't go 'round thinking that you're any more special than the rest of us that he's gone and fucked over."

Shocked by the statement, Dorea asked, "Who did he—?" only to have Cassie grip her wrist, shaking her head quickly to stop Dorea from finishing her question. The expression on her sister's face halted Dorea's words. "He took my grandson, Harry Potter. I want him back."

The old barkeep moved back behind the counter and looked around at the empty pub with a heavy sigh. "Thought your name sounded familiar," he muttered, reaching beneath the counter to pull out a
bottle of Ogden's, pouring out three glasses. The witches approached as he pushed a glass in front of each of them. Aberforth drank first, and he nodded to Dorea, who bowed her head in thanks before drinking.

As Cassie reached for her glass, Aberforth pushed it with the tip of his wand until it smashed into pieces on the floor at her feet.

Cassie jumped, angrily kicking alcohol and bits of glass from her boot, and muttering, "You're such a child," under her breath.

"Please," Dorea said softly. "I just want my grandson. Nothing more."

Aberforth raised a brow. "Nothing more? My brother kidnaps your boy, and you claim to have no thoughts of revenge?"

"Justice," Dorea corrected. "If he's responsible, I want to know it for a fact. If he's not then . . . then I will still take Harry out from under his hand. He's hidden him in the Muggle world from what I've gathered so far. Likely with my daughter-in-law's family, but I . . . I was gone when my son married. I don't know much about the girl or where she came from."

"Might be Cokeworth," Aberforth suggested. "Didn't know the girl myself, but one of her friends stops in once a year. Every Halloween. Drinks himself sick and blathers on about his guilt and his childhood growing up half-Muggle and all. Cries her name into six or seven pints until little Minnie comes 'round to collect him."

Cassie raised both brows. "That's useful information," she said thoughtfully. "Do you think you could send a message? Get this man to meet with us?"

Aberforth let out a cold laugh and shook his head. "Not until next Halloween, I reckon. The rest of the year he's Albus's man, and he don't come to Hogsmeade except when forced on weekends to watch the students, or to make last minute purchases at the apothecary for ingredients if he runs out. If your boy's in the Muggle world, then I'd check with Figg."

"Figg?" Dorea asked.

Aberforth nodded. "Miranda Goshawk's squib sister. Bell . . . something. Married a man named Figg some ways back. Albus meets with her once or twice a year. Only know that because one of my regulars sells kneazles from time to time, and the woman breeds the damned things with cats. He takes some off her hands now and then. Thought he'd try to earn free drinks from me by saying he was friends with a friend of my brothers."

Cassie snorted. "I imagine that went well."

"Thank you, Aberforth," Dorea said sincerely. "If there's anything I can ever do—"

"Keep this one out of my bar," he said, pointing a finger at Cassie, which she tried to catch in her teeth.

"Such a tease," Cassie said with a dark grin as she and Dorea turned to leave the Hog's Head. "Until next time, love. Give my best to Beatrice."
"Now, now, dearest," Cassie crooned sweetly with a slight tilt of her head, "if you keep scowling like that, your paint is going to wrinkle, and you always did have such lovely skin."

Dorea sighed in the other room as she listened to her sister speak with the portrait of their deceased niece, Walburga. As though walking through the stench of the house was not bad enough, they had been greeted with high-pitched shrieking. Normal portraits were not so horrible, but then again, Walburga had never been the most tolerable of individuals when she was alive. Dorea stayed in the dining hall, having slipped past the portrait with her hood drawn. Dead or not, Walburga would recognise Dorea on sight. The two witches had never gotten along well even before Sirius was born; add the obviously abused boy into the mix, and it made Dorea nearly homicidal and Walburga defensive.

Dorea had not wanted to go to Grimmauld Place, but they needed a safe house of sorts. Cassie's chateau was decent enough, but remaining local would make their plans much easier. It helped that, before her death, Walburga had been immensely paranoid and had some of the most decent blood wards available, not to mention an extensive collection of Dark—but useful—artefacts. However, it wasn't the artefacts, or the wards, or the house that they were currently after.

"Hello, Kreacher," Cassie said with a grin when they had entered the residence. While the elf vanished to prepare tea, Cassie sat down with her sister, throwing up a Silencing Charm to drown out the sound of Walburga's screaming. "His bond is broken, irreparably. I visited once after Walburga died, and Kreacher all but begged to serve me. Walburga forbade him to transfer the bond. I found it suspicious, so I cast a Diagnostic Charm. Merlin, what that woman must have done to the elf."

"She forced him to harm Sirius when he was very little. Following orders or not, Kreacher serves the House of Black, meaning all of our best interest. He knew that Sirius was in line to be heir since Cygnus had no sons." Dorea tried not to think of the many times she had healed Sirius's bruises and cuts, and the few times she had to go to St. Mungo's because Sirius had been brought there with severe injuries. She fought the urge to blame the elf, knowing that Walburga and Orion had been behind the actual abuse, but it was hard to even look at the hateful thing that had harmed her boy. "What will happen to him?"

Cassie sighed and leant back in her chair, lighting a cigarette. "He'll go mad within years. Completely unstable," she said. "He's obedient enough, even to the portrait. He's lost the ability to reform a bond, though. It'll kill him in the end, poor thing."

"Poor thing?"

"I know you have issues with that elf, but I've always taken to the little beasts. Pets that clean your home, cook your food, and praise you endlessly so long as you don't dress them up," Cassie said with a youthful grin. "I remember when Mother scolded me for accidentally freeing all of ours."

Dorea chuckled softly. "She never would have known had they not been crying in the foyer, begging to have those little pink dresses taken off of them."

"I wanted a playmate, and Pollux was terrible," Cassie insisted. "Be grateful for those dressed-up
house-elves; I'm fairly certain the only reason Mother got pregnant again with you was to give me a baby sister to play with. It's a shame you were so dull."

"Not dull now."

"No," Cassie agreed and inhaled once more. "Right, I'll go and have a chat with the banshee and see if she'll convince Kreacher to obey me. He's broken, but loyal to one mistress. Since his bond with our House is already so fractured, he'll be able to turn against Pollux and Cygnus if I order him too."

Cassie opened the door to the dining room to find Dorea flipping through a pile of old, dusty books filled with family photographs, most of which were burned or scratched beyond recognition; Walburga truly had gone mad in the end. Dorea looked up from the album in front of her and forced herself to smile at Kreacher, who refused to make eye contact with her. He was no longer scowling, which was an improvement.

"Everything all right?"

Nodding, Cassie reached down and let her fingers trail over the ridges of Kreacher's floppy ears. The elf flinched at first, as though he were expecting pain, but then he leant into the touch like a cat would. Dorea was almost surprised the elf didn't start purring. "Kreacher," Cassie said, "what is your purpose?"

"Kreacher lives to serve the Ancient and Noble House of Black," he croaked.

"And how will you do that?"

"By obeying Mistress."

Cassie smiled. "And who is your mistress?"

He looked up at her, bulbous eyes filled with awe and purpose. "Kreacher lives to serve Mistress Cassiopeia Black, and only her."

Dorea's eyes widened a fraction, and she closed the album in front of her. "And if your mistress were to order you to betray another member of the House of Black? Harm them? Kill them, even?"

Kreacher turned his attention toward her and narrowed his eyes, clearly still having residual prejudice against her left over from Walburga's influence. He very briefly looked torn over the question. When he struggled to respond, Dorea snapped, "Come now; you've done it before! Used magic even against an heir of this House!"

Kreacher shook his head. "Filthy, nasty stain on the House of Black," he growled. "Mingled with half-breeds and Mudbloods and—"

"Tsk, tsk," Cassie said, wagging her finger. "There'll be none of that now. Does the bond hurt, Kreacher?"

He scratched at his chest, the aching look in his eyes betraying the way that his head shook. "Kreacher's bond does not matter. Kreacher only lives to—"

"Serve, yes, I know," Cassie interjected. "Kreacher, if you are obedient and help us repair the Ancient and Noble House of Black, I will allow you to end your service with honour."

He grimaced at first, but then the muscles of his face contorted into something similar to a smile. It
must have been a long time since he had reason to express joy. "Mistress will put Kreacher's head on the wall?" he asked with pleading eyes, looking as though he would burst into hysterical tears if Cassie had not the heart to say yes.

She cringed. "Ugh, that hideous . . . Fine; yes." When he scratched at his chest again, looking relieved, Cassie patted him on the head. "There, there. Now, you are to go to two places, Kreacher. First, you go to Tenebris Castle and observe the greenhouse belonging to Pollux Black. You are not to let him nor any of his elves know of your presence there. You make a list of every plant he owns." She waited for Kreacher to nod his assent. "Then, you will likewise go to Black Manor, look through the potions lab of Cygnus Black, and make a list of every ingredient in his storehouse, every potion currently being brewed, and every phial in his house. You are also not to let him nor any of his elves know of your presence there."

Kreacher briefly looked confused. "Master Pollux is—"

"Not your master," Cassie insisted. "You serve the House of Black through your new mistress, and only me, is that clear? Pollux Black is a stain on the Ancient and Noble House of Black. As Patriarch, he has allowed your former mistress to abuse her heirs, her husband, and her elves. Pollux Black should have taken care of his family, but he left Walburga to wither and die in her grief. Did he visit her after the death of her son?"

Kreacher shook his head. "Kreacher's former mistress—Oh! Poor Mistress!—She locked up the house when no one came to call on her," he growled under his breath and narrowed his eyes. "Kreacher serves Mistress, now," he said, looking up at Cassie. "He helps to restore the Ancient and Noble House of Black so that he may have his head on the wall with his ancestors. Kreacher obeys!"

When he vanished with a small pop, Dorea sighed and rubbed her forehead. "It's terrible of us to use that little beast this way."

Cassie shrugged and sat down beside her sister, pulling the photo album across the table and cringing as she looked at the remnants of Walburga's life and family—all torn and burned by her own hand. "It's merciful, Dorea. He'll go insane and die painfully with that broken bond she left him with. At least this way he'll feel useful for the last leg of his life."

"Are you really going to put his head on that wall?"

Blanching at the thought, Cassie sighed. "I did promise, didn't I? Besides, I don't plan on living in this horrid place. It's a means to an end. When all is said and done, I say we buy out the neighbouring homes and then burn it all to the ground."

Dorea stood and adjusted her cloak. "When Kreacher returns, you should have him find Grandfather's portrait and relocate it to the attic by itself. He was always loyal to his House, but he has a portrait in Dumbledore's office. The former headmasters of Hogwarts are charmed to assist the current headmaster in whatever way they can. There will be no spies amongst us."

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**Hollyhock Gardens**

Knowing that her niece would have perfect timing, Dorea planned her arrival several minutes past the hour—just enough time for everyone to get comfortable. The fireplace in Arcturus's drawing room lit with green flames, and Dorea stepped out to the very shocked faces of Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy.

"Ah, our final guest has arrived," Arcturus said with a knowing grin. Lucius turned and glared at the
old man and moved to stand, only for Arcturus to raise his hand. "Sit back down, boy. You and your family are under no threat."

"Dorea?" Narcissa whispered under her breath. "You died."

"Did I?" Dorea asked with a smile, slowly approaching the young witch. "You look lovelier than ever, my girl." Her eyes flicked up, and her gaze landed on Lucius, who looked positively horrified, his hand gripping his cane tightly. "And you," she said, "have your mother's eyes, Merlin bless it. Abraxas's eyes were always so very cold; I imagine that you know that better than anyone. I was sorry to hear about your mother's passing."

Lucius cleared his throat. "I... I thank you, Madam Potter." He reached out and put his hand over Narcissa's. "Should I pass along your greetings to my father? He always spoke so highly of you." He paused briefly and raised a pale brow. "He was quite vexed to hear of your passing."

Dorea took a seat beside Arcturus after kissing his cheeks. "I think, perhaps, it would be best that Abraxas not know of my current... living condition," she said with a small smile. "You see, I don't know if he can be trusted, and I value trust above all other things, these days. I knew your father when he was younger, and he was a brash and ambitious thing. Quite charming, but capable of cruelty as well. He'd cut down his best friend if he were in the way of something he wanted."

Lucius sat up, his spine stiffening. "So I've heard. My father still claims a blood feud with the Notts."

Rolling her eyes, Dorea leant back in her chair and relaxed, hoping that, eventually, Lucius and Narcissa would mirror her. "Silly boys," she said. "Men get quite territorial over women—even women that they only presume to have."

They had still been in Hogwarts when Abraxas Malfoy challenged Thoros Nott to a duel for the chance to court Dorea. It was absolute nonsense, considering she had been secretly in love with Charlus Potter for years. By the time the dust had settled and the Malfoys and Notts were enemies, Dorea was in Charlus's arms, and both Thoros and Abraxas did their best to hide the truth about their feud, not wanting people to think they had lost a witch to a known family of blood-traitors.

"You and Thoros have children the same age, do you not?" Dorea politely asked.

Narcissa sat up, a proud smile crossing her face. "Draco will be seven this June."

"I'm told I have a grandson the same age," Dorea said and watched as all colour drained from Lucius's face. "Yes, I'm certain you're well aware of it, young man. So, I'll ask this only once, did you have anything to do with the death of my James and the attack on his family?"

"No!" Lucius shouted and stood up.

Dorea watched him in mild amusement. He was emotional, just like his father used to be. Malfoys always were stone-faced until a single crack broke them wide open. It was a trait she noticed in most young men, and it was likely that Lucius would eventually learn to contain such outbursts. "The war is still a sensitive subject, I see." Her gaze flickered to his arm. "Imperius, was it?"

"Of course," Lucius replied automatically.

"Your father did it?" she asked. "Was he the one who held a wand to your head and forced you to kneel before a man who murders children?" The look on his face was enough to guess that, while Imperius was a bit of a stretch, Abraxas was to blame for Lucius's connection and servitude to Voldemort. Before Lucius could answer her, Dorea cleared her throat and corrected, "Apologies, tried to murder children. Was it Abraxas who had you branded the same way that
Cygnus sold Bellatrix?"

Narcissa flinched and looked away. "Bella was . . . sick."

"I agree," Dorea said. When Lucius still refused to answer her about his father, she offered him a small, kind smile. "Perhaps, it was not Abraxas. No. He wouldn't think to endanger the life of his only son. Malfoys treasure their heirs, this I know. Cygnus, however, had no heir. Only daughters. One he gave to your supposed Dark Lord, another he burned from the tapestry, and the youngest he gave to you. I wonder," she said thoughtfully, "what the price for Narcissa was."

Eyes slowly widening, Narcissa leant forward. "Dorea, you don't mean to think that—"

"He had no son of his own to make a Death Eater, and Bellatrix was known to be terribly unstable. I imagine that Cygnus felt inadequate in his support of Voldemort," she suggested and watched as Lucius and Narcissa both flinched at the name. "Maybe one daughter was not enough. After all, it's well known that Avery, Rosier, and Mulciber each offered up their only heirs to the cause, and Lestrange gave both of his sons. What did Cygnus have but daughters? Abraxas certainly would not have forced the issue himself. Perhaps, he did not know that you were Imperiused to become a Death Eater at the wand of your father-in-law."

Lucius looked intrigued and flabbergasted all at once at the fabricated story, and Narcissa wore an expression of panic. When neither said anything to confirm or deny the fantastic suggestion that Dorea had created, Arcturus finally spoke up. "Don't look like that, girl," he said to Narcissa. "Anyone who's ever met your father knows he's a vicious, petty man. He's cruel to your mother, and he was more than happy to be rid of both of your older sisters. Even now, one of them sits in Azkaban living in piss and shit amongst dementors, while your father sleeps on silk without a care in the world."

A child's laughter broke through the thick air, and Narcissa reached out to catch her son as he chased a tiny kneazle kitten into the room. "What did I say?" she whispered to the boy. "No stirring up trouble, my love."

Dorea stared at the boy, her heart aching. *Harry will be about that size*, she thought to herself.

She watched as Lucius moved to stand behind his wife, putting both hands on her shoulders, having abandoned his cane—and wand—back in his own chair. Dorea took that as an excellent sign. She reached out and placed her own hand on Narcissa's arm. "We can wash this world clean for our children," she said softly. "A clean slate for everyone that deserves one."

Curious, Lucius asked, "And who does not deserve one?"

She looked up and met his stare. "Those who think that they can rejoin Voldemort when he rises again." Before either of them could argue, Dorea held up a hand to stop them. "My forgiveness has limitations, young man. I raised two sons who were both reckless and at times foolish. I know that a man, especially in his youth, can do very foolish things, especially under familial pressure or threat. I tolerate those who learn from their mistakes before it becomes an ingrained character flaw."

"Draco, be still," Narcissa quietly pleaded with her son, who was trying to wiggle out of his mother's grip.

"Boys should be free to play," Dorea said with a smile. "You have two days to decide."

"How will we make contact with you?" Lucius asked.

Dorea stood. "You won't. When you've made your decision, you'll go directly to the Aurors. You'll
understand when and why soon enough." She leant down and kissed Arcturus's cheek. "Uncle, as always it is a pleasure to spend time in your company." Turning to face the Malfoys, she smiled sweetly. "Whatever your decision, your son is a Black. To the best of my ability, I will ensure that he has a bright and safe future. Your former Dark Lord would never make such promises."

As she reached for the Floo powder on the mantle, Lucius cleared his throat. "Lady Potter?" Dorea turned and raised a brow, waiting for him to continue. "We were told that you died of dragon pox. My father . . . has taken quite ill with the sickness. Treatments have not worked, thus far, and the Healers say that he could pass any day now."

"And would you like me to recommend an expert? Perhaps one I know personally?" she asked carefully.

Lucius licked his lips and swallowed, his gaze hard. "I only meant . . . If you would like to say your farewells to a former friend, now would be the time."

Understanding entirely clear, Dorea smiled. "I think, perhaps, Abraxas has a great deal on his plate. Best let him pass in peace, don't you think?"

Lucius nodded, looking relieved. "Agreed."

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January 8th, 1987

DEATH OF BLACK PATRIARCH SHAKES WIZARDING WORLD

Are some Ancient and Noble Houses anything but, these days? The recent death of Black Family Patriarch, Pollux Black, was ruled an accident involving the wizard's personal greenhouse and an unfortunate collision with a venomous tentacula that had overgrown its security measures. However, Senior Auror Alastor Moody reported discovering evidence that Mr Black had, in fact, been poisoned.

"It's what happens when a man outsources his potions," Moody informed a Daily Prophet reporter. "Can't even trust your own family these days."

When questioned for details, Auror Moody gave a statement on behalf of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, informing Wizarding Britain that Cygnus Black, Mr Black's son and presumed heir, was suspected of his father's murder. A hobby potioneer, Cygnus Black supposedly supplied his family with their brewing needs, including a Vitamix Potion that Mr Black took daily. When tested, the Vitamix Potion provided by Cygnus Black was found to contain poisonous materials that were later discovered in his personal potions lab.

Cygnus Black professed his innocence upon questioning, but he was officially arrested when his son-in-law, Lucius Malfoy, came forward with evidence of Cygnus's involvement in the previous war with You-Know-Who.

It is well known that Bellatrix Lestrange (nee Black), the daughter of Cygnus and Druella Black (nee Rosier), was a devout follower of You-Know-Who. At the end of the war, Cygnus denied all knowledge of his daughter's ties to He-Who-Should-Not-Be-Named. However, Lucius Malfoy, Black's son-in-law (by marriage to Black's youngest daughter, Narcissa Malfoy nee Black), claims that not only did his father-in-law know of his eldest daughter's involvement in the war, but he actively financially supported You-Know-Who.

Malfoy, arrested in 1981 on suspicions of being a Death Eater, claimed that he had been Imperiused
into taking the Dark Mark, though was unable to supply any further information regarding his involvement. With his father-in-law in Auror custody, Malfoy felt safe coming forward to say that it was Cygnus Black who had cursed him into compliance shortly after his graduation from Hogwarts to join You-Know-Who’s rebellion against Wizarding Britain.

"Honestly, our family is just glad that we’re no longer under threat and that our names can finally be cleared," says Malfoy. "My father-in-law was a tyrant who took as he pleased with no thought of those he was hurting. Narcissa, her mother, and I appreciate the support of the community at this trying time, and we are looking forward to getting on with our lives."

Malfoy, a growing figure of prestige in the Ministry (and recently appointed to the Hogwarts Board of Governors), is currently mourning the passing of his own father, Abraxas Malfoy, who died late Tuesday night due to complications with dragon pox.

The immediate trial of Cygnus Black was held last night, where he was found guilty on all charges. It’s not, however, Cygnus’s trial that has the gossip mills of the Ministry working overtime. Arcturus Black, the new Patriarch of the Ancient and Noble House, made a public announcement in the Wizengamot following the conviction of his nephew:

"The House of Black is an Ancient and formerly Noble one. However, these past many generations, our blood has become tainted with those who would seek to undo us. Previous Patriarchs have allowed outside influences to tear away at our family, and an infection has festered in our ranks for too long. We have separated ourselves from one another and from the community.

"There will be a cleansing of my family, starting with the Patriarchal line. Our sons have all but died away from us, something I can only assume that Magic considered a necessity. As Patriarch, I plan on making drastic changes that will restore the nobility of this House. Toujours Pur are our words—Always Pure. Despite our blood being virtually unchanged, our magic has withered, our bonds are broken, and our honour all but vanished. No more! The Black family will once again be well-known in Britain as a family that contributes to the community, that honours their magic, and supports their blood.

"My first act as Patriarch will be righting a wrong that both my family and the Ministry overlooked for far too long. It burdens my heart to stand in the Wizengamot today, witnessing the conviction of my nephew Cygnus at the conclusion of this trial and knowing that another heir of my family now sits in Azkaban, having never been given the same opportunity. Sirius Orion Black deserves a trial, so that his family, and the families of those he is accused of injuring, may have rest and closure in knowing the truth of what happened during the war!"

Sirius Black, imprisoned for the murders of thirteen people following the death of the Potters—something he was implicated in—and the destruction of You-Know-Who, has been in Azkaban for the past five years.

Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones, claimed that she was unaware that Sirius Black never received a trial. She took over the Department after the promotion of former D.M.L.E. Head, Bartemius Crouch, was transferred to the Department of International Magical Cooperation after his capture of Sirius Black in 1981. Records of a supposed trial have not been found, and Mr Crouch has declined to comment.

Albus Dumbledore, Chief Warlock, claims that the "Wizengamot was busy trying to rebuild the magical community in the aftermath of war", and doesn't personally recall witnessing Black's trial, but he puts his support entirely behind Minister Bagnold and Amelia Bones in the investigation of this grievous error.
The rest of Wizarding Britain is left with many questions in the aftermath of this reveal:

Was Bartemius Crouch’s demotion because of mishandling of Sirius Black’s arrest? Is Sirius Black innocent? What other dramatic changes does Patriarch Black have in store for his Ancient and Noble House?
Toujours Pur

January 9th, 1987
Hollyhock Gardens

It helped that Arcturus had been the one to send the invitations out to all the witches in the family. Dorea couldn't very well sign her name to a letter, lest the owl fall into the hands of anyone greedy enough to pass along information to the Daily Prophet for a few Sickles.

She could see the headline now: Lady Potter, Back From the Dead? Are the Blacks Creating Inferi?

Cassie could have invited everyone to tea, but she was known only by name to many in the family since she had secluded herself in France for so many years and had never married; nor did she have any children to be associated with in society. Cassie claimed that it was one of many benefits of never marrying or giving birth: no one pestered you because they happened to be friends with your spouse or progeny.

Thankfully, Arcturus had been more than happy to sign his name to the bottom of each letter, so long as they did not bother him with the details contained within which he considered "women's business".

Arcturus spent his days pushing against the Wizengamot and arguing with legal offices, the Minister for Magic, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Despite Minister Bagnold demanding that Sirius be brought to trial, Bartemius Crouch and his allies in the Wizengamot insisted that Sirius had been properly tried in 1981—just days after his arrest. Amelia Bones had an entire team of Aurors working alongside the Department of Records to find proof of Crouch's claim. By the time the Wizengamot agreed to hold a trial in the coming days, Arcturus had bribed, bought, and blackmailed his way into getting Sirius removed from Azkaban and placed into a high-security cell inside the Ministry of Magic. If needed to testify, Sirius would have to be well removed from dementor influence, and there was no way of telling what mental state the man would be in, to begin with.

Dorea and Cassie briefly took over Hollyhock Gardens and made it ready for the onslaught of witches that had replied to Arcturus's summons. Considering the new Black Patriarch had publicly stated an overhaul of the family, the majority of women were likely attending the little luncheon simply out of curiosity.

"Are you ready for this?" Cassie asked her sister when they stood in front of the fireplace of Arcturus's drawing room.

Dorea sighed and shook her head. "No."

The green flames burst to life, signalling an arrival.

The young witch stepped out of the fireplace and dusted soot from the sleeves of her burgundy robes. The dark colour was a hair's breadth from being considered mourning robes, but no one in the family would be foolish enough to publicly mourn either Pollux or Cygnus, not with the way Arcturus had condemned them in the Daily Prophet. Not that the witch in front of Dorea and Cassie would have actually mourned Cygnus.

Even if he was her father.
"Andromeda," Cassie greeted her wary niece with a smile. "You look lovelier than ever."

"Aunt Cassiopeia," Andromeda said in greeting, nodding her head before turning her gaze toward Dorea, her eyes narrowing in curiosity before widening. "Aunt Dorea."

"All will be explained," Dorea said instantly, stepping forward and taking Andromeda's hands in her own. She smiled at the girl—no longer a girl, really—and reached up to tuck a dark brown lock of hair behind her ear. "I've been told that you have a daughter. Merlin bless her if she's as lovely as her mother."

Andromeda, still in shock, closed her mouth with a click of her teeth and took several moments to collect her thoughts before answering. "I . . . Yes. Nymphadora," she said with a joyful smile. "She's at Hogwarts right now. I can't attest to whether or not she has my looks, as it much depends on the day and her mood."

"A Metamorphmagus?" Dorea asked with a wider smile. "That trait doesn't run in our family."

"There are quite a few perks to marrying a Muggle-born then," Andromeda said, lifting her chin proudly as though she were in a permanent state of telling her fellow purebloods to kiss her arse. "Who truly knows where the gift comes from? She's an absolute delight with my temper and her father's two left feet and—" Her smile faltered, and her soft eyes widened as she looked over Dorea's shoulder to the door in the corner. "What is she doing here?"

Dorea turned and sighed at the sight of Narcissa. Like Andromeda, she wore dark dress robes, hunter green just dark enough to be a shade lighter than black. Unlike Andromeda's soft chignon of soft brown hair, Narcissa's blond locks had been pulled back from her face by a diamond comb on one side. Dorea tucked her arm into the crook of Andromeda's elbow to prevent her from darting back through the Floo and Escaping.

"Andy," Narcissa whispered. "You look . . . The years have treated you well."

"How the hell would you know?" Andromeda snapped. "I haven't seen you in over a decade."

Dropping her polite expression, Narcissa sighed dramatically. "I was sixteen, Andromeda, and you'd run off with a Muggle-born! I came home for Yule and was told that your name was not to be spoken. Bella had to be the one to tell me what you had done—"

"What I had done?" Andromeda asked incredulously. "I'd dared to fall in love with a good man!"

"Mother accidentally let your name slip at dinner, and Father launched a crystal glass at her head. She still has the scars since he refused to let her heal or glamour them," Narcissa continued. "What was I supposed to do? You've undoubtedly read the Prophet; you know what a monster he was."

Andromeda scoffed. "You think I honestly believe that nonsense about your precious husband being Imperiused by Father?"

"Lucius is a good man and a good father, and he—"

"He's a Death Eater!"

"He had a family to protect!"

"Girls!" Cassie snapped and stepped between them. "Let's have tea. Something tells me that this won't be the only argument that this room will see today. However, we're all family, and no one is going to leave this house until Dorea has said her piece; is that understood?"
Cassie's prediction had been spot on. No less than three arguments had broken out by the time the final witch had stepped into the room, two of which included actual attacks.

When Cedrella Weasley and Lucretia Prewett arrived together, Lucretia hadn't blinked twice before taking a fistful of Cassie's hair in her hand and dragging her to the ground. It had taken everyone else in the room to separate the women, and no sooner than they did, Andromeda was hexed in the shoulder when Callidora and Enid Longbottom arrived and mistook her for Bellatrix Lestrange. By the time that Belina Burke and Camila Crouch arrived only to hiss insults at one another, Dorea was fed up with every last one of them.

Theia Blishwick was the final witch to arrive. When she stepped from the fireplace, Cedrella bluntly asked, "Have any blood feuds with anyone in this room? Best get your first hex out of the way, dear."

After Healing Charms had been cast and a bottle of dittany was passed around, they all took their seats in the large circular room, chairs and sofas facing inward. Despite being of blood, few could be recognised as family at first glance.

Sisters like Andromeda and Narcissa were as opposite as night and day, and the same could be said of Dorea and Cassie. Even Enid looked very little like her mother, Callidora. While Callidora had light auburn hair and wide, stern eyes, Enid's dark hair and gentle expression made her appear like a living embodiment of fairytale princess, save for her age.

Cedrella, carrying the dark auburn hair that helped make her Weasley offspring stand out even more in a crowd, was short and sturdy and carried a no-nonsense attitude about her. Lucretia, who sat beside her, looked fit for polite society with her brown hair pulled to the side in a fancy braid. One might even think she was sweet and defenceless if they didn't notice she still had a clump of Cassie's hair in her tightly clenched fist.

The younger generations, some further removed from direct Black parentage, looked the least familial. Camilla's blond hair came from her Crouch father and was a dull shade compared to the platinum of Narcissa's locks. Belina's slick black hair and Chinese features came from her grandmother on the Burke side. Theia, the only witch in attendance wearing Muggle clothes—aside from the too-tight dress that Cassie wore—sat crossed legged in jeans on a large armchair by herself, the ivory-coloured upholstery making her dark skin stand out that much more.

Different in appearances, every last one of them, but the fire in their eyes and the magic in their blood was ancient and similar. Not to mention the temper and the slight tilt toward madness that came from far too many generations of intermarriage and what Dorea assumed had to be Dark Magic. She half-believed some of the stories that said the first Black witch used a blood sacrifice ritual, murdering her husband during a fertility rite to birth a powerful child. Whether or not it was true, something unquestionably had happened along the bloodline to make Black witches and wizards just a tad unhinged, especially when angered.

Tea was served, and the women mostly remained quiet as Dorea calmly explained the circumstances of her survival. She told them about her diagnosis and the Healers at St Mungo's giving up on her, save for Hammond Dillonsby, who made quite the promise to her son, carried out years after his death. She told them some of what she had learned from the goblins about the end of the war, and how she had gone to Godric's Hollow.

"It's time to end the blood feuds within our own family," she said. "Haven't we lost enough?"

Andromeda and Narcissa briefly glanced at one another before sadly looking away. "Voldemort killed my son and daughter-in-law. He enslaved Narcissa's husband. His corruption tainted our own blood when he took Bellatrix, not to mention Camilla's nephew, Bartemius."
Camilla looked down at the floor, studiously avoiding both Callidora and Enid. They both turned and gaped at her in shock as though they had not known her relation to the boy who had helped torture Frank and Alice into madness.

"Callidora lost her grandson and his wife, and Enid her nephew. Voldemort turned family against one another through this ridiculous divide of blood status," Dorea continued, ignoring the few who gasped when she said the name. "His associations with certain families like Belina's have labelled them Dark witches and wizards. He and his followers murdered Theia's father, Lucretia's nephews, and Cedrella's in-laws. When does it stop?"

"He's dead, isn't he?" Belina offered, looking around the room and glaring at any of the supposed good witches who stared at her suspiciously when Dorea mentioned her family had been labelled Dark. "And this blood prejudice thing didn't start with him. Toujours Pur, right? Andromeda and Cedrella were disowned long before You-Know-Who came to power."

"We've been reinstated by Arcturus," Andromeda whispered, shifting her posture so that her back was ramrod straight, looking quite prepared for a battle should any of the others question whether or not Arcturus had made the right call.

Lucretia grinned. "Father's keeping his word about making drastic changes."

Cassie snorted into her wine glass. "Just you wait."

"What does that mean?" Callidora asked, looking at Cassie before turning her full attention back to Dorea. "What does she mean? Why are we here?"

Dorea sucked in a breath to steady herself. "The Patriarchal line will end with Arcturus."

"What about Sirius?" Andromeda asked. "I assumed that's why Arcturus was forcing the Wizengamot to hold a proper trial. Is he not going to name Sirius his heir? He's the last of the Black line with Father in prison and Grandfather Pollux dead."

"Do you think Sirius is innocent?" Theia asked. "Don't get me wrong, out of anyone in this family, he was the last I thought capable of killing Muggles, but the paper said that he confessed. Didn't he?" At Dorea's disbelieving expression, Theia's mouth fell open in horror. "My gods... He's been in Azkaban for five years."

"He won't be right, even if he's found innocent," Belina said. Before Dorea could pin her with a withering glare, she held up her hands in supplication and added, "You know I'm right. I've seen people who've been in Azkaban for just one year. Usually, the Ministry rifles through their vaults so all they've left to their name is whatever artefacts they've squirrelled away in their homes. A lot of them come into the shop to sell a few things and make money to live off of. They're broken people."

"Sirius will be..." Dorea began, but the words began to choke her at the thought of Sirius wasting away in that hell hole while dementors feasted on his memories. "I will take care of Sirius. As it stands, Arcturus has vowed that he will abdicate his title of Patriarch. It will no longer exist. Her gaze settled on Lucretia, who widened her eyes in sudden understanding. If anyone would pick up what Dorea had planned, she figured it would be Lucretia, who had left Hogwarts to seek a Mastery in History of Magic and Ancient Runes.

"The family magic will settle on us," Dorea said. "I propose that we create a family coven."

Jaws fell open, and eyes widened at the announcement.

"There hasn't been a family coven in three hundred years," Lucretia said. "Not in Britain, at least.
The last were the Shafiqs, and their witches reinstated the Patriarchal line when three of their thirteen were murdered by rival families. Dorea, you're asking us to put ourselves out there with targets on our backs. Don't get me wrong; I'm not worried about a fight, but anyone who wants to pick one with our family would know exactly who we all are and how many of us to kill in order to destroy the coven."

"The benefits are something to think about," Callidora said thoughtfully, much to the shock of her daughter.

"Mother! You would endanger the Longbottom line for the Black?" Enid asked.

"We are all one family," Callidora retorted. "I would have us protected, and not by a Ministry who allowed a psychopath to rise to power, nor wizards who think they know better than we do. Family covens are considered sacred since they practise ritual magic—legal blood magic, even." Her gaze rose to meet Dorea's, and she smiled. "We'd be above the law to an extent. As easy as it could be to destroy a family coven, to make yourself an enemy of one would bring hell down upon your head if you're unsuccessful. Covens share enemies."

"We'd have all the power of a Patriarch, and the legal immunity of a religion since most family covens take up an idol of sorts, correct?" Belina asked Lucretia, who nodded.

"We were thinking Morgana," Cassie said with a grin.


"Sexual?" Theia chimed in with a small laugh. "Are we going to be practising Sex Magic?"

"With any luck," Cassie said with a smirk. "I've a little collection of beautiful Muggle-born boys in France who would love a reason to visit Britain."

"Wait," Camilla interrupted, eager to change the subject again. "Legal immunity?"

"As long as we don't practise Dark Magic," Dorea clarified.

When Andromeda looked at her sister and raised a challenging brow, Narcissa petulantly threw a biscuit at her.

"Girls," Cedrella said reproachfully, vanishing the rest of the food before Andromeda could retaliate.

"So long as we keep our magic righteous," Dorea continued, "the Ministry has no power over us. Within our family, our blood, the coven's word is law. Our enemies fall to us first to be dealt with. The Ministry won't intrude on our business. Too many of those men are too superstitious for their own good. Our power would protect our families, our children, and we could . . . We could be a community. Together we could repair the damage that our family has caused, and we can change Wizarding Britain. We can make it better."

"Wait," Enid interjected, still looking more than concerned with things that were not being said. "If this is such an amazing thing, why aren't there more family covens?"

"Because covens are only for women," Lucretia answered. "And wizards all want sons to carry on their names."

"Not to mention the fact that purebloods intermarrying over the generations has made getting pregnant quite difficult," Callidora added. "A coven needs at least thirteen to ritually begin; all must
be direct descendants from the same blood to create a coven before new witches can be added through blood ritual or bonding. Most families don't have enough living daughters."

"Even amongst the more fertile families," Cedrella said. "The Weasleys haven't had a daughter born to them in seven generations. Not until my little Ginny was born."

"There are negatives as well." Dorea knew that she needed to be as truthful as possible to make this work. "As mentioned earlier, destroying the coven is as simple as killing enough of us to take the number below thirteen. Not only that, but we have to be of one purpose. There cannot be strife amongst us in our craft." Her gaze settled first on Cassie, who sighed dramatically and finished her glass of wine. "We must put to rest these petty arguments between us."

"Petty?!" Enid raised her brows. "Their sister and her nephew," she said, pointing at Andromeda, Narcissa, and Camilla, "tortured my nephew and his wife. They're in St. Mungo's and will likely never leave." She pulled a silk handkerchief from the small purse on her lap and dabbed at her eyes. "Our poor Neville."

"But they did not!" Dorea snapped, her eyes flashing a violent shade of purple. "We are not enemies! Our enemies are the wizards and witches that murdered our children in cold blood during a war based on something as utterly ridiculous as blood status! Voldemort murdered my son, and Dumbledore—" She stopped mid-sentence when there was a collective gasp. Looking down at her clenched fist, she realised that she had silently and wandlessly summoned fire. Shaking out her hand, the red flames covering her skin vanished, and she took several slow breaths to calm herself.

"You all right, love?" Belina asked with a raised brow. Everyone else in the room was too shocked to speak.

"Fine," Dorea said stiffly. "It's just a side effect."

Cedrella cleared her throat to get Dorea's attention. When purple eyes met her stare, she breathed out quickly, but managed to whisper, "Dumbledore? What about Dumbledore?"

"He's hidden my grandson in the Muggle world with what I believe could be Lily's relatives," Dorea said. "And I want to find him."

"I knew it!" Theia shouted. "The Prophet said as much, but I knew that Dumbledore had hidden away Harry Potter! What for? And Muggle relatives? What about us? We're his family, aren't we? Look how many Blacks would've taken the boy in!"

Callidora nodded firmly, looking indignant on Dorea's behalf. "Your James and Frank were good friends. I know my daughter-in-law would have gladly brought up your grandson. Augusta might have been grieving her son, but she would not have turned away a boy in need of a family. Enid has no children of her own; she could have taken him in just as easily."

"Albus Dumbledore wouldn't put Harry Potter in the hands of the Black family," Belina said with a loud scoff. "Has anyone forgotten that we were all sorted Slytherin? That man wears Hogwarts House prejudice like the rest of us wear robes."

Lucretia shook her head. "I'm unclear as to why your grandson's welfare was put in Dumbledore's hands in the first place," she said, looking at Dorea. "What right does the headmaster of a school have to interfere in the life of a child who is not a student in his care?"

"What right did he have to enlist children to fight his war?" Cedrella said. "Your nephews were barely out of Hogwarts when they went to fight Voldemort at Dumbledore's request. My daughter-
in-law was destroyed when her little brothers died."

Lucretia nodded, returning her attention to Dorea. "Was Dumbledore named guardian in your son's will?"

"I don't know," Dorea said, taking a seat and sighing as she rubbed her tired eyes. "I no longer have access to the Potter vaults, and I assume that's where the will is. You are correct, however. If he was not named in their will, he had no right to interfere. Granted, the Ministry might have made a right —"

"Fuck up?" Cassie supplied.

Dorea tiredly laughed. "Indeed. But still . . ."

"We don't have thirteen," Belina blurted out. When everyone turned and looked at her, she shrugged. "What? I'm just pointing out the obvious. There are only eleven of us here."

"Ginevra would qualify," Cedrella offered proudly. "But you have to have a wand to swear a coven oath, and she's only five."

Andromeda sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose when Dorea looked at her. "My Nymphadora is thirteen," she said. "Although, there is the issue of blood. I don't know much of covens, but I do know the basis of a family coven is Blood Magic."

"The opening of a family coven requires a blood oath," Lucretia confirmed. "You offer in sacrifice a bit of your magic, your Houses, your bonds, and your blood to enter the circle. A silver dagger is used to open your palm for the oath. The dagger is passed to every witch until they've all spilt blood on the blade, at which point it is melted down to form protective amulets, signifying the witch's membership."

Belina suddenly grinned. "I could weave some interesting spell work into those amulets. The power the ritual would cause could be used to make—"

"It's not the magic Andromeda's worried about," Camilla said, cutting Belina off.

"You would all cut yourselves with a dagger covered in the blood of a half-blood child," Andromeda said, daring anyone in the room to grimace in horror. Most did not look bothered, though a few seemed uneasy. The long-term effects of being raised in bigotry and hatred.

"That won't matter," Dorea said with a hard gaze. "No one enters this coven with blood prejudice. One of the missions for this coven will be to eradicate such hatred in our society. We will be a beacon for others to follow."

"But . . . Toujours Pur," Narcissa whispered, looking torn and confused. "And . . . I married into a family that—"

"We're not forcing you to marry your only son to a Muggle," Cassie interjected, rolling her eyes. "Mother of Merlin, you just need not say Mudblood or flinch when a Muggle-born gets too close to you. Just leave them be, if they bother you, but keep quiet about it. They're not the filthy things we were told as children. Hell, most of the Muggle-born men I've slept with know more ways to make a woman come than almost any wizard I've ever met with few exceptions."

The smug look on Andromeda's face said enough.

"Always Pure," Dorea said, glancing at Narcissa. "Pure blood, or pure craft? You decide. You all
decide for yourselves, but . . . you should know that I can't do this without you. My grandson, Harry Potter, is out there somewhere. Hidden from the magical world that he was born into. He supposedly defeated Voldemort, but where was a body? What if Voldemort is still out there waiting to return to start another war? Are we to stand by, while Albus Dumbledore uses children barely out of Hogwarts as his own personal army again? How many sons and daughters do we have to lose while we wait for wizards and a corrupt Ministry to take action? I say that Voldemort is an enemy of the House of Black, and I will stand to bleed him dry and burn him alive should he dare to return."

Cassie stood up and looped her arm through Dorea's. "I stand by my sister."

The Longbottoms rose from their seats as well. "His followers too," Callidora said, her arm hooked through Enid's as though she were trying to prevent her from running off, just in case. "Should anyone rise to follow him or his path, they are an enemy of our House. Should those convicted of war crimes and marked with his insignia ever step foot out of Azkaban, the coven will seek justice."

Dorea nodded in agreement just as Andromeda stood to join the others, soon followed by Belina and Camilla, who shook hands, putting their own feud to rest. Theia, Cedrella, and Lucretia joined the group as well.

Lucretia made eye contact with Cassie and cleared her throat. "If we practice Sex Magic, you keep your hands off of my husband."

"Only during rituals?" Cassie sarcastically asked, hissing when Dorea elbowed her in the side. "I wasn't serious! Keep your silly little husband; I lost my taste for gingers years ago." Lucretia smirked and reached a hand out to Cassie, who sighed and shook it.

When everyone turned to look at Narcissa, she straightened her spine and gently rose from her seat. "*Toujours Pur,*" she said. "Craft. May our magic be always pure."

Cassie squeezed Dorea's hand tightly.

"We're still short one," Enid pointed out. "Even with Andromeda's girl, we're only twelve."

Dorea sighed, burden weighing heavily on her shoulders. "You leave the thirteenth to me."

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**January 10th, 1987**

**Hogsmeade - Hog's Head**

It had taken the promise that Cassie would not be in attendance—and a decent amount of imported Bulgarian firewhisky that she found in Arcturus's wine cellar—to get Aberforth to make the arrangements. The ornery man had let her into the pub with minimal complaints once she had passed over the case of liquor, watching as he pulled open one bottle with his teeth only to pour it into a large silver bowl on the floor.

"Cheers," he said, toasting Beatrice the goat, who began lapping greedily from the dish. "Private room's up the stairs and on the left. She's waiting for you. Uppity thing. Asked too many questions for my liking."

"I imagine she's quite curious. And you made certain that—?"

"Your business and her business ain't none of mine. Nor anyone else's," he confirmed before sitting down on a chair behind the bar and drinking deeply from the bottle.

Dorea slowly made her way up the stairs, doing her best to keep calm considering this truly was the
linchpin in all of her plans, thus far. If the meeting went poorly, she would have to reconfigure everything, including Sirius's potential release and safety, as well as finding and retrieving Harry. Dorea needed a powerful thirteenth, and one who would understand where she was coming from as a mother.

Despite not being a mother herself, Dorea knew that the witch had a mother's heart.

Opening the door to the private room that Aberforth had set aside for her, she smiled at the immediate look of shock on her guest's face.

"Hello, Minerva."
January 10th, 1987
Hogsmeade - Hog's Head

It had taken a lengthy conversation—and the willingness to have several charms performed on her—before Dorea was able to convince Minerva of her identity. Even still, she had agreed to wait in the room for at least an hour to prove that she was not using Polyjuice Potion. While they waited, Dorea asked Aberforth for some food, to which he grumbled under his breath about how his entire life had been upturned by witches, and he cursed the day he ever came across Cassiopeia Black.

When the hour was up, Minerva stood and embraced Dorea tightly, whispering, "We lost so many."

"I know. I've been told a great deal since I woke up several months ago."

Pulling away, Minerva irritably dabbed at her eyes before straightening her robes in a prim fashion. "Months," she muttered. "How has nobody heard of your return? The Daily Prophet would have been at your heels, the pesky vultures."

"I did not want Dumbledore to know," Dorea answered her.

Minerva's expression hardened, and she looked away angrily. "Oh, that man. He's brilliant, I know, and I'm sure we all owe him our lives for a multitude of things, but . . ." she said, sarcasm tinting her tone. "Forgive me. It's been a trying year."

Dorea reached out and took Minerva's hand. "I'm so sorry for your loss. I shared more than twenty years with my Charlus, and you only had three with . . ."

"Elphinstone," Minerva supplied, squeezing Dorea's hand tightly. "Wars make many widows, which was why I ignored his advances all those years until You-Know-Who was done with. When the world began to finally right itself, I marched straight into Elphinstone's office and demanded a date," she said with the smallest hint of a mischievous smile. "Poor man. I made him put up with a great deal, I'm afraid."

"Wizards are willing to work for women that they deem worthwhile," Dorea said, letting go of Minerva's hand to retake her seat. "I imagine you've read the Prophet this week?"

Minerva nodded and sat down as well. "Your brother and nephew. Should I offer condolences?"

"Only if you wish to tell it to the ether. I'll not accept any apologies from anyone over what happened there. Pollux was a vicious creature from birth, and he raised his son to be a hateful monster. Arcturus will be a good Patriarch in the short time that we'll have him."

Raising a brow at the words, Minerva's eyes widened just a fraction. Before she could ask any questions, however, Dorea cut her off. "You've known Albus for many years, Minerva. Care to tell me why the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot did not demand a fair trial for those arrested after the end of the war? I read his statement in the paper, of course. It might have made sense, had Albus been a casual observer, but we both know that's not true. He was recruiting for his little band of vigilantes that he called his 'Order' long before I fell ill. I know, because he asked Charlus and me for help, and we adamantly refused."

"Why did you refuse?" Minerva inquired.
"Because unlike the majority of the Wizarding world, I do not and never have believed that Albus Dumbledore pisses Felix Felicis," she answered irritably. "Charlus and I had the property in Godric's Hollow, you know. Though we lived at the manor most of our lives, the cottage was a lovely little escape, and I always found the village to be charming. We had a delightful neighbour who remembered Albus and Aberforth when they were much younger, and she had quite a few stories to tell. Let me just say that with Dark Lords on the rise, I would not put Albus Dumbledore at the head of any army meant to end the usurpation of our society and way of life. He is not, no matter how many medals they give him, Merlin reborn."

"Agreed," Minerva said, pulling a flask from the pocket of her robes. When Dorea raised a brow at her, Minerva shrugged. "I don't have classes to teach today." She took a long drink before passing the flask to Dorea, who raised it in a toast to her friend before sipping at the whisky.

Her lips puckered as she swallowed. "Mmm . . . Muggle?"

Minerva nodded. "My father occasionally drank the stuff, though he'd deny it to his last breath. Found a small bottle next to a bible after he passed, if you can imagine," she said fondly, the look of nostalgia in her eyes.

"Why is Sirius in Azkaban, Minerva?" Dorea asked plainly, getting back to the matter at hand. "Dumbledore had the power to force the issue. He'd known both of my boys since they were sorted, in his own House, mind. Yet, I wake to find out that Sirius is in prison, James is dead, and the only person that Dumbledore spoke for in the end was a Marked Death Eater that now teaches children how to brew potions."

Minerva looked up, meeting Dorea's angry gaze. "Severus Snape was . . . There aren't many excuses, but if you can think of a good one, he had it, I assure you," she said with a sigh. "He's also no less Marked than he was before the war ended. Poor lad is filled with guilt and for good reason. I don't know the extent of what happened, but despite saving him from Azkaban, Severus hates Albus; you can see it in his eyes. There's something more there, and I wish I knew what." She removed the pins from her tight bun, letting down half of her hair and rubbing at her temples to relieve the headache she was getting from the stress of it all. "As for why Albus chose Severus and not Sirius, well . . . Severus was not James and Lily's Secret-Keeper."

Dorea's eyes widened. "A Fidelius Charm!? Why? My son would have rather fought than hid away, I know that much! Why did James need to hide behind one of those? And why on earth would Sirius be their Secret-Keeper? Everyone knew how close they were. Brothers!"

"I know," Minerva said, shaking her head. "Which was why when James and Lily . . . I couldn't believe it myself, but he found them, Dorea. You-Know-Who knew exactly where to find them, which meant that Sirius had to have told him about the cottage. It's the only way. Albus insisted that he had cast the charm himself. Sirius was their Secret-Keeper."

"Something isn't right," Dorea insisted. "I'll find the truth one way or another."

"And in the meantime?"

Dorea looked up. "Where's my grandson?"

Minerva's normally hard expression softened into one of sadness. "I don't know. Albus was adamant, Dorea, that Harry be hidden. I didn't know why, but he sent me to watch over a house. I'd never been there before, but I sat on that damned brick wall all day long and watched them—the Muggles. Terrible people. A boy of their own, kicking and screaming and fussing about like none I've ever seen, and keep in mind how many students I've put up with over the years. Wretched boy. I didn't
want to leave your grandson there," she swore, "but Albus already had everything in motion. Convinced me that Harry's fame would be a hindrance in our world, and he'd have no chance at a normal childhood. The press would hound him, and You-Know—Voldemort's followers would hunt him. When we returned to the castle after leaving him with the Muggles, Albus knew I was reconsidering my stance."

"He Obliviated you?" Dorea realised, horrified.

Minerva nodded. "I agreed, of course, when he convinced me that my knowledge of the location could be a danger. Hagrid had it taken from his mind as well. We know Harry lives with Muggles, and that is all. I couldn't pinpoint the house if you put it in front of my face."

"He took the location but not the memory? Why?"

Scoffing, Minerva took another sip from her flask. "Because, regardless of his actions, Albus Dumbledore believes he acts for the good of everyone. Taking the location of Harry's whereabouts was his way of protecting the boy, but to remove the memory entirely would have been a gross violation of my mind, consenting or otherwise."

Dorea contemplated the information for a long moment before she returned her attention to Minerva. "I don't blame you. You looked after my boys for seven years, Minerva. You might as well have been another mother to them, and don't think I don't appreciate that. You would not put a child in harm's way, I know that. However, I hope that whatever lingering guilt you might have will sway your decision."

"About?" Minerva asked suspiciously.

"I'm creating a family coven. Arcturus will step down as Patriarch, and the Black witches will take control of the family magic, legacy, and status."

Eyes wide, Minerva stood up in shock only to pace back and forth before sitting back down. "Are you . . . Dorea! There hasn't been a family coven in—"

"Three hundred years," Dorea finished with a smile. "And I have exactly thirteen witches to start it. Well, twelve, actually." Her eyes flashed as she settled her gaze on Minerva.

Minerva's mouth fell open. "You can't possibly . . . Dorea, my father was a Muggle!"

"One of our members is the child of a Muggle-born," Dorea countered. "I don't see what difference that makes."

"I am not a Black!"

"Aren't you?" Dorea asked, raising a brow.

"My mother was Isobel Ross," Minerva clarified.

Dorea grinned. "Yes, Isobel Ross, daughter of Archibald Ross, son of Chester Ross, who was the son of Everett Ross. Except Isobel's mother, your namesake, was . . ."

Minerva pursed her lips. "Athena Black."

"Athena Black," Dorea echoed.

Looking peeved, as though a great secret of hers had been discovered—because hadn't it?—Minerva
narrowed her eyes. "Not many people know that."

"We have tapestries for these things," Dorea said smugly, but then softened her gaze to one of understanding. "I know you didn't advertise your lineage because of how the Ross family treated your mother for marrying a Muggle. There was certainly no reason to believe that the Blacks would have reacted differently. If anything, you would have been treated worse. If you ask me, I think it's time we put an end to that sort of behaviour. You are our blood, our family, and that matters a great deal to me."

"What are you planning?"

"I plan to find my grandson, take him, and raise him with the protection of twelve other witches. I plan on using the power of my coven to erase the prejudice from my family and perhaps our society, free my son from prison, and ritually sacrifice anyone who dares to think that they can wage war with my blood again, be they Dark Lord, Minister for Magic, or Hogwarts Headmaster." When Minerva looked hesitant, Dorea took her hand once more. "Come with me to find Harry, and then make the decision yourself."

"I told you, I don't know where the Muggles live."

"Do you know where Arabella Figg lives?"

Minerva's mouth fell open. "Arabella Figg?" Understanding fell across her features instantaneously. "He left that boy with Muggles, and his only contact is a powerless squib?!"

Dorea sighed in relief. An angry Minerva was a useful Minerva.

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**Wisteria Walk - Little Whinging**

They had to act straightaway since Minerva needed to be back in class the following morning, and it would not do to rouse Dumbledore's suspicions. As lovely as Minerva was, it was easy to tell when she was annoyed with a person, let alone enraged. Dorea assumed that Dumbledore's curtains would be clawed to bits the very moment that his deputy head returned to Hogwarts.

With Minerva's help—and Cassie in tow—they located Arabella Figg's house with ease. The invitation inside the home was easily acquired as well, since Arabella remembered that Cassie had been schoolmates with her sister, Miranda. Tea was served, and Dorea did her best to hold her temper and nerves as she listened to Arabella explain how she had been placed as Dumbledore's ears and eyes in Surrey, watching Harry Potter from a distance.

"Those Muggles," Arabella said emphatically as she sipped from a chipped cup. "I met Petunia on a walk once. Had to make excuses, don't you know? Pretended to admire her silly flowerbed, and God, she does love to talk about how lovely her flowers are. Ridiculously shallow woman; and she's a gossip too. I imagine she has a great many things to tell people about me," she said snidely, putting her teacup down just as one of her cats jumped into her lap.

The beasts—that were at least half-kneazle—had all circled around Minerva the very moment that she stepped foot in the door. The witch spent the majority of the time, so far, trying to shoo them off of her without hissing.

"When did you see Harry last?" Dorea asked, wringing her napkin in her hand until it was torn to pieces.

"Six months back," Arabella replied. "I only see him for myself once a year. When the Dursley boy
celebrates his birthday, they drop Harry off at my house for the day, and I'm to watch him. They
don't pay me much," she said, her lip curling in annoyance. "Not that they don't have it. Harry's good
with my cats, though. Very polite and quiet. Small thing, he is. I didn't have children of my own, and
I don't have many guests, so I'm not exactly sure how big children are supposed to be at that age.
'Course, his cousin's a right big... Well, you'll see, I imagine." She finally smiled. "Oh, it's good to
know Dumbledore's finally come to his senses. With family in the magical world, there's no need for
little Harry to stay with the Dursleys."

Cassie smiled and reached over to scratch the head of the cat in Arabella's lap. "Isn't it wonderful?"
"We're so very excited. We do wish that Albus could have come with us, but he's such a
busy man, you know."

Arabella nodded. "I know it. Only have time to see him maybe a few times a year. Busy man, that."

"Thank you so much, Mrs Figg," Dorea said as she stood from the sofa, eager to get the smell of cats
and cabbage out of her nostrils. "We'd best head over now."

The witches walked the few streets over to Privet Drive once they had transfigured their clothing into
that of Muggle attire. Cassie was more than familiar with what was in style, though she had chosen
to hold back, favouring a more conservative look for each of them. "You let me do all the talking,"
she insisted. "Those blood wards Dumbledore set up might be Death Eater specific, but we would be
stupid to think we could magically force our way in without him being notified in one way or
another. If you have to use magic, don't use it on them or as a way to get inside. I'm not in the mood
to get arrested again for Muggle-baiting."

"Muggle-baiting?" Dorea asked.

"No you don't," Cassie said in a singsong voice. "You've already too much blackmail on me for my
own good. I'll not be recalling the sixties, thank you ever so much."

"Is this it?" Dorea asked Minerva as they approached number four. The homes on the street all
looked alike; a boring row of conformity that differed only in the types of flowers in the beds, and
the numbers on the houses.

Minerva glared at the house angrily, her eye flickering to the brick wall. "Must be," she said. "Not
that I recall."

"Look alive, ladies," Cassie said as she straightened her shoulders and slipped her wand up the
sleeve of the ivory cardigan that she wore over the periwinkle housedress. Minerva and Dorea
mimicked her just as she knocked lightly on the front door.

There was a thunderous sound coming from inside, and they could hear the slamming of a few doors
as well. The curtains beside the front window fluttered before the door was opened to reveal a pudgy
child with red cheeks.

"Well, good day to you, young man," Cassie said with a simpering smile. "Would you happen to be
the man of the house?" Clearly out of breath, the boy gasped three times before ultimately just
shaking his head. "Is your mother home, darling?"

"Dudleykins?"

Minerva dug her nails into Dorea's arm to keep her calm as she stiffened at the sight of the Muggle
woman.

"Petunia Dursley?" Cassie asked. "So good to finally meet you, my dear. Is this your son? Oh, what
a handsome young man." She treated the boy with another flashing smile, going so far as to fake a blush. "Forgive me, how terribly rude not to introduce myself."

She extended a gloved hand to Petunia, who was flattered into silence as she approached the door, one hand on her son's shoulders prominently and proudly on display, as she shook Cassie's hand with the other. Cassie held back a smirk when she watched Petunia's gaze linger on her diamond bracelet.

"Cassandra Black," she said, changing her name just enough that it sounded Muggle. "But you, dear, can call me Cassie. May I introduce my dear friends, Minnie and Dory. We're here from the Ladies Society of London. There's been talk of expanding and creating a local branch here in Surrey. We have been asking around in regards to membership, and your name came up quite a bit, dear."

"It did?" Petunia asked, her eyes lighting up greedily. "The Ladies Society—Oh! How wonderful! I should tell you, there is much need for such a thing here in Little Whinging. I don't like to gossip, but the class of some people has just gone downhill these days if you ask me."

"Then you, my dear, are exactly what we're looking for! We need a good, upstanding woman to help lead this new, very exclusive club. Oh!" Cassie very nearly squealed. "Is that Victorian mahogany?"

Petunia stepped to the side, pushing her son out of the way and silently inviting Cassie inside to continue her praise. "The table?" she asked, trying not to look confused.

"The chair, dearest!" Cassie said, running her gloved hand over the shined wood. "Dory, is this Victorian mahogany?" Before Dorea could even think of how to respond to that, Cassie continued, "Did you know, I asked my husband Bertrand to replace our old things with Victorian mahogany, and he's such a sentimental fool. Couldn't bear to part with his mother's things. Petunia, dear, you are so lucky to have a man who spoils you so."

"Vernon was just promoted," Petunia said smugly, basking under the attention. "Won't you all please sit? I'll fetch us some tea and we can discuss the Society some more? I already have such wonderful ideas!"

Minerva and Dorea quietly stepped into the house as Petunia left the room. Her son lingered in the doorway for another moment before shutting the door and then plopping himself in front of the television, his nose nearly pressed against the screen.

Dorea's gaze flickered over the nearly spotless room. It felt confined and claustrophobic, and everything was in its proper place to the point that it all looked staged for a portrait of some kind. Expensive-looking artwork hung on the walls, though it was hardly pleasant to look at. Aside from the art, silver framed photographs lined the walls and the majority of other surfaces; the fat little boy was in every picture.

There was not a shred of evidence that Harry lived there.

Petunia returned with tea and immediately went into the story of her life, always squinting her eyes and grinning that widely when she was clearly lying. Dorea picked up on the tell when Petunia informed them that she was an only child, the apple of her parents' eyes. Her "handsome" husband was apparently on track to one day take over the company that he worked for, though Dorea very much doubted that.

"And you, dearest," Cassie said, leaning to the side to pinch at "Duddy's" cheeks. "An only child just like your mother?"
Dudley turned and looked at his mother, whose expression tightened. After the most subtle shake of Petunia's head, Dudley smiled. "It's just me."

Dorea stood angrily, and Cassie rose from her seat as well. "Oh, Dory, love, are you still feeling faint?" When Petunia stood, looking horrified as though Dorea could be sick all over her carpet, Cassie turned and whispered, "She's going through the change."

Petunia flushed—embarrassed for her guest—and gestured to the hallway. "The powder room is just this way. Duddykins, dearest, would you show mummy's new friends the garden in the back. Oh, the flowers aren't quite yet in bloom, what with the weather, but you simply must see my new patio furniture."

"You go on ahead, Mrs Dursley," Dorea encouraged. "I just need to splash a bit of cold water on my face."

"You poor thing," Petunia said condescendingly. "I'm so glad that I am much too young for such a hardship."

Dorea forced a smile before slipping into the bathroom. When Cassie's loud squeals of feigned excitement were shut out by the closing of a door, she stepped back out into the hallway and pulled the wand from her sleeve.

"Homenum Revelio."

A light emerged from her wand and hovered in the air for a moment before moving swiftly through the hallway, turning a corner, and splitting into five different balls of light. Four headed for the back door.

"Finite!" Dorea said, aiming her wand at the four. When they vanished, she turned her attention to the fifth, which circled the staircase until it disappeared through a cupboard door.

Her heart raced in her chest as she approached the door, absolutely terrified that she would find not a boy but a body. Arabella had not seen Harry in six months, and both Petunia and her son claimed that there were no other children in residence. What if Harry had died? What if . . .

She went to open the door, only to realise that it was locked from the outside. Pulling on the lock until she heard it click, Dorea slowly opened the door.

Inside, the magical ball of light hovered mid-air, illuminating the cupboard. In the far back corner of the small cupboard, sitting on a makeshift bed and curled beneath a large spider web . . . was a boy.
Dorea had to school her expression, referring back to every lesson she had ever learned from her parents and friends in Slytherin on how to hide her true intentions and emotions. She swallowed back a choked sob when she saw Harry's mop of unruly black hair that looked just like his father's. Something tight, and horrible, and gut-wrenchingly painful pinched inside of her chest. She wanted to cry, and scream, and pull the boy into her arms and never let go, but he looked absolutely terrified. Huddled in the corner with his knees tucked to his chest, Harry's eyes were closed tight as though she would not be able to see him if he could not see her. His feet were bare and dirty, tiny toes peeking out from beneath the frayed hem of a pair of jeans that were at least two sizes too large for him. The shirt, likewise, was too big; it had several stains, two holes near the collar, and hung off of one shoulder.

He was so very small.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she whispered, at the same time silently cancelling the Revealing Charm. The light vanished, submerging the cupboard into darkness. When her eyes readjusted, Harry looked like he had relaxed a bit, but not enough. She pushed down the blinding rage that stemmed from the fact that she felt the need to clarify to the boy that she was not a danger to him.

As a child, Dorea and Charlus had tried to educate James on the threat of strangers, but the boy had ignored them, walking through the world with blissful ideals thinking that every adult had the best of intentions. Harry, however, was practically shaking in her presence, despite being in his own home. His own . . . cupboard!

Depending on the circumstances, Dorea made a silent vow that these Muggles would suffer for a very, very long time.

Already knowing the answer, but wanting to reach him without causing a fright, Dorea quietly asked, "What's your name, sweetheart?"

There was a long moment of silence before he asked, in nearly a whisper, "Are you a teacher?"

Dorea raised a brow in curiosity. "Why do you want to know that, dear?"

"I'm allowed to talk to teachers." She smiled softly, watching as he worried the hem of his shirt between his small fingers. Without prompting, thankfully, he continued to speak. "When I'm at school," he said, pausing for a long moment before finishing, "teachers call me Harry. Sometimes, they call me Mr Potter."

When I'm at school, Dorea repeated in her head. Swallowing thickly and nervous over the specification, she cleared her throat and asked, "And what is your name when you're here at home?"

His brows furrowed. "Boy."

Unable to control her magic, Dorea winced as the light fixture in the hallway behind her exploded with a loud pop! She pushed herself further into the cupboard, pulling the door a bit behind her. There was no standing room, so she hovered in the doorway, stuck between a makeshift bed and the
"Is this your . . . room?" When he said nothing, she sighed and took several slow deep breaths. "It's very lovely." Her gaze landed on the spider webs hanging above his head. "I had spiders in my room when I was a little girl. Big ones called tarantulas. Mine were very special, though. They glowed in the dark."

Slowly, Harry lifted his face from where it had been pressed against his knees and opened his eyes. The barest hint of light reflected back the most beautiful colour of green that Dorea had ever seen—like emeralds.

"This is my cupboard," Harry muttered, "and those are my spiders. They're not really mine, though. They just come and visit sometimes."

"Would you like your own spiders?" Dorea asked him with a smile. "And . . . And a bigger room?"

"A room?"

She nodded, exhaling a shaky breath to keep calm. "As big as you'd like. Harry, I'd like you to come with me. Would you like to leave this house?"

He looked nervous and confused, squeezing his knees closer to his chest. "I'm not supposed to go anywhere other than school. I have to come right home."

"This is not a home, Harry," Dorea whispered. "This is not your home. Your home is with family. Harry, I'm your grand—"

"No!" Petunia shrieked. "Don't go in there!"

Harry flinched at the high-pitch and shrunk further back into the corner of the cupboard.

"You're not in trouble, Harry," Dorea promised as she stood upright. She gently pushed the door behind her, leaving it slightly ajar as she turned and levelled a withering glare at Petunia Dursley. Cassie and Minerva stood behind the Muggle woman, both looking at the cupboard with horrified curiosity. The boy, Dudley, wore a nervous expression.

"Finite," Dorea said, cancelling the transfigurations on her clothes. Her petite housedress lengthened and turned black, and her yellow cardigan fell to the floor—as though it had been rolled up into the shortened length—and changed to dark green robes.

Petunia's face paled and her mouth fell open in horror. "You . . . You're . . . You're one of them! Leave my house! Get out! Get out!" She reached out, pulling Dudley into her arms protectively. "Don't you touch my baby!"

Cassie snorted. "Trust me, love, it's not that boy we've come for." She side-stepped Petunia, her own transfigured clothes falling away into their original form. Petunia gaped at her, tugging Dudley ever closer. "He's in there?" Cassie asked her sister. At Dorea's firm nod, Cassie peeked inside to see the boy staring worriedly up at her. "Well aren't you a handsome little thing," she said with a bright smile. "You don't even look very sticky."

"Cassie!" Dorea reprimanded.

Turning to look at her sister, Cassie frowned. "What? Children are notoriously sticky. It's why I never had any of my own."
"Mrs Dursley," Dorea said, returning her attention to the Muggle, "I'm sure you will be delighted to
know that Harry Potter will no longer be in your charge. He is coming home to his family." At
Petunia's confused expression, Dorea took a step forward. "That boy is my grandson, Mrs Dursley."

"Think of Azkaban," Minerva cautioned. "Don't do anything reckless, Dorea. No matter how greatly
it is deserved," she said, jaw clenched tightly; her eyes flashing dangerously when Petunia and
Dudley dared to look at her.

"Believe me, I am," Dorea said, her teeth actually bared. "Were I a Gryffindor, this woman would
already be burning alive." Petunia let out a great sob, holding onto her son so tightly that the boy was
gasping for breath. "However, that would be a very quick punishment. I look forward to dragging
this out over an entire lifetime."

Before anyone could say more, the front door opened. "I'm home!"

"VERNON!" Petunia screamed.

Dorea shot Cassie a look. "Take care of it."

The blonde vanished down the hallway.


Cassie returned a moment later. "Everyone's secure in here," she said with a sweet smile. "Perhaps
we could all gather in the living room for a nice conversation? I believe one is greatly overdue. You
see, we're taking Harry with us, but before we do, I think his grandmother would be very interested
to know what his life has been like here. So you're going to answer any questions we have,
truthfully." She leant close to Petunia, pressing their cheeks together as she whispered in her ear,
"And if you lie, we'll know because we're witches."

Petunia shuddered at the word and let out another small sob.

"And if you're caught lying," Cassie said with a chipper tone that did not mask the threat in her voice
in the slightest, "I will turn into a bird and peck your eyes out."

Minerva looked intrigued. "You're an Animagus?"

Cassie smiled. "Registered in France. Sometimes I just want to shift and disappear into my form
forever. Animals have it easy. No need to have boring conversations." She reached out and tugged at
one of Petunia's locks of hair. "No need to pretend to like someone when you really just want to
claw away at their flesh until—"

"That's enough, Cassie."

"Just take the boy and go!" Petunia screeched.

"Scream again, and see what happens," Cassie threatened under her breath. "Send your son upstairs.
We'll not put the blame of the parents on the child. We're not monsters."

Petunia suddenly looked as though she were not quite ready to part with what was obviously her
human shield. At Dorea's narrowed gaze, however, she released her son. "Duddydums, listen to
Mummy, and go upstairs to your room until we're all done having a chat, all right?"

Dudley looked eager to get away and he darted for the opening in the hall but then stopped and
turned around. "Mummy . . . which one of my rooms should I go to?"
Dorea's eyes widened in anger, and two more light fixtures shattered.

Entirely unaware of how Cassie had done it without using magic, Dorea could not help but be slightly amused by the position that Vernon Dursley had found himself in. The man was tied up with electronic wires and flipped on his back like a pig ready for roasting; he also had a sock stuffed in his mouth. The fact that he was missing one shoe and sock from his left foot made her grimace in disgust.

Harry had been coaxed out of the cupboard with promises of sweets and reassurances that he was not in trouble, nor in any type of danger. When he still looked hesitant, Dorea promised him that she would not leave him alone with the Dursleys ever again, so there would be no future punishments from them either. He refused to take her hand but clung to the fabric of her robes as they walked into the living room.

Cassie was sitting on a chair, tapping the ashes of a cigarette into the wood that was most likely not Victorian mahogany. On the coffee table in front of the sofa where Petunia sat next to her hog-tied husband, was an angry-looking tabby cat, swishing its tail against the glass, hissing and snarling whenever either Muggle made a noise.

Harry stared, wide-eyed, at his uncle and was unable to stop the small giggle that escaped him. Vernon tried to speak around the sock in his mouth, glaring his beady little eyes at the boy. At the sound, Harry gasped and covered his mouth but relaxed when all Dorea did was laugh with him.

When the cat turned and narrowed its eyes at her, Dorea sighed. "Now, Harry, you should never tie up people like this on your own, am I clear?"

Still looking slightly amused, if still a bit nervous, Harry nodded.

"Come and have a seat, darling." Dorea sat down on a sofa opposite Petunia and Vernon, putting all of her attention on Harry. "Did you overhear any of the conversation I had with your aunt a few minutes ago?" When he shrugged one shoulder, she sighed again. James had been a constant chatter box at this age, even with strangers. "I'm your grandmother, dearest. My name is Dorea Potter. I'm your father's mother."

Harry turned and looked at his aunt and uncle, his brow furrowing. "You said . . ." He stopped and then returned his attention to Dorea. "They said . . . my parents died."

Reaching out, Dorea ran her fingers through his hair, frowning when he flinched at first, only to lean into the touch a moment later. Taking another chance, she slowly put her arms around him and pulled him into her lap. He was stiff, shoulders bunched up to his ears, but he began to relax when she gently hugged him close.

"Yes," she whispered. "Your parents did die, and that's very sad. I miss your father very much. He was my son, and I loved him more than absolutely anything in the world. Would you like me to tell you about him?"

Harry nodded.

Dorea felt a weight lift from her chest. "Would you like to see where your father grew up? If you'd like, you can even sleep in his old room. It's a very big room. Larger than this one we're sitting in."

Eyes wide in awe, Harry turned and looked at her, mouth open. "I get . . . It's that big?" he asked in shock. At her nod, he swallowed nervously. "How long will I stay with you?" he asked, side-eying his aunt and uncle, both of whom refused to make eye contact with him.
"Forever, if you'd like," Dorea answered him with a smile, reaching out and taking one of his small hands in her own and kissing it affectionately. He looked surprised by the gesture, but didn't flinch away like he'd done before. Looking down at his hands, Dorea frowned. "Harry, what are these from?"

Harry curled his hand into a fist and pulled it back. "Sorry," he said automatically.

Cassie glared at the Dursleys, and Petunia began to whimper in fear.

"What are you sorry for, my love?" Dorea asked.

Harry tucked his chin to his chest and whispered, "I burned the bacon again."

Dorea kept her expression soft when Harry returned his gaze to her, as though he were expecting some form of punishment over the reminder of his mistake. She instead kissed his forehead, her lips lingering just above the lightning-shaped scar on his skin. "Harry, say goodbye to your aunt and uncle. You won't be seeing them again."

Harry said nothing.

"Are we not going to question them?" Cassie asked.

"I know everything I need to know," Dorea said, looking at Petunia's terrified face. "Cassie, please instruct Mr and Mrs Dursley to take their child and go for a drive while we collect Harry's belongings. When they return, we will be gone, and they need never see any of us ever again."

Cassie frowned. "Excuse me? We're letting them go? These filthy Muggles have—" She stopped speaking when Dorea shot a look her way. Sighing dramatically, she reached over and tugged at the end of one wire, which loosened the others.

Vernon Dursley's limbs all fell from their bindings, his right foot hitting the edge of the coffee table with a loud thunk! He immediately pulled the sock from his mouth. Red-faced, he made to shout, but the tabby let out a low growling noise of warning. Instead, he swallowed, cleared his throat, and said, "Petunia, get Dudley. We're going to visit my sister."

"That would be best," Cassie said with a bitter smile.

The Dursleys left the house, not even stopping once to look back at Harry. Once they were gone and the door was closed once more, the little boy whispered, "I don't have things. It's all Dudley's. Do I have to leave my clothes 'cause they're not mine?"

"You can wear these out, dear. We'll get you brand new clothes later on," Dorea promised. "You can wear these out, dear. We'll get you brand new clothes later on," Dorea promised. Now, we're going to be travelling for a bit, and you might get sick on the way there since it's far away and you've not travelled much." Pulling a phial from the pocket of her robes, she held it out to him. "This will make you very sleepy, but you won't get sick. I promise."

Harry stared at the potion anxiously for a long time, only reaching out for it when Cassie offered, "You can have pudding later if you drink it." It didn't take long for him to fall asleep in Dorea's arms once he swallowed the draught.

"You're handling this better than expected," Cassie said thoughtfully.

Dorea's hands were shaking, and her voice was barely above a whisper when she said, "I need to get out of here as soon as possible before I set the house on fire with accidental magic."
Minerva swiftly shifted back into human form and frowned looking down at the sleeping boy. "I could happily murder those Muggles. Damn Albus Dumbledore to hell," she hissed angrily. "Harry will need a full health evaluation as soon as possible, and St. Mungo's is out of the question."

"Can Poppy be trusted?" Cassie asked.

Sighing, Minerva shook her head. "I would trust her with the welfare of any child, but if she left Hogwarts, it would rouse suspicion."

"Send word to Cedrella," Dorea told her sister. "She studied to be a Healer long ago. At the very least she still knows Diagnostic Charms."

"As many grandchildren as she has . . ." Cassie began to say, but stopped when she saw the look of anguish in her sister's eyes.

"Salazar . . . He's too small. Look how thin." Dorea lifted Harry higher up into her arms, which should have been much more difficult than it was. Tugging at the large shirt he was wearing, she revealed bruises on his upper arms. They were small, and had no particular shape.

"Probably that other boy," Minerva suggested. "Two bedrooms for one child, and a cupboard for another. I admire your ability to let them walk out of this house, Dorea."

"Don't admire me too much. I plan on returning on them tenfold for what they've done to my grandson." In his sleep, Harry curled against her chest, relishing the warmth of her robes. "They had him for five years," she said, brushing black fringe away from his face. "Which means they will not know joy for the next fifty."

"Can't use magic on Muggles," Cassie reminded her.

Dorea pressed her cheek to the top of Harry's head and breathed in deep, rocking him slightly in her arms. "No. So I suppose we'll have to be creative then, won't we?"

Grinning excitedly, Cassie darted out of the room.

Minerva sighed, looking concerned. "We had better follow her. Merlin knows what she's up to."

When the two witches made it into the kitchen, the blonde was switching on every appliance she could reach, including the cooker.

When the flame burst through the small metal grate, Cassie smiled. "Oh goodness," she said dramatically, fanning her face with one hand and feigning distress. "All of these Muggle things . . . I'm so very confused." She took a frying pan that had been drying on a rack next to the sink and tossed it on the stove with a loud clang! Minerva's eyes widened when Cassie opened the refrigerator and pulled out a package of wrapped bacon and threw it onto the pan, paper and all.

"Burned the bacon," Dorea growled under her breath.

As Cassie disappeared into the next room, likely to plug as many cords into outlets as she could, Minerva looked over the cooker as the bacon and paper began to sizzle and smoke. "Sirius's antics at Hogwarts are making more sense by the minute."

"Found this upstairs," Cassie said as she returned, thrusting a stack of papers at Dorea. "Locating Charms are easy when you're searching for a name on paper. Learned that trick whilst studying for my N.E.W.T.s. Pretty much all the legal Muggle documents are there. Educational records, birth certificate, and what have you. There's also a letter from a meddling prick that we all know. Says
something about the wards on this house. They'll drop the second that it's not Harry's home, by the way," she said with a grin, adding, "or if there's not a home left here for him to return to."

When Cassie opened the door to the microwave oven, Minerva's eyes widened. "Cassiopeia."

Dorea raised a brow. "What? What's happening? What is that contraption?"

"We need to leave," Minerva encouraged as Cassie began sticking tins of soup inside the microwave. "Quickly."

Cassie looked back. "What? Does this do something?" she asked, batiking her eyes innocently. "You'll have to forgive me, I'm so inexperienced with Muggle doodahs and gizmos."

Speedily moving out the back door with Harry in her arms, Dorea looked back at Minerva. "Go to Hogwarts. Try to stay out of Dumbledore's path until I send word. If you're gone too long, he'll grow suspicious." Cassie stepped through the back door, a freshly lit cigarette in hand and a smug grin on her face. "You meet me in Gringotts."

Cassie tilted her head to the side with a grin. "Do you smell smoke?"

They all Disapparated away before any of them could see the fire.

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**Gringotts Wizarding Bank**

A private room had been given to the Black sisters, while the goblins took a small sample of Harry's blood. They needed to compare it with the vault security system since Albus Dumbledore was in possession of the physical key. While they waited for the goblins to return, Cedrella Weasley was guided into the room by a burly little goblin who was missing half his left ear.

"You did it," she whispered as she slowly approached Dorea and the sleeping child.

"Found him with his Muggle relatives," Cassie said for Dorea, who looked as though she were trying to grind her teeth into dust from the anger and stress building up inside of her.

"Set him down gently, face up and arms at his sides," Cedrella instructed, quietly passing a Calming Draught to Cassie and nodding her head toward Dorea with wide eyes. When Dorea finished making Harry comfortable on the leather sofa and stepped back, Cedrella began casting a multitude of Diagnostic Charms. "He's terribly underweight, Dorea. Were the Muggles poor?"

"Well off enough," Cassie said bitterly, putting the Calming Draught in Dorea's hand and directing it to her mouth. When her sister complied, swallowing the potion, Cassie looked at Cedrella and scoffed. "The Muggles had a boy of their own, you know. You should've seen the little beast. If Harry's underweight, it's because that boy took both servings at every meal for himself."

"Did you leave them alive?" Cedrella asked warily, lifting a brow as she made eye contact with Dorea, who was more likely to have a tell, seeing that Cassie was generally unashamed of her actions, murder included—no matter how deserved it might have been.

"For now," Dorea whispered. "I'll deal with the Muggles another time. My pressing concern is Harry."

"He has burns on his hands," Cedrella said, looking at each individual finger, one at a time. "Poor dear. To have gone through so much in so short a time."
When Dorea didn't speak again, only closing her eyes to clearly drown out the rising stress that was fighting the Calming Draught, Cedrella stepped back. "He'll need to be put on a variety of potions to build up his strength. Unless he can tell you what he's used to eating, I would start him on small portions. A treat would not go amiss, however. Might do him some good to be made happy with all these changes. The potions will help supplement any nutrition lost."

She sighed softly, reaching out to touch the boy's hair. "Handsome little thing, isn't he? I'll give you a Potion for Dreamless Sleep as well, in case of nightmares. He's young. He'll likely bounce back from whatever happened to him, but you're in for a rough start, Dorea."

"Luckily, she has us," Cassie said pointedly.

Cedrella inclined her head in agreement. "*Toujours Pur* and all that rot." When Cassie smirked in reply, she looked at Dorea once more. "We'll need to act fast."

Ragnok returned with a key in hand. "He's Harry Potter, all right," he said as though making a grand announcement. When none of the witches responded with relief—already knowing who the boy was—Ragnok huffed and held out the key to Dorea. "To the Potter vaults. I had your account manager take a look inside. Other than the sum put away for Harry Potter's education, everything has remained intact, including the will of James and Lily Potter." He held out the rolled parchment to Dorea, who unravelled it slowly, grateful for the Calming Draught as her hands would ordinarily be shaking.

"Dumbledore has no rights," Cassie said, reading over her sister's shoulder. "There's a whole list of people that Harry should have gone to if Sirius were unavailable to raise him. Who's Remus Lupin?"

Dorea winced. In the worry over Harry living with Muggles and Sirius in Azkaban, she had neglected to think about another unofficial member of her family. "One of James's closest friends. He's how Dumbledore gained legal access to Harry without the Wizengamot interfering," she said angrily. "Sirius was arrested, Peter Pettigrew was dead, and both Frank and Alice Longbottom were hospitalised. That left only Remus."

When both Cassie and Cedrella stared at her, confused, Dorea shook her head sadly. "He's a werewolf."

"No one would leave a child, especially *this* child, in the care of a werewolf," Cedrella said.

"Remus was a sweet boy," Dorea argued. "Cassie, would you send word to Belina? Perhaps one of Borgin and Burkes customers has connection in the werewolf community. I'd like to find the boy."

"Might ask Lucretia to do that, instead," Cedrella offered. "Her husband works in the Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

Ragnok, no longer a part of the conversation, loudly cleared his throat. "Will you have further need of Gringotts today, Dorea Opaleye?"

She offered him a polite smile. "I would like Albus Dumbledore forbidden from accessing the vaults or any information about their contents. Also, I plan on requesting horde assistance to restructure the wards around Potter Manor now that Harry is with me." When the goblin nodded his head in agreement, Dorea bowed her own. "Thank you, Ragnok. You've been efficient as always. The Black family vaults will be opened within the week, I assure you. I trust you to organise whatever you need to do to have them properly audited."

Ragnok bowed his head just slightly once more before exiting the room.
"Audited?" Cassie asked, shocked. "This is new information."

"I'm returning the goblin-made artefacts that our family has hoarded over the years. They're not ours, and I'd much rather have goblins as allies in any form than enemies who think we stole their gold." Dorea stood and leant down to pull Harry back into her arms. "I'll send word from Potter Manor with Floo access for everyone," she said. "Quietly assemble the others, and see that Minerva brings Nymphadora with her."

"What are you planning?" Cedrella asked.

Dorea's eyes flashed silver in anger, and then they returned to purple once again. "We start our work tonight. I won't let our enemies wake another morning without our family having the proper protection we need. Tomorrow the world will know the Black coven."
January 10th, 1987
Potter Manor

The manor was clean but cold.

She had crossed the ward boundaries, glad that she'd convinced Charlus to use Blood Magic to do so. He had been hesitant at first—ever the embodiment of light. Blood Magic was walking a fine line between what was and was not legal. But Dorea had insisted that properly erected blood wards would keep them safe. Unfortunately, the wards had been keyed to the Potter line specifically, an extra layer of security, which prevented her from accessing them without Charlus, or James . . . or Harry.

Now, however, she was home.

The drawing room she remembered as being warm and inviting was now dark and empty. Some of the furniture was missing, likely having been moved to the cottage where James and Lily had lived—and died. The family portraits that hung on the walls were covered in black lace, including her own. It was an eerie thing to see. At the same time, it felt appropriate. She was no longer that woman. She was no longer Dorea Potter, wife of Charlus and mother of James and Sirius. She was Dorea Potter still in name, but she was Dorea Black at heart. Dorea Opaleye to the goblins. Grandmother of Harry Potter, supposed Boy Who Lived. She felt her blood burn a bit at the thought. Erasing that horrendous epithet was on her ever-growing list of things to do.

She settled Harry on a sofa, tucking a blanket around his body before lighting a fire in the nearby grate. A few flicks of her wand and the lamps in the corners of the room brought light and life back to the quiet home that felt much too large now that it was essentially empty. If she closed her eyes, she could still smell Charlus's pipe; she could still hear the sound of Sirius's horrendous motorbike, and James laughing when the engine eventually puttered out.

Concentrating, Dorea raised her wand and felt for the ward boundaries, touching them intimately enough to manoeuvre their parameters. With apt focus, she closed off the entire property to everyone, allowing only Floo access, which she would soon lock with a password. No one was coming near her home or her family again without her say-so, under threat of death and dismemberment.

With a fistful of powder from her pocket that she had kept on hand just in case, Dorea engaged the Floo with bright green flames and fire-called Cedrella and Cassie. "It's time."

The witches arrived into Potter Manor one by one before the Floo was closed off and blocked from all access—Ministry included lest they have a damn good search warrant or a Curse-Breaker with a death wish. Dorea slipped away with a still-sleeping Harry, eager to tuck him into a proper bed in a proper room with every Security Charm she could think of to keep him safer than a Gringotts' vault.

Meanwhile, Lucretia and Cedrella took over, emptying cupboards and rooms in search of pillows and blankets to bring life back into the manor, in addition to removing the black lace from the portraits. By the time Dorea rejoined the women, the drawing room looked like her home once more, and the scent of food cooking in the kitchen filled the air. She stood in the entrance, watching as the witches mingled, most around the teenage girl with blue hair standing beside Andromeda. The young girl had a bright smile as she shook hands, grimacing each time that her mother introduced her as "Nymphadora."
"My friends just call me Tonks," she insisted, and Andromeda huffed.

"I explained everything to her on the way," Minerva said quietly as she approached Dorea from the side to not draw any more attention. "She's a bright girl. Dedicated to her magic."

"Is she ready?"

"Are any of us?" Minerva asked. They made eye contact, letting the severity of what they were about to do settle between them. "Albus will know by morning." Dorea nodded her head. "He's under the impression that Nymphadora's parents wanted her to come home to be with family due to the death of Pollux."

"Does he suspect anything?"

Minerva shrugged one shoulder. "Doubtful. Outside of Hogwarts, he'll be too preoccupied with Sirius's approaching trial to even consider what we're doing. He will find out, however. Are you prepared for that?"

Dorea smiled thoughtfully. "With you in my corner, I think Dumbledore will have a very rude awakening tomorrow morning." A heavier thought settled in the forefront of her mind after a moment. "He'll be angry. Unable to do anything to get Harry back, especially with what I've planned. He'll try and take this out on Sirius, won't he?"

Sighing in frustration, built up from years of dealing with both children's rapidly changing temperaments and grown wizards stomping their feet over not getting what they want, Minerva pursed her lips. "The trial is to determine whether or not Sirius is guilty or innocent of his accused crimes. We will learn the truth. I dare any wizard in that Wizengamot to dare question all thirteen of us when we demand his freedom should he be proven innocent. The Wizarding world hasn't changed so much. Many still believe family covens to be sacred. It would be considered a crime to act against us."

"They'll want our power," Dorea mumbled irritably as she watched Theia begin pouring out glasses of wine from a bottle that she had clearly brought with her. The food cooking had obviously been brought along as well. She made a mental note to figure out how to get necessities in the manor without the aid of a house-elf. Perhaps Narcissa or Cassie would loan her one. "The coven will have the ability to do many great things."

"My mother would have adored it, had she lived to see this," Minerva said with a sad little smile as she looked at the gathered women. She let out a quiet, dry laugh and added, "My father would have been horrified. He didn't think much of magic, to begin with, but were I to tell him that I'd run off with a bunch of women to perform Blood Magic... Poor man." She smiled fondly in thought.

"He is innocent, by the way," Dorea insisted, looking at Minerva. "Sirius. I raised him. There's nothing he and James would not have done for one another. Even in grief, Sirius would not have taken his anger out on innocent lives. Which means—"

"That either Sirius did not kill those people or they were not all innocent?" Minerva suggested with a raised brow.

"We'll have to see, won't we?"

A small meal was shared thanks to the efforts of Cedrella and Lucretia. The women sat in a circle to break bread together. Two loaves were split between the thirteen guests, while a third sat on a window sill next to a bowl of salt. Dorea had nearly teared up at the sight of the old-fashioned gifts.
Cassie nudged her in the side and tilted her head toward Enid and Callidora, indicating that they had been the ones to bring the items into the house. It eased Dorea's nerves. She had been worried that Enid would have changed her mind in the end. Some feared the old ways and had been led to believe they were entirely dark in nature.

"To us," Belina said, raising her glass and looking around the circle. "May we purify our family with what we do here tonight."

"May we purify the world," Callidora added, lifting her glass. "It is in need of a great cleansing."

"Toujours Pur," Cassie said with a smirk before she drank from her glass.

"Toujours Pur!" everyone echoed.

Once outside in the dark beauty of the Potter orchards, Dorea turned her focus up to the moon overhead. It would have been more powerful to perform the ritual had it been full, but symbolically she felt this was more appropriate. She had already lost so much, but here under the light of the stars and a waxing moon, she could feel the magic pulsing. They were rebuilding, growing, and manifesting what would soon be the birth of a new future for their world.

Dorea dragged a silver blade across her hand, slicing open the skin until a pool of blood formed. Channelling her magic, she blew hot air across the surface of the blood, watching as the dark red rippled in her palm. "Ignis Draconis!" she hissed, throwing the blood into the centre of the circle that the witches formed, onto a pile of upturned soil that had been prearranged. The blood turned to fire the moment it touched the earth.

They had discussed the ritual at length, making sure that no one had any doubts about what was to happen that night. The incantations were memorised and the tools cleansed and purified.

Belina assured the others that the silver dagger she had procured had no dark past, nor was it goblin-forged. Instead, the ivory-hilted dagger was Muggle-made—an artefact that had come through Borgin and Burkes by mistake. A witch had taken possession of an old Irish castle when the last nobleman died off. She had sold away every item for as much money as she could, trying to persuade Belina's uncle that the dagger had killed seventy-two werewolves outside of Kildare. It had not, but the blade was still worth a great deal.

Clothing was shed and the circle was opened properly, each witch whispering "Lumos" and then placing her wand horizontally in front of her feet. The silver dagger was passed all the way around the circle until it fell into Nymphadora's hands. Andromeda swallowed nervously as she watched her thirteen-year-old look at the item. It was decided that as a virgin—much to Nymphadora's minor embarrassment—she would be the one to open the circle. Her blood and magic were as pure and light as possible, despite having a Muggle-born father. From maiden to crones—it felt oddly appropriate.

Glancing at her mother with grey eyes, Nymphadora received a proud nod in return from Andromeda, before she looked into the flames and stepped carefully over her wand.

"I, Nymphadora, daughter of Andromeda Black, willingly enter into this circle." She winced as she sliced the blade across each of her hands. Briefly forgetting the words, she looked back at her mother, who mouthed them to her. Smiling, Nymphadora looked back into the fire. "I dedicate this circle to those who cannot protect themselves. We will be their defence. I will devote my life to my magic, my blood to my coven, and any future House I enter into will know my bond." She threw her blood into the fire and grinned when it flashed bright pink.
When she stepped back to her place, she looked to her mother briefly before turning her attention to her aunt Narcissa, who had been placed on her other side. Instead of handing the blood-drenched blade to her mother, she passed it, handle first, to Narcissa.

The blonde stared down at the red blade and sucked in a breath before steeling her nerves, accepting the ivory handle with the slightest bow of her head. Approaching the fire, she sliced her palms open as she incanted, "I, Narcissa of House Rosier, daughter of Cygnus Black the third, willingly enter into this circle. I dedicate this circle to our children. We will raise them in strength. I will devote my life to my magic, my blood to my coven, and House Malfoy will know my bond." The fire flashed silver when she threw her blood.

Andromeda took the dagger from Narcissa, turning back to watch as she joined hands with Nymphadora with no hesitation, pure blood be damned. Andromeda smiled and lifted her chin proudly as she dug the blade into each palm. "I, Andromeda of House Rosier, daughter of Cygnus Black the third, willingly enter into this circle. I dedicate this circle to the outcast. We will deliver them and give them refuge. I will devote my life to my magic, my blood to my coven, and the House of Tonks that I build with my husband will forever know this bond."

Andromeda linked hands with her daughter as the yellow fire behind her faded. "I'm so proud of you," she whispered, kissing Nymphadora on her forehead before passing the dagger along.

"I, Theia of House Blishwick, great-granddaughter of Misapinoa Black, willingly enter into this circle. I dedicate this circle to the silent. We will be the voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. I will devote my life to my magic, my blood to my coven, and any future House I enter into will know my bond." The fire turned blue as Theia returned to her place.

"I, Camilla of House Crouch, daughter of Charis Black, willingly enter into this circle. I dedicate this circle to the liars. We will seek truth and pull it from their tongues by force. I will devote my life to my magic, my blood to my coven, and any future House I enter into will know my bond."

"I, Belina of House Burke, daughter of Belvina Black, willingly enter into this circle. I dedicate this circle to magic. We will learn the truth of you, dictated to us by no man or government. I will devote my life to my magic, my blood to my coven, and any future House I enter into will know my bond."

The fire was still purple as Callidora approached it. "I, Callidora of House Yaxley, daughter of Arcturus Black the second, willingly enter into this circle. I dedicate this circle to the dead. We will avenge you. I will devote my life to my magic, my blood to my coven, and House Longbottom will know my bond." The fire erupted into a small inferno of bronze light before she handed the dagger over.

"I, Lucretia of House Macmillan, daughter of Arcturus Black the third, willingly enter into this circle. I dedicate this circle to the past. We will learn from it, and choose not to repeat its mistakes. I will devote my life to my magic, my blood to my coven, and House Prewett will know my bond." The fire flashed turquoise, and Lucretia grinned as she tossed the dagger to Cedrella, who gave her a pinched look of disapproval as she switched places with her.
"I, Cedrella of House Yaxley, daughter of Arcturus Black the second, willingly enter into this circle. I dedicate this circle to the suffering. We will use this opportunity to show the world that we are merciful and good. I will devote my life to my magic, my blood to my coven, and House Weasley will know my bond." The fire burned bright red, and Cassie snickered as Cedrella's auburn locks blended with the flames. "Hush, you," Cedrella said, pressing the hilt of the dagger into Cassie's open palm.

Cassie stepped over her wand delicately, as though she were still in her highest pair of heels and not barefoot on the cold grass. "I, Cassiopeia of House Bulstrode, daughter of Cygnus Black the second, willingly enter into this circle. I dedicate this circle to our enemies. They will feel our suffering, and no one will stand in our way of it. I will devote my life to my magic, my blood to my coven, and my bond will be to my coven, because I'll be damned if I'm going to let a man trick me into marrying him at my bloody age." She flicked her blood into the fire, grinning when Nymphadora's giggles could be heard over the roaring flames that were as grey as her eyes.

"Tag, you're it," Cassie said with a wink in Minerva's direction.

Snatching the dagger swiftly from the blonde, Minerva stepped sure-footed over her wand and cut open her hands. "I, Minerva of House Ross, granddaughter of Athena Black, willingly enter into this circle. I dedicate this circle to the innocent. We will be the pillars they can cling to, the walls that shelter them, and the example they can look to. I will devote my life to my magic, my blood to my coven, and anyone that crosses my path will know my bond." The golden flames were blinding as Minerva stood in front of the fire, one hand dropping her blood over it, completely unafraid.

"Seal it," Minerva said with a determined smile, placing the dagger in Dorea's open and still bleeding palm. "Finish this thing so you can go inside and look after that boy of yours."

Dorea looked down at the dagger covered in the blood of thirteen. She wondered how many more she would need to adequately make up for the blood spilled in the name of everything her family once stood for. How many had died because the Ancient and Noble House of Black thought they stood above others? How many suffered when the House of Black financially and publicly stood behind those who would oppress people who were different? How many sons and daughters died because no one stood to protect them? More than thirteen, she gathered. It would likely never be enough. Therefore, she would never stop.

"I, Dorea of House Bulstrode, daughter of Cygnus Black the second, willingly enter into and seal this circle. We take back the magic of Avalon that our mother Morgana ruled over. We curse those men of Merlin who stand idly by while Dark Lords rise up amongst us. We spit on the name of those who hide behind titles and in shadows. Our fire will be our light, and we will reveal them all for what they are. I dedicate this circle to our family. We are all united by blood. The world will know the Ancient and Noble House of Black and the coven that holds its magic."

She stepped toward the fire with her wand in one hand, levitating an iron cauldron and setting it into the centre of the flames. Into the cauldron she tossed the blood covered dagger. Dorea placed her wand to her temple, pulling out a silver, hair-like wisp of magic.

"The last Patriarch of our House has fulfilled his vow to me." She flung the memory of Arcturus's promise into the cauldron and watched as the flames turned green. "Our mothers birthed an ancient line of men who carried our name for many generations. That has ended. We declare the Patriarchal line of our House ended. May our future sons carry the name of Black with our blessing, deferring to us in all family matters. We declare this coven as the heir of our House. The world will know our bond."

She stepped back from the fire, placing her wand back at her feet. One by one, those not already
holding hands reached out to one another. The moment that Dorea gripped Minerva and Cassie, closing the circle, a well of magic overflowed from the centre of the fire, blowing the flames out against their feet like a rushing wave, though they were not burned.

When the fire died out a moment later, the cauldron at its centre had broken apart, the silver dagger melted down into thirteen individual amulets in the shape of a circle.

Dorea's hands shook as she tried to calm herself through the rush of power she was feeling. The last thing she needed was to accidentally set her new coven on fire.

Nymphadora's small voice pulled everyone from their thoughts as she asked, "Umm . . . can I put my clothes back on?"

Narcissa, of all people, laughed.

"Is that it?" Cassie quietly asked Dorea as everyone let go of one another's hands. Belina was already kneeling in front of the broken cauldron to collect the amulets, imbuing them with extra protection and spell work. Andromeda and Narcissa were hugging one another as Cedrella and Callidora placed robes over the reunited sisters.

Dorea smiled. "That's it," she said softly, letting out a slow exhale. "Now we get to work."

January 11th, 1987
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

The Great Hall was filled with smiling faces, all finally readjusting to returning to their classes after the Christmas holidays. Albus looked out over the sea of happy students, doing his best not to think of the many he had taught over the years that had grown up in war.

He tried not to think about Tom Riddle or James and Lily Potter. He could not help but think of Severus Snape, seeing that the surly young man had made an entrance by issuing detention to two Gryffindors that just so happened to have been in his way. Albus Dumbledore did his best not to think about Sirius Black. However, he would have to think about the young man very soon, considering Arcturus Black had made outrageous demands of the Wizengamot and Albus, as Chief Warlock, needed to be present for the eventual trial—otherwise it would look suspicious. All he could hope for was that Sirius was too damaged by dementors to speak clearly. Five years amongst the creatures . . . No man could come out of that with his sanity intact, especially after what he had done.

Sirius had been imprisoned for the murder of thirteen people, but Albus had left the boy to rot in Azkaban because he knew that Voldemort had murdered the Potters thanks to information provided by Black. There was no other explanation as to how Voldemort knew where to find James, Lily, and little Harry. Sirius had done it, Albus was certain. And the betrayal of a friend was something he took very seriously.

When the owls brought in copies of the Daily Prophet, Albus did not want to look. Surely, it would be yet another front page piece about the approaching trial of Sirius Black. He closed his eyes, trying not to visibly show the stress he was feeling.

"Did you not sleep well, Albus?" Minerva asked as she took a seat beside him.

"Quite well," he replied. "I have a great deal on my mind is all. Many things to think about. Please, do not worry yourself, my dear." He opened his eyes and smiled at her. She looked better than she
had in quite some time. Perhaps now that the holidays were over, she had less time to reflect on her departed husband and was renewing her focus on her work. "I trust that young Nymphadora made it safely to her mother?"

Minerva smiled. "Of course. She was quite happy to be reunited with her family. Bright child, that one. We'll see great things from her, I assure you." When Albus smiled in agreement, Minerva glanced at the folded *Daily Prophet* next to his plate. "Would you mind if I read that when you're finished?"

"You may have it now." Just as he was handing it over, the headline flashed in front of his eyes, and he stopped, his grip tightening on the paper.

He tugged the *Daily Prophet* back from Minerva's grasp and unfolded it right away. His blue eyes widened comically at the photograph of a witch he thought long dead. No, no, no, no, no. This couldn't be happening. How had he not known?

"Not possible. How is this . . . ?"

**BOY WHO LIVED REUNITED WITH GRANDMOTHER, DOREA POTTER**

"Is everything all right, Albus?" Minerva asked.

Albus's mouth fell open. In the photo, Dorea Potter stood in front of Gringotts, looking ever the part of a heart-broken grandmother, frowning sadly as Rita Skeeter took her hand.

Taking in slow breaths and briefly wondering the fate of Harry's Muggle family and why he had not been alerted that the boy had been kidnapped, Albus skimmed the article for information.

. . . miraculous recovery . . . dragon pox . . . was devastated to wake to the news that her entire family had perished in her absence . . . Albus's pulse raced as his eyes rapidly flicked over the words, finally settling on the actual interview:

"*Harry is the only thing I have left in this world,*" Dorea says, tears in her eyes. "*The last piece of my sweet James, who died a hero. I regret not knowing his wife. I would have supported his marriage to a Muggle-born, no matter what anyone said.*"

*For those who have wondered these long years about the location of Harry Potter, wonder no longer. Dorea Potter informs us that "Harry is safe at home. Citizens of Britain need not worry. There's not a force in this world powerful enough to take my boy from me. My home is now unplottable, sealed up with the strongest wards that money could buy. And goblins do love money."*

"Not possible," Albus mumbled again, his throat constricting.

*When asked what Dorea plans to do now that she's been reunited with her grandson, she said: "I only want to keep Harry safe and give him the type of home and family he deserves. I want to show my gratitude to my community for standing by him these years. My gratitude especially goes out to Albus Dumbledore, who has been directly responsible for the care that Harry has received these past five years. I plan on visiting him soon to repay him for everything he's done for my family."

He wasn't quite sure, but he thought that the photograph of Dorea looked straight into the camera right at him . . .

And she smiled.
Albus waited until the students were dismissed to their classes before he made a hasty retreat to his office. No sooner did he shut his door, a charm alerted him that someone was just outside, clearly having followed him. Sighing in resignation, he took a breath to calm his nerves before saying, "Come in."

Minerva pushed her way through the door and met his untwinkling eyes. "I thought I would do you the courtesy of letting you know that you'll need to travel to London this morning. Sirius Black's trial will take place today. Apparently, the Wizengamot was trying to delay it for one reason or another, but the Black family has had their legal teams throwing a bit of a fuss."

Unable to even consider how Minerva knew this information before he did, Albus schooled his expression, not wanting to give away the anxiety he was feeling. He didn't have time to deal with Sirius Black's farce of a trial. He had to find out where Harry Potter was and how, exactly, his grandmother was able to abscond with him. Surely if the woman did something to Harry's Muggle relatives, there would be magical proof. He would have to speak with Aurors to have their home investigated. Unfortunately, Dorea had put him in a tough spot. The Daily Prophet interview had her giving him the credit for her current custody of the boy. There would be no way that Albus could prompt an investigation leading to Harry's removal without making himself look—best case scenario—stupid.

"Are you even listening to me?" Minerva snapped, drawing his attention back to her. "I've dismissed my classes for the day. We can travel to the Ministry together by Floo, unless you prefer Apparition." She looked him over with a narrowed glance. "Though, if you insist on Side-Along, I'll have to take the lead. You don't quite look well, and I'd rather not get splinched."

He blinked. "You're coming to London?"

She bristled with the impatience of a woman who had spent years having to deal with children not properly paying attention when she spoke; having a grown man do the same thing was reaching her limit. "I have been invited to attend the trial as well. I've already informed Pomona, Filius, and Severus."

When he continued to gape at her in shock, she tilted her head to the side, her eyes flashing with mischief the same way that they did in her Animagus form when he occasionally caught her pawing at the trinkets on his desk until they fell and broke. She was hiding something. He focused on her eyes for a brief moment until they narrowed at him dangerously.

"Legilimency?" she questioned him, realising what he was attempting. "I'll quietly remember the many years we've been friends and colleagues, Albus, and not hex you for even attempting to break into my mind."

"How?" he asked her instead of offering an apology. Very few individuals had the ability to keep him out. It had been years since he had been so thoroughly blocked by anyone other than Severus.

She smiled wryly and delicately removed a circular amulet that hung around her neck on a thin, silver chain.
He stared at the object in confusion. Talismans protecting against Legilimency were rare, not to mention incredibly expensive. The amount of power to go into putting one together was barely worth the chances that you would stumble across a Legilimens who cared enough to go to the trouble. Few Ministers for Magic even bothered purchasing or making one, often relying on their own Occlumency instead.

Minerva had never before gone out of her way to protect her mind from him. Her mental shields were practically paper thin, and she had never given him a reason to suspect that she had taken issues with his abilities. Granted, he had never thought he would even want to use them against her. In fact, aside from her sour attitude that was easily attributed to grieving for her husband, the only time that Minerva had ever even spoken against him had been . . .

His eyes widened as he recalled their very loud argument following Harry Potter's placement with his Muggle relatives. Albus had offered her Obliviation, making it evident that it was not really a request, and she had all but hissed in his face before acquiescing to having the location of the Dursleys' home removed from her memories.

"What do you know?" he quietly demanded, his hand tightly clenching the copy of the *Daily Prophet* that he had brought with him.

Minerva met his stare and lifted her chin defiantly as she walked toward the fireplace in his office, reaching for the Floo powder, never breaking eye contact once. She threw the powder into the grate and sharply announced, "Ministry of Magic!" The green flames lit up behind her, casting her shadow over the wall in a menacing way that actually unnerved him. She had always been a force to be reckoned with—brilliant, determined, and fierce—but she held herself now in a way that resonated power. He could almost feel the static in the air.

Eventually, Minerva gave him a tight smile. "What I *know* is that five years ago, I told you not to leave that boy with those Muggles. You should have listened to me." With a simple gesture of her hand toward the fireplace, she stepped back and said, "After you."

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**Potter Manor**

The very brief publicity stunt had gone well. As a copy of the *Daily Prophet* was brought in by her sister, Dorea was ever amazed by the speed of the press when it *really* counted. Granted, it was not a very long article, and she imaged that any news about Harry would need to be printed immediately, lest the story spread by word of mouth and then it would not be very "breaking." She made a mental note to keep an eye on Miss Skeeter in the future; a friend in the media was a friend worth having.

The paper was put away before Harry woke. Too much still needed to be accomplished, and Dorea did not yet have the time to take the boy aside and explain magic to him. Announcing that he was a wizard was not something that one could just drop in his lap with the expectations of a seamless transition from Muggle to magical life. No, that would be a conversation for another day—a day when she didn't have to worry about the rest of her family.

"Good morning, my love," Dorea said with a bright, affectionate smile as Harry crept slowly into the room.

She had consulted with her coven about how to handle her grandson, and most had great wisdom to offer. The majority had all raised children of their own, and some were even dealing with grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Callidora and Cedrella both offered their own grandchildren up for socialising at a later date when Harry was adjusted to his new home, as each witch had a grandson who would be in Harry's year at Hogwarts. Not wanting to appear like she was not
contributing, Narcissa had promptly followed suit, asking for an arranged play date with her son as well.

While they all had a great many things to offer in way of support, it was Minerva who suggested that Dorea give Harry the chance to make a few decisions on his own considering the life he had recently lived. He had been living in a cupboard, obviously frightened into staying inside when company was over, which told them that his every move had been monitored if not dictated for him. Dorea hated it, but she sat at the dining room table and waited for Harry to come out of his room on his own.

The charms surrounding his bed had alerted her almost an hour and a half earlier that Harry had woken, but she remained in her seat, letting the smell of fresh waffles drift down the hallway, tempting him out. She did not feel the slightest bit guilty that she had magically forced the smell to linger outside of his room, or that she had pushed the door open a crack. She wanted it to be obvious to him that he was not a prisoner—that all doors were open, but he needed to be the one to walk through them.

The worried look on his face as he peered around the corner was heartbreaking. She remembered a similar one, long ago, when James had brought Sirius home for the first time. He had been older than Harry was now but still just a little boy who walked on eggshells while he visited, ever concerned that he might break an unknown rule at any given moment. Blinking her eyes rapidly at the thought of her son, still in captivity, Dorea willed away the tears and did her best to compartmentalise her emotions for the sake of her grandson.

"Are you hungry?" she asked him, reaching for the plate of waffles in the centre of the table. "I wasn't sure what you liked best, so I have syrup, fruit, chocolate sauce, and ice cream."

Harry's eyes widened, the green looking so much brighter in the morning sunlight that beamed in through the open windows. There was the smallest flicker of excitement in his stare, but his feet did not move forward.

"Would you like to come and sit down, and I'll serve you up a plate?" Dorea tried to make it sound like a request, but his feet moved immediately as though he had been ordered. She made a mental note to bankrupt Vernon and Petunia Dursley once they had collected the insurance from the ashes that used to be their home.

"Who else?" Harry asked, looking at all the food set out on the table.

Dorea smiled. "Just the two of us for now, dear. You can help yourself to anything you'd like. Or I can get it for you. Now, keep in mind, we don't eat ice cream for breakfast every day. A growing boy needs a proper meal. However," she said, a sparkle in her eyes as her smile brightened at the way the corners of his mouth turned up slightly, "I thought that today we could have a celebratory breakfast. We have much to celebrate, don't you think?"

He shrugged, eyes widening as she set one waffle down on a plate in front of him. He nodded when her hand touched the chocolate sauce, and he reached for his fork, brandishing it as though it were a weapon and hunching his shoulders, ready to defend his meal.

"Make sure to chew each bite before swallowing," Dorea instructed him the moment he stuffed a much too large piece into his mouth, chocolate sauce dripping onto his chin. Unable to control herself, she licked her thumb and then swiped at the mess.

Harry stared at her in bewilderment until she winked at him, and he laughed around a mouthful of half-chewed waffle. She grimaced at the sight and gently nudged his chin up with her knuckle, closing his mouth for him.
"Do you know what we're celebrating, Harry?" She sipped at her tea while he predictably shook his head. "Today is the very start of our brand new family. No more Dursleys, no more cupboards; just we Potters and Blacks."

Harry took a moment to swallow before asking, "Blacks?"

Dorea nodded. "You have a very large family, my little love. Your aunt Petunia was your mother's sister, correct?" He nodded. "Did you know your grandparents? Your mother's mother and father? Petunia's mother and father?"

"They died."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said, genuinely. Though she imagined if the Muggles in question were, in fact, alive, then they would have been accessories to their grandchild's abuse, and Dorea would have another set of Muggles to ruin. "Well, I am your father's mother. And your father has a brother named Sirius Black. And I have a sister, Cassie Black. We have many cousins. A large family filled with people who are going to adore you when they meet you."

"Why me?" he asked quietly. "I'm just . . . just Harry."

Dorea swallowed down the words "Boy Who Lived" because they tasted like bile, and she simply shrugged her shoulders delicately. "Because, to us Blacks, family means absolutely everything, and you, my dear Harry, are one of us."

His brow crinkled. "Am I not . . . not Harry Potter then? Will I have to change my name again?"

"No, love," Dorea said, recalling how Harry had told her that when he was at home with the Dursley, his name was boy. "You're my Harry, now and forever," she promised him with a sweet smile. "My love, my dear, my little lamb."

Harry's cheek tinted pink briefly, and he turned his attention back to his plate as he muttered, "Better than Diddykins."

When breakfast was finished, they returned to Harry's new bedroom, and Dorea took great pleasure in showing him some of the books that had been left on the nearby shelves. All magical ones with moving pictures had been temporarily relocated. Harry ignored most of the books in favour of the collection of dragon toys he could see sitting on a higher shelf. Dorea smiled at the sight of the little creatures. They had long since lost the magic that made them animatedly react to touch, as well as the ability to fly. No more lively than a typical Muggle toy, but Harry looked fascinated as she brought them down for him to play with.

The wards alerted her that company was coming through the drawing room Floo, and she had to force herself to relax, knowing that only her coven members and designated guests were allowed entrance into the manor thanks to the heavily restricted wards.

"Harry," she said, getting his attention, "I have some errands to run today. Very important things that I could not manage to reschedule. While I'd love nothing more than to spend the entire day with you, I have to leave for a few hours. I've arranged for someone to come and stay with you while I'm gone."

"Mrs Figg?" Harry asked, looking like he was doing his very best to hide his disappointment. Remembering how the cats at Arabella's house climbed over guests as though they were furniture, Dorea could hardly blame the boy.
"No," she said, shaking her head. "Someone brand new, who will be so excited to meet you. Perhaps you could show him your dragons."

She led Harry back through the manor and down a long stretch of hallway before reaching the drawing room. With her entire coven needing to be in attendance with her, that left few to look after Harry. Cedrella offered her daughter-in-law, Molly, who would have had no trouble looking after another child. However, Dorea was not happy with the thought of dropping Harry into a house full of other children, especially without explaining magic to him. Since most of the coven's children and spouses all lived in magical homes, few options were left available to her.

Andromeda, however, had come to the rescue.

Dorea and Harry stepped into the room to see a tall, lanky man with shaggy brown hair standing in front of the fireplace with his hands behind his back. He wore a fleece-lined denim jacket that matched the blue of his jeans exactly, except the fabric over the knees was faded and obviously well-worn. The image of a large mouth on his t-shirt reminded Dorea of the silly shirts that Sirius and James used to wear when they strolled through the manor after a day of visiting Muggle London.

Standing beside him, Andromeda smiled at the man as though he was the very reason that the sun rose each and every morning. Side by side, the couple made the oddest pair. Andromeda wore finely pressed dark robes, and held herself in graceful stillness, while the man looked as though he were ready to bounce out of his shoes in childlike excitement.

Andromeda turned her attention to the new arrivals and smiled sweetly at Harry. "Hello, there." When Harry pressed himself closer to Dorea to shyly hide away, Andromeda's smile widened. "Aunt Dorea," she said, turning her focus on the older witch, "I'd like to introduce my husband, Ted. He's more than happy to look after Harry today."

Before Dorea could say a word in greeting to the Muggle-born wizard, he beamed excitedly as he pulled his arms from behind his back, brandishing a long box that was spellotaped at the corners where the cardboard had been repeatedly torn. "And I've brought Cluedo!"

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**Ministry of Magic**

Dorea had moved through the Ministry of Magic alongside Andromeda and Nymphadora, blending in as much as they could with the crowd until they reached the Wizengamot courtroom that had been set aside for the trial. The coven members entered the room and spaced themselves out amongst the rest of the crowd to not draw attention. Several reporters were in attendance, including Rita Skeeter. *Helpful*, Dorea thought as she made eye contact with the blonde and smiled politely.

She kept her eyes open and alert, waiting for Minerva and Dumbledore, but before either could make an appearance, someone in the Wizengamot had apparently said something to insult Bartemius Crouch, who had deigned to grace them all with his presence. He had been tight-lipped when interviewed for the *Daily Prophet* about Sirius's arrest, but his mouth was wide open today as he spewed bitter words at Amelia Bones.

"I still say that you're all foolish to dismiss the usage of dementors in this farce of a retrial!"

Amelia sent him a withering glare and made to say something just as the doors creaked open. Everyone turned to see Minerva enter the room and turn left to join the spectators, while Albus Dumbledore followed behind her, looking to the right where his seat as Chief Warlock sat empty, waiting for him.
"Good, he's here," Arcturus muttered impatiently. "We can move this along now."

Minister Bagnold sighed deeply, looking relieved at Dumbledore's presence. "Albus, thank you for coming on such short notice."

Dumbledore inclined his head as he made his way up the small set of stairs to join the other members of the Wizengamot just as Amelia Bones finally reached her limit.

"What retrial, Bartemius?" she snapped angrily. "According to records, Sirius Black never had a trial in the first place! And we've stated repeatedly the reason that the dementors have been banned from this courtroom, but I'll say it again since you're too thick to remember it: Sirius Black has been exposed to the creatures for years! We need him to be coherent enough to answer our questions!"

Dorea shared a look with Minerva and smiled. Amelia Bones was officially on the good side of the coven, which could prove very useful depending on how the trial went.

"It's not my fault that your department lost the records of his bloody trial," Crouch shot back at Amelia. "I heard him confess to the murders myself! It's insulting that the Wizengamot is even wasting our time with this. Is my account not good enough for you?" He stood, holding his arms out as though he were an innocent martyr, his honour being questioned by vagabonds looking to send him and his integrity to the chopping block. "I am ever loyal to the Ministry. You all seem to have forgotten that I sent my only son to Azkaban for being associated with You-Know-Who!"

"Associated?" Cornelius Fudge sarcastically asked with an impatient snort. "Is that what you call it? Your boy helped torture two of the finest Aurors to ever grace the Ministry. I say we bring Sirius Black out, give him Veritaserum, and get this over with!"

Crouch's eyes widened and he glared at Fudge venomously. "You had just as much hand in putting Black away as I did, Cornelius!" Fudge's mouth fell open, and he gaped in objection like a fish as his face turned red. "And you know perfectly well that Veritaserum is inadmissible in a trial."

"The man has spent five years in Azkaban!" Fudge retorted. "Even if he were an accomplished Occlumens, it's unlikely he'd be able to fight off the truth serum after such a long exposure to dementors."

"Unlikely, but not impossible. As it stands, this trial is Sirius Black's word against the Aurors who arrested him, and others who were present at the scene of the crime. And the word of Sirius Black cannot be trusted!"

When Crouch's speech seemed to rouse some of the members of the Wizengamot—who were clearly already uncomfortable with the idea of being in a room with an accused murderer and Death Eater without the protection of dementors—Dorea shot her uncle a knowing look.

Arcturus cleared his throat loudly. When whispering continued, he repeated the gesture with an Amplifying Charm. "Perhaps I might offer a suggestion then?"

Minister Bagnold gave him her full attention. "You have a solution, Patriarch Black?"

"Indeed, I do. And you may call me Arcturus, Minister, as I am no longer the Patriarch of the Ancient and Noble House of Black."

The Minister's eyes widened in shock, and the Wizengamot erupted into more whispers and mumblings. "Not the—"

"You're the whole reason that we're even here today!" Crouch yelled.
Arcturus narrowed his eyes at Crouch, his lip curling up in distaste as he stared at the man. "Madam Minister should ask Bartemius Crouch to watch his tone with me," he cautioned carefully. "I may no longer be Black Patriarch, but I am quite endeared to people who might have reason to start a blood feud with him by the day's end. He would be encouraged to speak politely to me if he wishes to have any allies come nightfall."

Crouch's eyes widened. "Are you threatening me, sir?"

Several people began speaking over one another and gesturing wildly, either trying to placate Arcturus by saying that Crouch did not mean any offence, or trying to calm Crouch by saying that Arcturus was an old man who was clearly a bit feeble.

"Salazar's sake, is this really the best idiot we have to speak on behalf of Britain when dealing with other countries?" Arcturus questioned, looking directly at the Minister. "No wonder he was demoted from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Can't even tell when he's being threatened."

Crouch stood up again, only to be tugged back into his chair by Hyperion Greengrass. The Minister for Magic watched on in shock.

"Arcturus, sir," she said, returning her attention to the former Black Patriarch, "you requested a trial for Sirius Black as the Head of your family. According to Ministry records, you are, in fact, the Head of the Black family. Everyone else is either in Azkaban or deceased."

"Then you're looking in the wrong records, Minister," Arcturus informed her. "I happen to know at least thirteen witches with Black blood who are more than happy to take the reins of my ridiculous family."

Crouch's expression twisted in confusion. "Witches?"

Fudge paled dramatically and squeaked out, "Thirteen? Thirteen w-witches?"

Minister Bagnold's mouth fell open.

All reactions were pleasant, but Dorea took particular pleasure in how the pieces all clicked together for Dumbledore, and he looked as though he had swallowed a whole nest of wasps.

She had half wished he would glance in her direction so that she could see the hope and ego drain away from his eyes as he realised all of his potential plans regarding Harry were most certainly futile. However, he was staring accusingly at his deputy head. Minerva had brought a book with her to the proceedings, and was flipping—looking bored—through the pages, ignoring the outbursts around her as though she had not a care in the world for the screaming around her.

Arcturus struggled to stand, but when he did, his posture was straight and commanding. "I have officially, in vow and ritual, stepped aside as the Patriarch of my family. The Ancient and Noble House of Black is now led by its family coven."

Crouch shook his head. "That's impossible."

"Is it, Mr Crouch?" Everyone turned their attention toward Dorea when she spoke up. There was the flash of a camera that she purposely pretended to ignore, though she had adjusted her stance to provide the photographer with her best side. "I've been told very recently that a lot of things previously thought impossible are, in fact, quite the opposite."
Dorea waited patiently as the increasingly loud whispers echoed around the large room, only to be silenced when the minister raised her wand. "Madam Potter, I . . . I did not think you of all people would want to be here today."

Frowning thoughtfully, Dorea asked, "And why not? Sirius Black's innocence affects me a great deal. Many have clearly forgotten that I raised that boy from the age of eleven." She very purposely kept her gaze away from Albus, instead directing it toward Crouch and Fudge, only the latter of whom looked properly castigated at the very sight of her. "I may not have birthed him, but his blood runs in my veins."

Head held high, Dorea squared her shoulders, looking battle ready. Her stare was hard as she announced to the entirety of the Wizengamot, "I have come to collect my child. I will see justice done this day."

While the majority of spectators were busy picking their jaws up off of the floor, Arcturus slowly returned to his chair. When Lucretia offered her father her arm to help him, he brushed her off irritably. "I know that I'm not the Patriarch any longer, but I'd prefer to remain in my seat, if it pleases you all. Bloody arthritis."

"There has not been a family coven in . . . This is outrageous!" Crouch said and turned to the minister. "Is this even legal?"

"Watch your tone, Crouch," Fudge hissed, reaching over and yanking on the man's robes to get his attention. "Some of us still respect the old ways." When Crouch brushed him off, the squat man stood, removing his hat and wiping the sweat from his brow as he made eye contact with Dorea. "Madam Potter, you are a member of this Black coven?"

She dipped her chin to him. "I am the High Witch of my coven, sir."

Fudge paled further and retook his seat, his hands shaking as he tried to put his hat back on straight, only to have it fall off, landing on the lap of the wizard sitting to his right.

"Everyone calm down, please," Dumbledore said, finally breaking his silence when the crowd began to stir once more. "Let the lady speak. Madam Potter, are we to presume that your coven has already been bound in ritual? And you have thirteen?"

One by one, each of the witches stood.

Crouch made eye contact with his sister, Camilla, and glared at her as though she had sold him out herself. Some men in the courtroom, mainly those married to witches in the coven such as Ignatius Prewett and Septimus Weasley, merely smiled as their wives stood. A few men began chattering amongst themselves, counting, when Minerva stood and silenced them all with a narrow look.

Dumbledore swallowed, dutifully avoiding Minerva's glower. "What idol has the Black coven chosen?" he asked, taking notice out of the corner of his eye as his deputy head returned to her book.

Dorea grinned, doing her best to keep it subtle and not menacing. "Morgana," she said, pleased at the way that Fudge and a few others began actually choking on the gasps that tried to escape their
throats.

The last family coven had chosen Nimue to balance the wizards in the world that likened themselves to Merlin. The coven before them had gone with Circe, to distance themselves entirely. Choosing Morgana, Merlin's great enemy, spoke volumes. Morgana had been a Dark witch by nature, but one skilled in the healing arts as well. The Black witches were stating that they were to be feared and respected because the power they would wield could be used for the benefit of all . . . or the destruction of many.

It helped that Morgana was linked with the fey, and many wizards were greatly superstitious—Fudge was clearly one of them.

"The Ancient and Noble House of Black, and the coven that represents it," Dorea said, her voice echoing in the chamber, "demand the fair trial of our former heir, whom we believe was wrongly imprisoned by this assembled body."

Unlike every other statement, this was met with pure silence, most still too shocked or afraid to say a word against her.

Dumbledore, however, cleared his throat and sent her a look of sympathy, as though she were some poor creature in need of his pity. "Madam Potter . . . Dorea . . . you must know that Sirius Black . . . He betrayed James and his family. Sirius Black is the reason that your grandson is an orphan. You want this man freed?"

"I want to hear from Sirius's own mouth that he betrayed his brother," she insisted. "I won't believe it from anyone other than him."

"He murdered Peter Pettigrew as well as twelve Muggles!" Crouch exclaimed, his face turning red. "Of course the man betrayed the Potters! He was a Death Eater! You-Know-Who's favourite! Apologies, Madam Potter," he said, using a disrespectful tone that Dorea made a mental note to remember, "but you are delusional if you think otherwise."

"Delusional?" Tiberius Ogden repeated, incredulously as he stared across the Wizengamot at the man. "Merlin, man, do you have a suicide wish? Do you know to whom you're speaking? Dorea Potter just proclaimed herself High Witch of the first familial coven in Britain in . . . in . . ."

"Three hundred years," Lucretia primly provided.

Camilla narrowed her eyes at Bartemius. "Be very careful how you speak to Dorea, brother."

Crouch turned his attention to his sister, sneering at her in reply. "Stand against me in this, Camilla, and I'll see you disowned for the betrayal of your family."

She laughed cheerfully. "I stand with my family today, or haven't you been paying attention? You seem very against this trial, Barty. Do you have something to hide?"

Crouch folded his arms across his chest. "He's a murderer. He told me so himself! I won't say it again."

"Good," Cassie said, rubbing at her temples. "Your voice grates on my nerves."

"Many of you esteemed wizards and witches have children of your own," Dorea said, stepping from the bench she sat at to walk forward, placing herself in the centre of the chamber and in front of every member of the Wizengamot. "Hyperion Greengrass, you have two young daughters, do you not?"
The young wizard looked briefly shocked to have been singled out, but he bowed his head respectfully toward her and nodded. "I do. Daphne's the same age as your grandson, I believe; Astoria's just turned three."

Dorea smiled. "And if little Astoria were to grow up and murder her sister? Would she be any less your daughter?"

His mouth fell open in shock at the very thought of such a horror. "I . . . I . . ."

"Madam Marchbanks," Dorea said as she turned her attention toward an older witch, "you have three sons, do you not?"

"I do," the woman replied, lifting a brow in curiosity.

"And would any of them kill or betray the others?"

"Never," she said automatically. "They are closer than any brothers could be."

"So were my boys," Dorea said, addressing the large room. "Sirius and James were brothers. If a confession does not come from Sirius's own mouth, I will never believe the things he has been accused of. He is my son."

Dumbledore sighed in resignation after sharing a look with the minister. "Can his word be trusted as truth?"

Minerva set her book down on the bench beside her with a loud thunk, drawing attention from the crowd as she stood. Folding her hands gently in front of her, she announced, "The coven requests that Sirius Black be given the option to be placed under a Sanguinem Verus."

Whatever twinkle might have been left in Dumbledore's blue eyes faded. "Blood Magic?"

Crouch shook his head, stubbornly crossing his arms over his chest. "That's not legal."

Fudge groaned in embarrassment, as though sitting near the man was putting him at risk for being associated. Amelia Bones looked ready to throw something at Crouch. "They are a coven!" she told him. "Of course it's legal! Especially since Sirius Black is their own blood."

"It is impossible to fight the Sanguinem Verus," Cassie announced, as she had been elected to be the one to cast the spell. Dorea was too close to Sirius, and Cassie was known to be able to disconnect emotionally to prevent a sympathetic transference of feelings during the spell. "He would, of course, have to be willing, as any lie from his mouth would kill him. Think of it like a temporary Unbreakable Vow."

"And this is what you wish, Madam Potter?" Minister Bagnold asked.

Dorea sighed but did not relax her posture in the slightest. "This is the decision of the coven. If Sirius did have a hand in James's death, then he will either tell the truth and return to Azkaban, or he will lie and die before us. Either way, justice will have been brought."

The minister contemplated that very carefully before turning to look at Dumbledore for help. He shook his head very slightly, and she raised a brow at him before looking to the Aurors standing beside the second set of doors. Ignoring Dumbledore's silent protests to the use of Blood Magic, she ordered, "Bring him out then. Let's see what Sirius Black has to say for himself."

Dorea quickly returned to her seat, looking on as Minerva and Cassie took her place at the front of
the room. The doors opened and Aurors disappeared through them only to return a moment later, each with a tight grip on the arm of a young man with long, matted, black hair that covered most of his face.

From the bit of his skin visible to her gaze, Dorea could see that he was gaunt and ashen. There was a line of dirt on his skin between his neck and where his prison uniform was being pulled as the Aurors moved him, indicating that he had not been bathed in quite some time. Sirius did not fight against the grip that the Aurors had on him; he hung limply in their arms, consigned to whatever fate they were delivering him to.

His bare feet dragged behind him, the tops scraping against the floor. Dorea winced at the sight. Several of his toes had obviously been broken and left untreated; the bones were crooked and the joints looked larger than normal. She closed her eyes, unable to look any further without losing control of her emotions and magic. She was grateful to feel Andromeda squeeze her shaking hand.

The Aurors directed Sirius to a chair in the centre of the room. The Wizengamot faced the front, the spectators—and coven—at his back. The moment that the Aurors dropped him in the chair, chains from the sides shot up and bound Sirius's arms and legs. Another wrapped itself around his chest, forcing him to sit up straight. He winced and let out a pained groan.

"Sirius Black," Cassie said, moving to stand in front of him, "do you know why you're here today?"

There was a long moment of silence before Sirius slowly shook his head.

"You are here to be tried for the crimes you are accused of. The Ancient and Noble House of Black has decided to offer you the choice of Sanguinem Verus. Do you agree?"

He forced his attention up to her, his eyes dull and glazed as he stared up at her in confusion. He looked concussed. "San . . .? Blood Magic?"

"Do you agree?"

He swallowed dryly and cleared his throat, his voice rough and scratchy as he asked, "How?"

Cassie ignored his questions. "Do you agree?"

Still obviously confused, Sirius shook his head before muttering, "I . . . I . . . Yes, I agree."

Dorea did her best not to visibly show how she was both nervous and relieved at his consent. She knew without a doubt in her heart that neither of her sons would ever betray the other, but something had happened, and she was terrified to find out what.

"And you know that if you lie under the spell, your magic will poison you from the inside out, and you will die a most horrible death?" Cassie asked, looking down at Sirius with a raised eyebrow and what was supposed to be an air of impassiveness, but when she made eye contact with the man, she raised an expectant eyebrow at him.

Sirius blinked. "Aunt Cassie?"

Cassie huffed, momentarily breaking her cold, stony facade. "Sirius, do you consent?"

He let out a choked sob. "It's my fault. Everything . . . it's—"

"Do you see?!!" Crouch stood again, pointing his finger down at Sirius with disdain. "What further proof is needed? He confesses! He murdered Peter Pettigrew and twelve Muggles!"

"Consent!" Cassie urged him as the Wizengamot began shouting over one another.

"Yes! Do it!"

Sirius sucked in a sharp breath when a wand was pressed against his chest over his heart. The entire Wizengamot and audience fell silent as they watched on with great interest. Cassie kept Sirius at wand point while she held her hand out, palm up, to Minerva. Sirius turned his attention briefly to his former professor, who did not spare him a glance as she concentrated on the spell, cutting open Cassie's palm with a Slicing Hex.

"Sanguis Sanguinis Mei," Cassie muttered as she let her blood drop on the middle of her wand, watching as the wood began to glow in her hand and move down toward the tip being pressed against Sirius's chest. Everyone knew when the light and magic had touched him because he let out a shocked gasp loud enough that it echoed in the room. "Sanguinem Verus!" Cassie pulled her wand back and watched closely as Sirius's back straightened, his eyes cleared, and his shoulders relaxed. He looked rather Imperiused, but no one said anything about it.

Minerva let out a careful breath as she took Cassie's place in front of the man. "Sirius Black, are you or have you ever been a Death Eater?"

"No," Sirius answered mechanically. The passion was lost from his voice, but everyone that could hear him could not mistake the disgust in his tone at being asked the question. "Never. I'd rather die than kneel at the feet of that sorry excuse for a wizard." As though his words would still not be proof enough, despite the spell, Sirius pulled his left arm hard enough that the chain trapping it wrenched tighter, drawing Minerva's gaze.

Flicking her wand at the arm, she sliced open the sleeve to reveal an inner forearm that was marked with nothing except recent bruises and faded tattoos; there was certainly no Dark Mark. She turned and stared up at the Wizengamot, lifting a delicate and challenging eyebrow and pursing her lips in anger, daring any one of the fools to raise his voice to her.

"He has no Dark Mark," the minister said before turning her attention to Crouch, her brows furrowing in anger. "He has no Dark Mark! Why were we led to believe otherwise?"

Crouch just shook his head. "He . . . He confessed."

"Sirius Black, did you murder Peter Pettigrew and twelve Muggles November of 1981?" Minerva asked bluntly.

"I did not," Sirius answered. "I would never kill an innocent person—wizard or Muggle. I did mean for Peter to die."

The audience began to whisper their surprise. Dorea gripped Andromeda's hand tightly. Shocked, Minerva turned on her heel and stared at him. "What? Why?"

"Peter betrayed James and Lily," Sirius said, his focused gaze turning to look up into the benches of the Wizengamot where Dumbledore sat. He made eye contact with the man, whose face drained of all colour. "Peter is the reason they died. I tracked him down with the intentions of killing him. I'd kill him now if he stood in front of me."

An unpleasant chill ran down Dorea's spine at the admission. Peter. Little Peter whom she had welcomed into her home just like the rest of James's friends. She had watched the boy grow up, allowed him to eat at her table, sleep in her home . . . How did someone so seemingly innocent grow
up to be whatever it was that Sirius was now describing?

"How is that possible?" Dumbledore asked, leaning forward as though he and Sirius were the only two people involved in the conversation. His expression was torn and emotional, bordering between guilt and absolute disbelief. "You were the Potters' Secret Keeper. I cast that charm myself."

The minister's mouth fell open in shock. "You did what?"

"I was suspicious," Sirius said. "The wards around my flat had been tampered with, and I began to suspect that I was being followed. Voldemort wanted Lily, James, and Harry. I knew he could try to use me to get to them. I was a poor choice for Secret Keeper. I was worried that Death Eaters were following me, thinking that I could lead them to James." He looked away from Dumbledore then. "I Apparated around Britain to various places to get rid of any potential trackers, and then I grabbed Peter and took him to Godric's Hollow. We recast the charm ourselves. Peter Pettigrew was James and Lily's Secret Keeper."


"Peter was a Death Eater. Peter was a spy. I saw the Dark Mark on his arm the night I confronted him. He cut off his own finger and caused the explosion that killed the Muggles."

Crouch exploded. "Why did you confess that night?! You told me that you were responsible!"

"I was. I was the one who suggested that Peter be the . . . Secret Keeper," Sirius admitted, his words getting stuck in his throat as he became overwhelmed by emotion. "I should have known that he was a spy. I'd meant to kill Peter, but I wasn't fast enough. He killed those Muggles because I didn't stop him in time."

Crouch scoffed, ignoring the way that the members of the Wizengamot sitting near him were looking up at him as though he were covered in stink sap. "You mean for us to believe that Peter Pettigrew just blew himself up along with twelve Muggles for no good reason?"

"Cut his finger off to leave behind proof," Sirius muttered. "Killed the Muggles to . . . frame me. Peter didn't die. He escaped."

"Quiet!" the minister yelled when the gathered people began gasping and shouting in shock.

"How is that possible?" Dumbledore asked when the room had quieted once again.

Sirius looked as if, for the first time, he was trying to fight the push of the Sanguinem Verus. He swallowed hard and looked up at Minerva. Her eyes narrowed at him curiously, watching in shock as they—very briefly—shifted colour and shape. "Oh, you foolish boy," she whispered under her breath and then announced, "Peter Pettigrew is an Animagus."

"What?!" Fudge shrieked and jumped from his seat as though he were preparing to be assaulted by any random animal that might have sneaked into the room. "How is that possible?!"

"We had to," Sirius said, letting out a pained breath as the spell overpowered him completely. "We couldn't let Moony suffer alone. He choked on a small sob when Minerva reached out and took his hand, giving him the first gentle touch in over five years.

"This is a farce!" Crouch accused. "The spell clearly didn't take, or the dementors have driven him mad!"

Sirius scoffed and held Minerva's hand a bit tighter, as though drawing strength from her.
"Dementors don't hurt me like they do the others," he said in a slightly smug tone, a bit more subdued—because of the spell, Dorea thought—than Sirius was likely to be.

Dumbledore tilted his head to the side in curiosity. "What did you say?"

"I'm innocent," Sirius said. "I keep them out of my head by remembering that when I'm human."

"When you're . . ." the minister began before gaping at Sirius. "You're an Animagus as well?"

Sirius nodded. "Dog."

"He's not registered," Crouch mumbled as he took his seat, ignoring the way others automatically scooted away from him. He crossed his arms defiantly. "You hear me? He's not registered. Still a criminal."

Minerva pursed her lips. "I think that time already served will account for that crime, thank you, Mr Crouch!"

Sirius let out a soft breath and his shoulders relaxed a bit more. "I like it when you yell, Minnie. Always did." A dumb smile plastered itself to his face as his eyes dimmed a bit as he completely stopped fighting the spell, letting it really dig its way into his blood and bones. "I used to purposely get in trouble in class. One of the Muggle-born boys in our year went to Muggle primary where he said teachers would spank you when you misbehaved. Always wondered if I pushed you far enough —"

Minerva let go of Sirius's hand and flicked her wand, silencing him. "Stop talking right this second, young man!"

Cassie snorted and unsilenced him. "I like this spell."

Ignoring her, Minerva glared up at the assembled body of officials. "Is this sufficient proof?"

Cameras began flashing again as the Wizengamot members talked amongst themselves, the minister conferring with several people, Dumbledore included. Andromeda patted Dorea's hand while they waited. Dorea could not take her eyes off of Sirius, off of her son, who sat chained to the chair like a madman, like the criminal he had been accused of being. Eyes stinging from unshed tears and something inside of her chest throbbing with the need to rush to him, she distracted herself from the pain by making a mental list of all the injuries she could spot. Every mark would be returned tenfold upon anyone who had dared touch her boy.

"Take a breath," Andromeda whispered. "You can't lose control here."

"Look what they did to him," Narcissa muttered angrily under her breath from the row behind them, clenching her amulet tightly in her hand. "How dare they lay a hand on a son of our House."

"Cissy," Andromeda said, looking over her shoulder.

When Narcissa did not react to her sister's words, Nymphadora leant over the back of the bench and grabbed her aunt's hand, smiling when the blonde was startled out of her anger. "Thank you, dear," she said quietly.

While Dorea breathed slow and deep to calm herself, Minister Bagnold stood and turned her focus on the chair in the centre of the room. "Sirius Black, is there any reason why you should be returned to Azkaban prison?"
Sirius shrugged sadly and whispered, "Nowhere else to go."

Dorea sniffled and shook her head, turning away from everyone, especially the cameras as they continued to flash around her. Andromeda and Nymphadora both sat up straighter as though they could block Dorea from the photographers.

"Are you guilty of any crime with which you've been accused?" Minister Bagnold asked Sirius.

"Just the Animagus bit," he confessed. "I didn't kill Peter or those Muggles. I was not in league with Voldemort. I would have rather stabbed myself in the heart than betrayed James."

The minister turned back to glance at Dumbledore, both looking torn and concerned with everything that had happened in such a short period of time, though Dumbledore looked far more perturbed by it all, as though it were a personal slight against him rather than an epic fuck up on part of Crouch and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Before anyone could say another word against Sirius, Cassie stepped forward, making the decision for them as previously rehearsed. "The Ancient and Noble House of Black reclaims its stolen son," she said, words carefully chosen as she pointed at Sirius. "Sirius Black is innocent, and we demand that the world know this." In the corner of the room, Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill broke from writing so rapidly. "Let it be known," Cassie continued, "now and forever, that Bartemius Crouch is an enemy of the Black coven and the House we represent for the crimes committed against a son of our House."

Crouch paled dramatically, his moustache quivering on his face. "Wh-What?" he stammered. "You can't. I-I'm a son of the House of Black as well! Camilla, tell them! I'm a son of the House of Black!"

"Not anymore," Minerva tersely ground out. "The coven has made our decision."

Sirius blinked, confused. "Coven?"

"Never you mind that, young man," Minerva said, waving her wand intricately over his chest and ending the Sanguinem Verus. "Come with me; we'll get you home safely." When the chains did not release his limbs, she turned and sent a withering glare to the Aurors standing nearby. They shared a brief look with the minister before rushing to release their prisoner.

Sirius coughed as the final remnants of the spell were pulled from his chest. "Home?" He leant against the older witch, stumbling a bit as he tried to plant his misshapen feet firmly on the ground. The Aurors stepped back as the majority of the coven moved to surround the former heir of their House, each witch looking more dangerous than the last as they glared across the room, eyes narrowed at their newly proclaimed enemy, Bartemius Crouch.

When Crouch's gaze landed on his sister, he stood up and pointed at her. "You—! Camilla! Camilla!"

Camila sighed, watching as her brother fought his way forward, wand in hand. "Someone should give him a book on old magics and etiquette. He knows better. Mother would be beside herself. He's liable to get himself killed." Before he could do just that, she flicked her wand, stunning the idiot. "Let's get out of here before this place turns into an even bigger madhouse."

Belina scoffed at the ungraceful way that Crouch collapsed. "You were raised by the same parents?"

"Barty's always been a bit touched," Camilla said before closing in around Sirius on one side with Belina.
Cassie turned to look at Dorea, who nodded her head once. The coven reacted swiftly, shifting out the door and into a private room with Sirius in tow; only Cassie and Minerva remained behind with Dorea to face the minister, the Wizengamot, and the press.
"Madam Potter, I would like to apologise for what was clearly a most grievous oversight on our part." Minister Bagnold looked nervous as she approached Dorea. "I am so very sorry for what happened to your son." At Dorea's narrowed eyes and lifted eyebrow, she quickly corrected, "To both of your sons."

"Minister, the only people who need to be sorry are those who are at fault," Dorea assured her, doing her level best not to look in Dumbledore's direction despite the fact that he was trying to make a beeline right for her. She nudged Cassie, a silent request to intervene should Dumbledore prove successful in his efforts.

Bagnold smiled awkwardly. "Can we hope that the Black coven will be on friendly terms with the Ministry?"

Dorea held back the scowl that she wanted to send the woman who was already basically asking for favour mere seconds after fully admitting the Ministry's fault in the imprisonment of her innocent son. Still, Dorea had expected nothing less from politicians. "Our coven plans to rectify a great many things in our community, Minister. As long as the Ministry tries to keep up with us, we will have no problems," she said, leaving the subtle threat lingering in the air between them. In case the minister was slow on the uptake, she added, "Any interference, and we will not be as patient and understanding as we were here today."

The minister looked just nervous enough to please her, so Dorea turned to take her leave, only to be stopped mid step by Rita Skeeter. The eager little reporter was practically salivating at the mouth.

"Madam Potter," Rita said and then smiled brightly as though they were old friends. "Dorea, would you be willing to answer a few questions for the Daily Prophet? I think that what you just said to Minister Bagnold would be something the entire Wizarding world would like to hear."

Dorea forced herself to look hesitant despite having already prepared answers to a number of questions. Cassie put a hand on her shoulder, looking concerned for Dorea's well-being, which was hardly necessary, but it made the "concerned mother look" all the more approachable for the photographer, who continued to snap photographs.

"Just a few questions, Miss Skeeter," Cassie said and then grinned. "Lovely brooch, by the way."

Rita buzzed excitedly over the praise. "Thank you, Miss Black." She looked to Minerva, as though expecting a word from her as well, and she nearly melted under the withering expression that the witch was giving her.

Clearing her throat, Rita returned her attention to Dorea. "Madam Potter, covens, especially family covens are so rare these days. You mentioned to the minister that you plan on helping to heal and rebuild our community. Does this mean you're open to requests?"

"Yes, but not for some time," she said slowly so that Rita's Quick Quotes Quill wouldn't have a chance to fill in any blanks on its own should it be unable to keep up with her. "I am aware that in the past, covens have been used to facilitate celebrations, rituals, fertility rites, and even offer protection of Houses through the construction of wards that might otherwise be too expensive for a
family.

"We're taught at Hogwarts how to harness individual magic, but rarely is there opportunities to learn to embrace magic, and rituals, together. Family covens have a distinct advantage. Our blood and bonds bind our magic together, and we are able to harmonise in one purpose. The power created can be a great and terrible thing. We are burdened with the responsibility, and we wish for Wizarding Britain to know that we do not take our duty lightly.

"While we do plan on helping our community, much of our magic will be spent over the next year or so building protections for ourselves. We cannot help others if we ourselves are not looked after. Also, as we are a new coven, we need time to adjust to one another within ritual. Exposing others to our combined magic without knowing our own limitations would be careless at best."

"Are you willing to release the names of your coven members?"

Cassie snorted indignantly, and Minerva rolled her eyes. Dorea, however, just smiled. "While we have nothing to hide, openly releasing the names seems like an invitation to our lazy enemies."

Rita lifted a perfectly manicured brow. "Lazy?"

"Anyone with half a brain could put in the effort to discover our coven," Cassie blurted out. "We're family, after all. However, we are just like everyone else, and we do not wish to gain any new celebrity from this event. Make no mistake, we are proud to stand together as witches, but the reasons for the creation of our coven were dire. We must look inward and protect our family first."

Dorea nodded in agreement. "My sister is correct. Covens are sacred," she said in a tone that might have come across as reproachful had Rita picked up on it. "Morgana has blessed us with the creation of our family coven. How many families can say that they have at least thirteen witches alive and all of the same heart and mind to conduct the kind of magic that this world is in need of?"

"And what kind of magic is that?" Rita asked.

"Healing Magic, Miss Skeeter," Dorea said with a soft smile. "We plan to heal and protect those who cannot do for themselves."

"Such as?"

"Wizards and witches who have been harmed by war, those unjustly convicted, those who have been cast from their own families." Minerva stepped in, a cross look on her face as she stared the reporter down. Her eyes flicked to the Quick Quotes Quill and narrowed as it kept writing even though she had ceased speaking. As though the quill had taken notice, it stopped moving. "Not to mention first generation witches and wizards who are in need of guidance."

Obviously shocked and not even trying to hide it, Rita almost laughed as she asked, "Muggle-borns?" At the unamused expressions she was met with, the reported stammered out, "B-But . . . With all due respect, the House of Black hasn't exactly been known for their *tolerance* of Muggle-borns in the past."

"Which is why the past is behind us, Miss Skeeter," Dorea said firmly. "The House of Black has always been a mixture of personal beliefs regarding first generation magic and those who choose to learn and embrace Muggle culture. The problem has been that our Patriarch has always been of the mindset that we are not only above Muggles and Muggle-borns but other families in our community as well. Our coven is here to *loudly* disagree with the wizards who have led our House in the past. We are here to help rebuild our world into something better, something *safer* for us all."
It had been a firm point that Dorea was not willing to back down on. She had never been close with many Muggle-borns at school, and her life post-Hogwarts was largely taken up by Charlus and her children. She had previously prided herself on not being anti-Muggle-born or openly speaking out against them. However, with James dying for a war based on blood prejudice, and her Muggle-born daughter-in-law giving her life to take down Voldemort, Dorea realised that she had made a grave error in merely being silent while others loudly preached their prejudice. She would not let her family or coven be known for being silent.

"Are you planning on embracing new members?"

"Witches with a blood connection to the House of Black are welcome to speak with us," Cassie answered. "In time, we will also welcome those who are connected to our family through marriage or other bonds. Eventually, we plan on granting limited membership to our coven through those who wish to participate in blood bonding."

"Anyone?" Rita prompted. "Even Muggle-borns?"

"Especially Muggle-borns," Dorea insisted. "Miss Skeeter, I never had the privilege of meeting my daughter-in-law, Lily Potter, but I am to understand that she was the brightest witch of her age. Why on earth would we turn our backs on a culture that has the ability to produce a witch with brilliance, strength, and power to defeat a Dark Lord?"

Clearly surprised and somewhat thrown by the statement, Rita looked to the side where Dumbledore was standing, openly gazing as he observed the interview. "Madam Potter, surely . . . It's widely known that Harry er . . . your grandson defeated You-Know-Who."

"Is it? How silly. He's just a boy, Miss Skeeter," Dorea said, smiling condescendingly at the woman. "A boy as normal and average as any other. I hardly think that my grandson, who spent his morning playing with dragon toys and eating waffles, is some great Dark Lord slayer." She laughed quietly, smiling when both Cassie and Minerva joined in. She used the moment to look over Minerva's shoulder, making eye contact with Dumbledore. "How preposterous. No, I give credit where it is due. Lily Potter saved us all. Morgana bless my son for loving that witch and embracing her Muggle background."

"Do all your coven members feel similarly?" Rita asked, scanning the room carefully, as though she could spot lingering coven members. "I saw Belina Burke leave just now. And despite being cleared of any suspicion, some still believe that Lucius Malfoy, husband of your niece Narcissa, was a follower of You-Know-Who. What do you say to people who would ask how you could name Bartemius Crouch an enemy of your coven, and yet welcome the Malfoys into it?"

"I say that family is above all. And that we are not out for vengeance; we seek justice. Our justice may be cruel when we are crossed, but we are not above mercy. Morgana is known for her powers and her preference for Dark Magic, but she was also a magnificent Healer. We follow in her steps." Dorea paused, appearing to hesitate, though every word and breath had been carefully planned. "In fact . . . any marked Death Eater who stood beside the false Dark Lord, Voldemort, has three days to seek out the Black coven for forgiveness, healing, and sanctuary. They will be judged and assessed. If redemption exists for their souls, we will help them seek it."

A few people, who had been eavesdropping along with Dumbledore, gasped loudly, shocked by the announcement. Some turned and left the room quickly, likely to spread the word faster than the Daily Prophet would print. Rita scowled in their direction.

"Wow. I . . . You're willing to forgive Death Eaters?"
"We're willing to hear them speak," Cassie clarified.

"The hatred and prejudice that Voldemort used in his war is an infection, Miss Skeeter. Our society stinks of it. Lily Potter defeated a disease, but our body is left wounded and untreated. Without some sort of intervention, Death Eaters will begin to fester and rot, and we shall find ourselves in another predicament, won't we?"

"Why three days?"

Dorea smirked. "Three is a powerful number."

"So is seven," Rita said with a teasing grin of her own.

Dorea shrugged a slender shoulder. "I'm an impatient woman. Speaking of which, I have a son that is in need of his mother. Good day, Miss Skeeter."

Cassie and Minerva flanked her as Dorea made her way past Rita, heading for the room where the rest of the coven had taken Sirius. The short time they had spent in the Wizengamot chamber was long enough, and Dorea was eager to get home. She could not begin to imagine how desperately Sirius was in need of familiar comforts: food, a bath, a warm bed.

"Madam Potter, if I may—"

Dumbledore frowned and took a step closer, ignoring Minerva's widening eyes as he did so. "Dorea," he whispered, "you can't keep Harry—"

"Tut tut, Albie." Cassie tapped the man on the end of his crooked nose, stepping in front of Dorea to allow her an escape. "It would be in your best interest to forget the name Harry Potter exists," she said, her tone light but threatening at the same time. "We'll be in touch. That, I can guarantee."

Dorea, Minerva, and Cassie walked into the room. They passed Lucretia, Camilla, and Belina, who were guarding the door like a cerberus, each looking alert and ready to inflict the most painful violence upon any who would dare try to undermine the coven at such a crucial moment. The door closed behind them all, and Dorea's heart broke at the sight in front of her.

"It's all right, love," Andromeda whispered soothingly to Sirius, who was curled in her arms, sobbing into her shoulder.

Cedrella was quietly casting Healing Charms from nearby. Sirius's broken feet—Cedrella's pressing concern—were bandaged, the wrappings glowing a soft blue indicating that a Pain Relief Charm had been placed on them to help him walk until more permanent repairs could be made. The other witches stood around Sirius and Andromeda in a protective circle, each looking more heart-broken than the last. Narcissa, in particular, looked quite devastated. Dorea recalled that before her niece's betrothal to Lucius, followed by Sirius's disownment, the cousins had been quite close.

"Perhaps we should give them a moment," Minerva suggested to the other witches, gesturing to Dorea. When Andromeda tried to move, causing Sirius to stiffen, Minerva held up her hand. "You stay right where you are, young lady." She put her arm around Nymphadora's shoulders, the tips of
her fingers playing with the ends of the girl's long, black hair. "Brighter colours look better on you, my dear."

Nymphadora nodded sadly. "I know, but . . ." She trailed off, her gaze turning back to her mother, who was rubbing soothing circles on Sirius's back. "Is he going to be all right?"

"In time."

Minerva ushered the other witches out of the room where they created a barricade in front of the door on the other side to prevent Aurors, Ministry officials, the press, and especially Albus Dumbledore from entering.

Sirius had spent five years in that cell, but he only knew as much because he had been sane enough to occasionally overhear the prison guards talk to one another. While the rest of the prisoners wailed and cried as dementors sucked every last bit of joy from their memories, Padfoot eavesdropped and kept to himself as the creatures overlooked him. Despite not having a window in his cell, Sirius knew the changing of the seasons when the guards talked about sending their kids off to Hogwarts or picking them up at King's Cross for the summer. He had known that exactly five years had passed when one particularly prickly guard bitched for three weeks straight about losing fifty Galleons on the Quidditch World Cup that summer.

The day to day, however, alluded him. His cell was always dark; what minimal light he had to see with came from the torches in the corridors to line the path for the guards. Every so often there would be an inspection and, depending on the Ministry official, Sirius would play simple-minded, or he would flirt his way into getting something to read to pass the time. He did not possess a wand, of course, but what little wandless magic he did know provided decent distraction once he had been able to pull ink from an old Daily Prophet and use it to add to his collection of tattoos.

Dorea would have rolled her eyes at him.

He had wished for years that he could write to someone. Write to Dumbledore and ask for his help. Write to Remus and ask about Harry. Write to Dillonsby and ask about his mother's health. Write to Walburga and tell her that he hoped she would die of spattergroit.

Over five years of rotting in that cell with nothing but a bucket of shit to keep him company. Then suddenly, Aurors had shown up, whispering amongst one another and glaring at him as they yanked his cell door open, kicking him in the ribs and head until he blacked out.

When he awoke, he was in a small room, chained to the floor.

No one said a word as to why he was there—wherever he was. No one said a thing until Bartemius Crouch came into the room, eyes blazing with hatred and fury. He aimed his wand at Sirius, hand shaking, before pulling back and spitting on him instead.

"No dementors, per Minister's orders," Crouch said before disappearing.

The Aurors he left behind enjoyed making up for the lack of dementors. They hexed and jinxed and cursed him until he was bruised, broken, and bleeding. He had been hit in the head by two Confundus Charms that left him dizzy. It was not until a woman appeared, ordering the Aurors around and complaining about missing records, that Sirius had even a moment of reprieve. When they finally pulled him out of the room and into the large Wizengamot chambers, he was fully prepared for execution.

Even then, back in the room surrounded by the smell of witches, and Andromeda's arms encircling
him, Sirius was fairly positive that he was hallucinating. Either that, or the dementors had finally Kissed his soul right out of his chest, and this was some place between life and death.

"You're free," Andromeda whispered. "No more Azkaban."

Sirius broke.

His chest hurt from broken ribs, and the sobbing made the pain all the more real, which he both hated and enjoyed. He didn't like pain, but because of it, he was pretty certain that he was still alive. When another set of warm arms encircled him, he didn't protest. The strong, familiar smell of gardenia and hollyhock flooded his nostrils.

He pulled back just enough to look up into iridescent purple eyes that eventually shifted grey, and he weakly cried, "Mum?"

"Hello my brave, brave boy," she whispered, her bottom lip trembling as she stroked his face with gentle fingers, letting tears roll down her cheeks rather than let go of him to wipe them away. She was smiling; a smile filled with grief and heartache and relief all at the same time.

"I didn't save them," he said, his voice cracking. "James is dead. I saw him... I... I didn't mean to. It's my fault," he confessed on the end of another wracking sob. "It's my fault!"

"It is not," she said softly, pulling his head to her chest and rocking him the same way she used to when he was a teenager and woke up in the middle of the night with nightmares, thinking he was still back at Grimmauld Place with Walburga. "It is not your fault. You did everything you could to protect your brother. I know that. James knew that." Her voice broke a little when saying the name. "And you have suffered enough for your guilt. No more, Sirius. No more, my darling. It's time to heal and be strong again. We have to be strong, don't we?"

When he did not answer her, instead fisting her robes tight in hand as though she could disappear at any moment, Dorea sighed. "We have to be strong for Harry."

Sirius stopped crying, sucking in deep breaths. "Harry."

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**Potter Manor**

Sirius remembered the old manor as though he had been there yesterday. Not a single thing had changed since he had helped James pack the place up. James had felt lonely in the large manor, and Lily fell in love with the cottage in Godric's Hollow. Sirius did his level best not to think of what the cottage looked like the last time he had seen it. Noting that Dorea and Andromeda were leading him in through the east wing entrance, he took little time in asking, "Where's Harry?"

"He's in another wing of the manor with Andromeda's husband," Dorea answered. "I need Cedrella to finish checking you for injuries, preferably in an area where no accidental magic can cause harm to Harry."

Sirius nodded in understanding. It made sense. The last thing he wanted was to hurt Harry. "Ted," he said, looking up at Andromeda. "I remember him."

"Do you remember Nymphadora?" Andromeda asked with a smile. "She's at Hogwarts now. The wretched little thing," she said with a quiet laugh.

"It's only been five years, Andy."
Dorea scoffed and angrily muttered under her breath, "Only."

Sirius sighed, squeezing her hand, relieved that it still felt automatic to do so. The woman had been his mother and comforted him when he needed it, and he had been quite the affectionate child, making up for years of neglect from Walburga. He had not stopped holding Dorea's hand in public places until he was fourteen, and James teased him mercilessly for it. Even then, he had merely transferred her arm to the crook of his elbow and walked around as though he were some great lord escorting her from shop to shop.

"You . . . you know what I mean, Mum."

Once they were in a secure room—an old guest bedroom from the looks of it—Sirius sat down and forced a smile when Cedrella came in. She looked uneasy at first until she unwrapped the bandages that she had placed around his broken feet, at which point her expression was full of pity. Sirius was not sure which look he hated more.

"Can you lift your arms?" she asked. Sirius winced as he obeyed her, his breath hitching when his right arm would not lift as high as the left. "Just as I thought. Several broken ribs." Her magic washed over him, and Sirius nearly collapsed with the relief that came with whatever spell she had used to ease his pain. "There's some internal bleeding as well. This is recent."

He shrugged half-heartedly. "Aurors aren't as chipper as they used to be, I s'pose." When Dorea bristled angrily, Sirius noticed that small flames lingered at the tips of her fingers. That was new. "Don't bother getting upset now, Mum. Nothing to be done about it. If I've learned anything in the past five years, it's that not a damned thing actually gets done in the Ministry when it should. The whole fucking place is corrupt."

"So I've seen," Dorea ground out.

He looked up, eager to distract her from feeling sorry for him. "Where's Moony? Remus."

"I have the coven looking for him."

"I have the coven looking for him."

His brow furrowed in confusion. "Looking? Didn't you get Harry . . ." Her nose twitched—an old tell that he remembered from when he and James would get into trouble. She was angry but trying to hide it. That made him panic. "Harry wasn't with Remus?"

Dorea sighed. "It's a long story, love."

Cedrella winced apologetically when her exploring fingers found an old injury near his knee from years back that was never properly healed. "He'll have to be given Skele-Gro tonight for his feet. I also want to put him on similar potions as Harry to get him back to a healthy weight and repair the malnutrition," she told Dorea. "His muscles are atrophied and—"

"Wait, what?" Sirius gaped at Cedrella before turning his focus on his mother, horrified by what he was hearing. "Why is Harry on potions like that? What happened to him? What happened to my boy?" he demanded angrily and tried to stand, only to have Cedrella and Andromeda both wrestle him back onto the bed before he did further damage to his feet. "Mum!"

Dorea placed a hand on his shoulder and gently pushed the strands of long, dirty hair from his face. "Calm down. If you don't calm down on your own, I'll be forced to ask Cedrella to administer a Calming Draught. Harry is safe. Now."

His chest ached something fierce, remembering the last time he had seen Harry. He had been so small in Hagrid's massive arms, crying out for Lily, that painful-looking scar on his forehead. Sirius
remembered trying to heal it to no avail. He still was not sure what that meant. Harry would be six now, he mentally noted, wondering if the scar had remained all these years. "What aren't you telling me? What's wrong with him?"

"He was raised by his Muggle family."


"Nothing," Cedrella muttered furiously as she rewrapped his feet, casting an Impervious Charm on the bandages. "That was the majority of the problem."

"The Muggles will be dealt with, Sirius," Dorea said before he had a chance to ask what exactly Cedrella had meant.

"I'll leave the potions in your study," Cedrella said. "I'll Floo in the morning for the . . . Well, you know."

Dorea gave a nod to Cedrella and Andromeda, and the two gave a parting smile to Sirius before closing the door as they left. Turning her full attention on her son, Dorea used her wand to help cut the prison robes from his body. She tried to distract him a bit from his anger by tutting at the sight of the tattoos spanning the width of his chest. He gave her the smallest hint of a grin before frowning once again in consternation.

"Don't think of anything other than resting," she said softly. "My job is to make sure you and Harry both get well, and that you feel safe in this home." She stood and walked into the en suite bathroom to fill the bathtub, returning to help him stand. "When you have your strength again, you can help me plot the demise of every last person who might be a threat to our family."

Feeling like a child again instead of the twenty-seven-year-old man that he was, Sirius let go of her arm and hobbled his way into the bathroom behind her. He ignored her when she looked at him reproachfully, knowing that she likely had planned to help him walk. "I can do it," he said when her mouth opened.

She turned around just enough to offer him a small bit of privacy as he pulled his trousers down and very carefully climbed into the tub, using the wall as leverage. The hot water felt like fire at first, and he let out a pained yelp before the heat warmed through to his bones and he shivered, melting into the weightless feel of it. He pulled his knees to his chest, sighing when Dorea turned and gently wrung a wet flannel out down his back. "Umm . . . Walburga . . . is—"

"Dead."

He nodded thoughtfully. "And Peter?"

Dorea frowned at how dirty the water already was, but refused to say a word about it knowing that Sirius was already likely having an issue sucking up his pride. He did not need to feel even worse than he already did. "Oh, I imagine the whole Wizarding world will be on the lookout for him very soon."

Sirius almost choked on pent up emotions as he whispered, "Remus. I thought it was him. How could I have thought . . .? He needs to know the truth. I need to apologise."

"We'll find him, love. I promise you."
Aubergine Trousers

January 11th, 1987
Potter Manor

Dorea silently cursed both Dumbledore and Voldemort as she walked from one end of the manor to the other. Sirius would be placed in one wing of her home with Harry on the opposite side until Sirius felt he was ready to be reintroduced to the boy. Had she only had a son or grandson to care for, Dorea's magic might have not crackled at the tips of her fingers, but because Dumbledore played games with her family in the aftermath of a war, Dorea now had a neglected six-year-old to care for, as well as a twenty-seven-year-old man, who spent the better part of the past five years living as a dog to survive.

She was so lost in her thoughts that she had not been prepared for the small boy running into her excitedly. Her heart leapt into her chest at the sight of the mop of black hair and the bright smile, and Dorea had to focus on his eyes to remind herself that this was not James, but Harry. Harry, who had been a quiet and shy little thing when she had left him that morning, but was now as rambunctious as any other child she had ever met.

"Grandmother, can Uncle Ted come over tomorrow and play?"

Her mouth fell open in shock, and she tried not to show how being called "Grandmother" nearly brought tears to her eyes. Looking up, Dorea found a smiling Ted Tonks leaning casually against the wall, watching them with approval. She wondered what exactly the man had done in the hours of her absence to get Harry to bring down his walls so fluidly. When she reached out to affectionately touch Harry's hair, he very briefly pulled away before allowing it. She held back the sigh that almost escaped. Not all of the walls were down. So as not to make him think he had done anything wrong, Dorea gave no reaction to Harry's hesitancy at being touched.

"We'll have to see, darling. But I'm sure he can come over again sometime very soon," she promised, watching happily when Harry's smile widened.

She followed him into a drawing room that was home to a fort built from armchairs, tables, bed sheets, and pillows. A sock was tied to the top of Charlus's grandfather's lion head cane as a makeshift flag sticking out of the centre of the fort. The toy dragons sat at the foot of the entrance like guards.

"Why don't you take all of your toys back to your room? Do you remember the way?"

"Yes." Harry nodded and very quickly began gathering up the dragons. His gaze flickered over the fort, and his smile faltered. "I . . . I'm sorry. I'll clean it up."

Dorea acted quickly. "What needs to be cleaned up, dear? This is clearly the most perfect place in the entire house for a fort. In fact, you've done me a great favour." She put her hands on her hips, surveying the room as though she were inspecting it. "I have wanted a fort in this home for many years, and now I don't have to build it all on my own."

Harry watched her carefully and then, as though he felt it was the appropriate response—rather than wanting to on his own—he stepped forward and hugged her. His arms were not tight, and he did not linger, but Dorea felt a wave of emotion wash over her all the same. She touched the top of his head and exhaled. "There's a good lad. Off you run."
She brought a hand to her chest as she watched Harry carry his dragons down the hallway. "Is that the same boy I left this morning?"

Ted smiled brightly. "He's a fun kid, especially once you break through the walls he's built up around himself." He paused for a long moment before turning to her, his expression earnest. "Madam Potter, can we talk?"

Smile gone instantly, Dorea faced the man and frowned. "What is it?"

Ted walked further into the drawing room, stepping over a series of sheets that had been rolled into ropes to create a bridge in front of the fort. He took a seat at a small table in the corner of the room and folded his hands in front of him when she sat opposite. "Harry said some things that were a little alarming," he said right away. "Andromeda didn't tell me too many details, other than his aunt and uncle were Muggles, and that they weren't the sort who liked magical folk."

Dorea bristled. "They kept him in a cupboard." She had not wanted to share that information with many people outside of the coven, but Ted had somehow managed to get Harry to behave like a happy little boy. Perhaps if he knew everything, he could do more for her grandson.

Ted sighed at the revelation, but he did not look surprised. "That makes sense. Not the . . . I meant that Harry really takes to the bigger rooms," he said, gesturing to the transformed drawing room. "We played hide and seek early on, and he wouldn't hide in obvious places like cupboards or inside furniture like Dora used to when she was little. Harry preferred to hide on the other side of a wall or behind the sofa, but always in a position that he could easily run from so he wouldn't get stuck. Even the fort there has multiple exits, and he was very adamant about there being nothing blocking pathways."

Dorea was hesitant as she asked, "Do you think they ever hit him?" She did her best to separate Harry from Sirius, and Petunia Dursley was certainly no Walburga Black, but she could not help but prepare herself for raising another child with such a painful past.

"Couldn't say. He doesn't flinch like you might think a child who'd been abused would, but he stayed out of arm's length from me in the beginning, and he shied away when I patted him on the arm. I'm guessing he got dragged around a bit."

Dorea nodded thoughtfully, trying to remain calm as she absorbed the new information, most of which she had already suspected. She wasn't at all prepared when Ted informed her: "He can't read."

"He's six," she said automatically, cringing when she heard the words leave her mouth. James had certainly known how to read by that age.

"He can't read well for a six-year-old," Ted clarified. "I brought down some of the Muggle books from his room, and he ignored anything that didn't have pictures. When I asked him if he wanted to take turns reading, he got upset and ignored me for a good twenty minutes. I asked him about school; he said his teachers weren't very nice. Some other children made fun of him because he didn't know how to spell his name. He knows now." He pulled a parchment from his trouser pocket and unfolded it in front of her—Harry's name was scribbled repeatedly from top to bottom in messy writing. "Seemed pretty determined to show me once I'd sussed out what was wrong. He behaves as though he's trying to prove his worth. I don't even know whether or not he's doing so consciously."

She ran the tips of her fingers over the name. "I highly doubt his Muggle relatives ever read to him or gave a care for his education. I'm honestly surprised they bothered sending him to school."

"Muggles have laws that make sure children attend," Ted informed her. "He'll need a lot of tutoring
just to catch up with children his own age. I'm not a teacher, but if you can't manage to find someone with the time, I'd be happy to help out."

Not one to cry in front of strangers, Dorea swallowed down her emotions and offered him a prim smile. "I can't thank you enough, Mr Tonks."

He grinned, openly amused by her polite facade. "Call me Ted. You're performing blood magic with my wife and daughter. I think we should all be on a first-name basis."

She lifted a curious brow, smirking when he chuckled at her reaction. "You take to our ways quite well, Ted."

He leant back in the chair, making himself comfortable now that they were "family" and he wasn't just a last minute babysitter. "When I got my Hogwarts letter... God, it was all I could do to not leave for King's Cross that day. I hated waiting." His eyes glimmered with nostalgic fondness. "Muggle-borns eat it all up, y'know? Most of that magic happens to be all the flashy bits and things that purebloods take for granted, but piece by piece, we want to know more."

"My parents are Muggle, but I'm not. I'll always like to do things a bit differently from Andy, and I'd like Dora to know how to handle life in the Muggle world if she ever needed to, but this is our life. Our world. I'm fine with what that all entails. We're taught History of Magic in Hogwarts, but nothing about traditions and culture. It's as much a part of a birthright for us as any pureblood."

"You should be the spokesperson for all Muggle-borns."

Ted scoffed good-naturedly. "Blood supremacy will always be out there. Just because you put a handsome face on Muggle-borns, doesn't mean that the fear and hatred will go away just like that."

Dorea smiled. "It's something I want to work on. I'd be happy to have your input on the matter."

"I'd be honoured. As for Sirius, you let me know when he's good to socialise again." At her automatically defensive expression, he put his hands up. "Andy gave me an update on her way out. Sirius was always a decent fellow, and good with Nymphadora when she was just a little one. I never believed the rubbish the papers printed about him. Once he's on his feet again, we'll all have a big family dinner. I make a wicked fondue."

Dorea let out a small laugh at the thought. "Don't go to any trouble for us."

"Trouble?" Ted grinned brightly, his eyes lit up with mischief and excitement. "You having a laugh? I'd pay ten Galleons to watch Lucius bloody Malfoy attempt to eat melted cheese off of a stick and stay clean in the process. I'll bet he nibbles."

Grateful that she had never learnt to depend on house-elves, Dorea sat Harry down on a chair in the kitchen beside her while she prepared a simple dinner for the two of them. Sirius would need a slower reintroduction to food that would consist of clear broths and bland porridge until he could stomach anything else, but Harry seemed to be all right as far as variety went, though the portions were off for a boy of his age.

After dinner, she placed a phial in Harry's hands and smiled sweetly at him. "Drink up. It'll make you healthy and strong."

He stared at it the same way he had looked at the others but said nothing as he drank the potion, handing her back the glass tube when he was done. She took it from his hands and grimaced when she almost grabbed her wand to vanish it. Sighing and realising that she could never handle life in the
Muggle world, Dorea came to a decision.

"Harry, do you believe in magic?"

Harry looked up at her, eyes wide. "That's a bad word."

She frowned at his expression. "I beg your pardon?"

He looked down. "I . . . Uncle Vernon says it's nonsense."

"When did he say that?"

"After my haircut." She waited patiently for him to continue. "It grew back real fast. Like that," he said and tried to snap his fingers. "He yelled and asked what I did. I told him my hair grew quick, like magic. He got mad, and he put me in . . ."

"In your cupboard?"

Harry nodded.

"Did you know, my love, that Vernon Dursley is a very silly man who knows absolutely nothing?" Harry's eyes lifted from the table to meet her gaze. He fidgeted a bit with his hands, scratching at the scar on his forehead, looking nervous to react to her statement. "In fact," she continued, "I would bet you a whole treacle tart that your uncle is not even a man at all. I bet he's a very large aubergine that learnt to talk."

Nervousness cracked, Harry let out a burst of laughter and covered his mouth. Dorea grinned brightly at him. "That's why his face is so purple."

Harry shook his head, still snickering. "He's only purple when he's mad."

She mimicked his headshake. "No, no, no. Aubergines can't get angry; everyone knows that. I wonder if some witch plucked an aubergine from a vegetable garden and said, 'I think this aubergine needs trousers and moustache.'"

Harry folded his arms on the table and buried his face in them in an attempt to stifle his giggles, which did not work in the slightest. Dorea was glad that Sirius had been given a healthy dose of Sleeping Draught, or else the echoing laughter surely would have woken him, even from across the manor.

While Harry continued to laugh into his arms, Dorea took her wand and summoned an apple from a bowl of fruit in the centre of the table. "Colovaria," she whispered under her breath, smiling as the green apple turned purple. With Harry still distracted, she twisted the apple's shape, adding an Engorgement Charm as well to increase its size. Slipping her wand back into the pocket of her robes, she announced, "Look who I've found!"

Harry glanced up and burst into another round of laughter at the sight of the aubergine.

"Why, Mr Dursley," Dorea said to the aubergine, "I hardly think it's appropriate to come to dinner without trousers."

Harry giggled again and handed over his napkin. "Make him trousers, Grandmother."

She took the napkin and folded it around the bottom of the aubergine. "Well, that's not quite right, is it? Looks a bit like a nappy." Harry's cheeks were pink from laughing, his eyes bright with joy.
"What should we do about this? Maybe a bit of magic?"

"Yes!" Harry exclaimed.

"Oh, but Vernon here does not like magic, does he?" she asked. "Tsk. Tsk. That's quite silly of him. Silly Aubergine Dursley would rather wear a nappy than admit that magic is real." She looked at the aubergine again. "Now, Vernon, you can either admit that magic is real, or wear a nappy for the rest of your life. Harry and I know that magic is real, don't we Harry?"

Harry nodded excitedly.

"In fact," she said and pulled her wand out of her robes once more, "I have found myself a wand."

Eyes wide, Harry peeked beneath the table to see where the wand had been hidden. "Should we magically make trousers for Mr Dursley?" Harry looked back up at her and nodded eagerly. She smiled at him and tapped her wand against the napkin three times, then muttered, "Bracafors!"

Harry's eyes widened comically, and his mouth fell open when the napkin around the bottom half of the aubergine turned into a tiny pair of trousers fit for a doll. "How did . . . ?"

When he did not seem terrified by what had happened, Dorea prompted, "Would you like to see another spell?" The eager nod that followed was almost immediate. "Draconifors," she whispered, and the aubergine shook in her hands, transfiguring back into the green apple before shifting once again into a tiny dragon.

Silent, Harry stared in awe as the little dragon approached him. "Is it real?"

"The dragon?" Dorea asked. "Or magic?"

Harry licked his lips and looked up at her nervously. "Both."

She grinned.

January 12th, 1987

By the time the Sleeping Draught wore off, Sirius was still so exhausted that he had continued sleeping well into the afternoon of the following day. It had been too long since he had slept in a proper bed instead of a mouldy old cot or the cold stone floor of his cell. The warmth of the covers was almost suffocating, but he refused to part with them lest the past twenty-four hours turn out to only have been a dream, and he would soon wake again in Azkaban, freezing and miserable.

Eventually, he managed to crawl out of bed long enough to find the array of potions set out on his bedside table. Despite any unpleasant aftertaste, Sirius was thrilled to have magical healing back in his life. Within minutes, he was feeling calm, focused, and in slightly less pain. The Vitamix Potion had an added effect of giving him energy as well.

Planting his healed feet on the floor, Sirius stood and checked that the door to his room was open, smiling and sighing in relief that he had not been moved from one cage to another. There was a pile of clothes on a chair near the door that included folded trousers and simple robes. On top of the clothing was a wand. His wand.

Figuring that his mother must have retrieved it, and any possible other items that the Aurors who arrested him decided to keep (though his favourite leather jacket was nowhere in sight.) His fingertips touched the wood and felt the magic reconnecting, blending, merging like it had all those years ago in Ollivander's shop. He remembered holding the wand for the first time, feeling the magic
resonate, and thinking that he would be off to Hogwarts—free of Walburga.

Funny how the wand still redefined what "free" meant to him.

After dressing, Sirius tucked his wand into the waistband of his trousers—ignoring a voice that sounded like Lily scolding him for it—and anxiously shifted down into his Animagus form. Old habits died hard, and Sirius felt more comfortable as Padfoot just in case he needed to make a speedy getaway from any situation.

He had planned on making his way to the kitchen for some food, but a strange smell redirected him down a long stretch of hallway and up a staircase to the wing where he and James used to live when they were teenagers. His ears perked at the sound of male voices.

"—get my own wand, Uncle Ted?"

"When you're eleven, Harry."

Padfoot froze outside of the room, shaking.

"Do you want me to keep reading, or would you like to try a few words?"

"No. You go."

"All right. 'Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is one of the safest places in the world. It is heavily enchanted and hidden away from Muggles. If a Muggle stumbles upon Hogwarts, all they will see is an old ruin, with a sign that reads: Danger. Do Not Enter. Unsafe.' Do you know what a Muggle is, Harry?"

"Grandmother told me. They don't got magic like us. Except my mummy."

"Actually, your mum was a Muggle-born, like me. That means that our parents are Muggles, but we have magic."

Peeking his head slightly inside the bedroom that used to belong to James, Sirius spotted Ted Tonks sitting on the floor beside a little boy with black hair. He sucked in a sharp breath through his nose. The Pain Relief Potions had not been enough. They eased most of the aches in his muscles and put a warmth back in his bones, but the stabbing pain in his chest was left unaffected. He let out a quiet whimper that unwillingly attracted Ted's attention.

"I'll be right back, Harry," Ted said, passing the large book into Harry's lap. "If you want, you can look at the pictures." Harry kept his attention on the book, even as Ted left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

The black dog stared up at him.

"And what's your name, big fella?"

In a rush of magic, Sirius stood before the man in human form. "Padfoot."

Ted grinned. "Sirius." He hesitated for a moment, watching the man's reaction before opening up his arms and hugging him tightly. "God, it's good to see you, mate."

Sirius sniffed and held onto his cousin's husband as though he would collapse without him there. "Harry's in there," he whispered. "Ted . . . I . . . I—"

Ted pulled away, keeping his hands on Sirius's shoulders. "Does Dorea know you're up and about?"
"She left my room unlocked. No wards."

Smirking, Ted shook his head. "Why Slytherins can't just say what they mean, I'll never know. So, she's obviously fine with you seeing Harry, even without her supervision." Sirius's nose twitched, and Ted smiled. "Gesture of good faith?"

Sirius shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe she's just making me take the first steps on my own." He frowned, staring at the door. "Everything bad that's ever happened to Harry is my fault."

"Rubbish," Ted said adamantly. "You're his godfather. You're incapable of doing anything to harm him. You tried doing right; Andy told me. She's downstairs in the parlour with the rest of the coven. Merlin knows what they're planning."

"World domination?" Sirius offered.

Ted chuckled. "You going to stay out here all day? Or do you want to come in and meet your godson? Five years is a lot of time to catch up on, you know. I suggest you start as soon as possible. Children grow up too quickly if you ask me," he said with a heavy sigh. "My little girl's practically all grown up. Almost fourteen, if you can believe that."

"Little Nymphadora?" Sirius asked. "Who told her that growing up was a good idea?"

"Not me, that's for certain."

"Boyfriends yet? Girlfriends?"

"She put a lad in the hospital wing last term for snapping her bra strap. Hit him in the left leg with a Stinging Hex," he said proudly, an amused grin on his face. At Sirius's raised brow, Ted added, "She said she missed her target and needs to work on her aim."

"Fucking hell," Sirius said with wide eyes. "Good girl."

"Come on," Ted encouraged, gently directing Sirius toward the door.

"Is everything all right?" Camilla asked, looking across the circle at Dorea, who had fallen silent in the middle of a sentence, tilting her head to the side as though straining to hear something from far away.

Dorea smiled. "It's fine. Sirius is with Ted and Harry." At Andromeda's inquisitive look, she just said, "Alert wards on Harry's room." She cleared her throat, feeling a weight lift from her shoulders.

While keeping Sirius and Harry apart had initially been the safest approach, she realised that she should not protect them from one another, and instead, allow the two to grow on their own. Harry was her grandson, not her son; by all traditions and legalities, Sirius had more right to raise the boy than she did. While she did not plan on throwing her son into instant parenthood, she did want him to embrace the responsibility over time. Sirius would help keep Harry safe and loved, and Harry would help grow Sirius into the man he should have been during the years that Azkaban stole away. Babysitting them every moment during that process would just make them both too dependent on her.

"Right," she said, getting back to the meeting. "Who has already sent word?"

"Lysander Yaxley reached out to me," Camilla said. "I woke to an owl this morning. He's one of the Death Eaters that claimed Imperius." She hesitantly glanced at Narcissa, and the reminder that Lucius
had been one such Death Eater was left unspoken. She returned her attention to Dorea. "He's working in the Ministry and is worried that we'll make war on his career. That and his wife is pregnant. I'm guessing that he's thinking if he has a daughter, it would be smart to connect her to the coven. He is technically related to the Blacks through my grandmother. It's distant, but enough according to the stipulations you put in place."

Dorea nodded thoughtfully. "Arrange a meeting then. We'll question him like everyone else and see what use he can be."

"And if he can be trusted," Callidora added.

"Veritaserum?" Theia suggested, looking up at the others from her cross-legged seat on the floor. "The spell we used on Sirius can only work on Black blood."

"Veritaserum and then some," Cassie said with a smirk. "We need to know why these men and women joined Voldemort, when, under what influence, and exactly how deep their loyalty to him runs. Did they kill? Torture? Or, like Lucius, was it all financial backing?"

"Lucius really never did anything?" Enid asked Narcissa, looking nervously concerned.

The blonde shook her head. "I imagine he might have, had things turned out differently, all things considered. However, Abraxas acted in Lucius's stead the majority of the time. Lucius was only ever brought to meetings to watch and learn at his father's side. The Dark—" She stopped mid-sentence and shared a look with Andromeda before correcting herself, "Voldemort . . . put trust in the Malfoys because of our wealth. One needs money to go to war, after all. The prestige was beneficial as well. Lucius did help recruit younger wizards from Hogwarts, however. Which is why he was contacted by a handful of former associates last night and this morning."

Belina let out an amused chuckle. "Men are predictable. They're deciding which way to turn based on your husband's judgement?"

Narcissa inclined her head. "Gustavus Goyle was with Lucius in his study by the time I arrived home from the Ministry yesterday. He wants to meet with the coven."

"What about the other one?" Lucretia asked. "Crabbe."

"Vincent?" Narcissa shook her head and sighed. "Fool. His Muggle hatred parallels Bella's. He wasn't smart enough to earn a decent place in the inner circle, however. He depended on Lucius. He won't come to us even by force."

Belina looked disappointed. "We could still try."

"Put him on a list," Dorea said. "If they come to us on their own, we'll judge them righteously. If they do not, they are considered our enemies, will be watched carefully, and will be brought down should they even think about moving against us."

"Vincent has a son Draco's age," Narcissa pointed out. "As do Gustavus Goyle and Thoros Nott. What are we going to do about the children? They'll all be in Hogwarts together."

"I don't put the sins of a parent on the child," Dorea stated. "After all, Sirius was raised by Walburga." Several witches laughed at that. "Anyone else?"

"Amycus and Alecto Carrow visited Lucius this morning," Narcissa said. "They did not leave quietly."
"Keep an eye out. I'll alert Amelia Bones when we have a complete list," Dorea said, looking at Lucretia, who was writing down names on a piece of parchment.

"What about Dumbledore's pet?" Belina asked, meeting Dorea's gaze. "Everyone knows that he pulled strings to get Severus Snape out of trouble despite being a Death Eater. My uncle thinks that Snape was closer to Voldemort than any of the others in the younger generation."

"Severus is a good man," Narcissa reassured them all. "He's . . . an angry, very anti-social, and surly man, but he was never like some of the others that I met, my own sister included."

"Minerva is working on that," Dorea informed them. "She has a soft spot for the boy. Either way, if he is loyal to Dumbledore, then he'll be a problem for us. In the meantime, we need to schedule the creation of protective wards for our homes. Potter Manor is safe because of the magic we added during the creation of the coven as well as goblin assistance. While I fully believe everyone capable of taking care of themselves, let's remember that any enemies will likely have no problem using our families against us as well. That means those of you with children."

"Malfoy Manor can wait," Narcissa said. "We have very old blood wards, and once the three days are up for the Death Eaters to contact, Lucius has promised to change the security access."

Callidora spoke up next. "Longbottom Keep will need protections. Our previous wards have eroded over time. We don't know why, as of yet, but Alice and Frank went into hiding the same time that your son and his wife did. I find it too coincidental that both Harry and Neville ended up in similar situations. I'll have to speak with Augusta, but I imagine she'll be open to having protections put up on the property."

Cedrella cleared her throat. "That leaves me," she said with a heavy sigh. "I spoke with my boys last night. Camelon married a Muggle girl and moved to the continent some time ago. Most in our world believe he died because he's essentially gone Muggle since his boy was born a squib. Bilius is planning on travelling abroad, and he's already sold his flat. Arthur . . . Well, Arthur's wife is . . ."

"Molly lost her brothers in the war," Lucretia interrupted to explain. "She's a stubborn girl, and that grief buried itself deep. Seven children during a war? Ignatius's aunt Muriel had too much influence, and Molly's gathered her children around like the Gryffindor lioness she is. A mother protecting her cubs. She'll be hard to convince to trust us. Not to mention, her parents were both very loyal to Dumbledore. Any action that separates the coven from Dumbledore will make her wary of us."

"Yes," Cedrella agreed, "but Arthur understands—"

"Your boy lets my niece walk him about by the bollocks," Lucretia retorted with a small laugh. "Appealing to Arthur won't do us a bit of good. If Callidora is amenable to waiting a month, perhaps offering the Weasleys protection first will go a long way," she pointed out. "We do have to think about the future, after all."

Cedrella ignored Lucretia's comment about Arthur, and instead smiled proudly at the thought of her many grandchildren. "The full moon is in just a few days, and if we bring this to Molly right now, it might get our foot in the door. She has six sons, and the first daughter of Weasley blood to be born in seven generations."

Everyone turned and looked at Enid and Callidora, who had a short whispered conversation before nodding in agreement.

"Right, that's that. We'll make a schedule for everyone else," Dorea said, standing up and stretching. "Belina, if you would help Camilla and Lucretia put together the final touches on the security wards.
Cassie, you help them." Cassie tilted her head back and sighed dramatically. "Don't fuss. We need an Animagus's insight, and Minerva is too busy dealing with Dumbledore. If Peter Pettigrew willingly and maliciously turned my family over to Voldemort, then he's a danger to us all. I want the little rat kept out of our homes."
January 12th, 1987
Potter Manor

After casting a quick Detangling Charm on Sirius's hair that Ted had needed to learn for the sake of raising a daughter, the two wizards stepped into the small bedroom to face the six-year-old, who had his nose literally pressed against a page of the book in his hands.

"Harry, do you think we've room for another?" Ted asked with a big grin as he put his arm around Sirius's shoulders as casually as possible to both prevent Sirius from either fleeing or collapsing, and to show Harry that Sirius was not a threat. "I'd like you to meet my very good friend, Sirius Black."

Harry looked up, bright emerald eyes connecting with Sirius's gaze. "Hullo, Mr Black."

Emotion stuck in Sirius's throat at the sight of the boy, and he blinked back tears. He had been the first aside from Lily to hold Harry after he was born, even before James, who had been busy excitedly worshipping Lily's mouth while muttering how he was going to be the coolest dad ever. Sirius, meanwhile, had pried the baby out of Lily's arms, snuggling him to his chest as though he had helped bring the boy into the world as well.

"H-Harry," Sirius whispered and then cleared his throat. "I umm . . . We've met before. Your dad, James, was my best friend. Brother, actually."

Harry's eyebrows lifted in curiosity. "Are you my uncle?"

Sirius laughed awkwardly. "I'm actually . . . I'm your godfather."

"What's that?"

"Well . . . I . . ."

"It's like an uncle," Ted supplied with a smile as he retook his seat at Harry's right, gesturing his head to Sirius to sit down as well, "but about a million times better! Godfathers give you gifts, take you places, and they teach you the most amazing things. A godfather, Harry, in the magical world is someone who teaches you everything you need to know about magic before you get to Hogwarts. A godfather is like having . . ." Ted began to say but then winced a bit, before pushing on with, "like having an extra parent."

Harry kept his eyes trained on Ted as he spoke, not paying much attention as Sirius slowly sat down on his left. When he processed the information, Harry turned his focus back to Sirius. "Like a dad?"

Sirius frowned. "I . . . Yeah."

Harry matched his expression before whispering, "My dad died."

Scratching at his chest to stop himself from clutching at it painfully, Sirius nodded his head. "I know, son."

"now?" he asked, looking hesitant and nervous. The boy glanced at the door, relieved to see that it was still open.

Forcing a smile, Sirius pushed his long hair from his face, hoping that he didn't look as gaunt as he had the day before. "Kind of. If . . . If you want me to be.'

Sirius knew what he wanted, of course. James and Lily hadn't needed to even ask him to be godfather. He had just assumed what his role would be and took to it like a grindylow to water. He hadn't planned on raising Harry once Azkaban had become a reality of his everyday existence, and even now, Sirius knew that the likelihood he would ever leave Potter Manor was slim to none—at least, not to raise Harry on his own. No, his mum was good for Harry; she was good for them both.

Harry thought about the offer for a moment before asking, "What do I call you?"

Smiling, Sirius recalled hours of teasing from James and Remus both referring to him as "Dadfoot." He shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever you'd like, son. You can call me Sirius if you want."

Harry nodded thoughtfully before looking at Ted. "Are you going away?"

"Not at all. You and I are friends, right?" When Harry nodded quickly, Ted grinned. "Friends don't leave one another. I've just been doing my best to fill in for Sirius here while he was away. Now that he's back, I'm sure he'd love to teach you all about magic and Hogwarts. In fact, unlike me, Sirius was born in the magical world, so I bet he knows loads more than I do." Harry smiled brightly, eyes widening in excitement. Ted leant in conspiratorially and whispered, "You think we could ask him some questions?"

Instead of asking about magic, however, Harry turned to Sirius and blurted out, "Did you really know my dad?"

Focusing on his eyes to separate the image of father and son, Sirius nodded. "Oh, Harry . . . James was the best person I knew. He was braver than any man I'd ever met and smarter than just about anyone except your mum."

Harry sat up on his knees, his mouth falling open. "You knew my mum, too?"

"Absolutely. Lily was like a sister to me. They were my family."

Harry's expression screwed up in consternation. "How come I don't know you? Aunt Petunia never said I had a dogfather."

Ted hid a snort in his sleeve, but Sirius did not hide his grin at the slip. Getting control of himself, Sirius cleared his throat. "I umm . . . I got into a spot of trouble, and I had to fix some things before I could see you again," he offered, trying to be as honest as possible without outright confessing his every sin to the child. The weight of his guilt, however, was heavy, and Sirius's shoulders began to feel the burden. "You weren't supposed to be given to . . . You were . . . I was supposed to take care of you, Harry. James and Lily, that's what they wanted. They wanted me to look after you if something . . ." Tears sprung to his eyes. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

Harry looked at Ted awkwardly, relaxing a bit when the man smiled kindly at him, giving him a nod. Looking back at his godfather, Harry reached out and patted Sirius's tattoo-covered hand. "Grandmother says I shouldn't say sorry when I didn't do nothing wrong. She says it's wasted forts."

"Wasted efforts." Ted smiled proudly. "Your grandmother is a smart woman, Harry."

Sirius wiped his eyes on his arm. "She's the best."
Picking up the forgotten book, Ted changed the subject to help ease the tension. "Harry, why don't you show Sirius your favourite picture of Hogwarts?"

The pain of waking up to a world full of death and emptiness had been so horrible, that words could not express Dorea's grief properly. She had been running on the fuel of purpose, and justice, and vengeance for months now, but seeing Sirius and Harry take turns trying to throw peas into one another's mouths at the dinner table, laughing, was doing good to repair the many breaks in her heart.

Having admitted defeat at being too busy for full-time domesticity, Dorea reluctantly accepted the help of a house-elf. While she would have much preferred Cassie's Parisian elf, Aubry, the creature was apparently a fixture of Chateau Noir and refused to leave France. Narcissa, however, had a full staff to take care of Malfoy Manor and was quite happy to be rid of one elf that supposedly did not get along well with Lucius.

"Thank you, Dobby," Dorea said with a smile when the floppy-eared elf popped into the dining room with a tray of phials that he set between Sirius and Harry.

The elf had fallen excitedly at her feet when his bond had been transferred from the Malfoy family to the Potters, and he nearly vibrated when introduced to Harry. The boy had taken well to the creature, asking if Dobby was a new playmate of sorts. Sirius had muttered under his breath about house-elves being more like improperly trained pets, and Dorea quietly reminded Sirius that not all elves were the same. She also made a mental note to tell Cassie not to mention Kreacher before the little beast was disposed of.

Dobby popped away quickly to tend to other duties, and Sirius took a good look at the potion phials before separating them.

"You take lots of medicine too, huh?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. Got to. It'll make me strong again, and soon you won't be able to keep up with me," Sirius offered with a wink as he opened a phial before downing it in one gulp.

Harry watched him curiously. "I drink a purple one too. See?" he said, holding the smaller phial up to Sirius for inspection. "What's it for?"

"Well, that is to help you so you'll eat more," Dorea said, taking note of Harry's half-empty plate. "You still need to gain a bit of weight." She grinned playfully at him when he scrunched up his nose, looking down at the broccoli in front of him. "We don't want you floating away now, do we?"

Harry laughed at the thought but then turned his attention to Sirius's plate. Their meals had been drastically different aside from peas. While Harry had been fed roast beef and vegetables, Sirius ate plain rice and a bowl of clear broth. "Do you need to eat more?"

Sirius sighed looking down at his plate. The broth had gone down fine, but his stomach was clenching in pain just looking at the rice. "Yeah. Where I was . . . when I wasn't here . . . Food was . . ." His eyes went dark as he remembered the bucket in his cell filled with rotting apples and mouldy bread. The bucket was only refilled once a fortnight—sometimes the guards forgot. "I didn't eat much."

"Me too."

Sirius bit back a snarl.

"Where did you go?"
Sirius looked at Dorea, but she paid him no mind as she delicately cut into her beef, pretending to ignore the pair. He was on his own; parenting felt like learning to fly for the first time—exhilarating but terrifying at the same time. "It's a place called Azkaban. Not very nice," he told Harry, forcing a smile. "I don't think I'll go back."

Harry nodded as though he understood. "I lived in Surrey. I don't want to go back there."

Before Sirius had a chance to say anything about Petunia or Vernon, Dorea looked up and smiled tightly. "And neither of you ever will."

"Is Azaban like Surrey?" Harry asked.

Sirius briefly wondered if he could Side-Along-Apparate Lily's sister into the prison and leave her there to rot. He shook his head and sighed. "No. Azkaban is not a city or a town. It's a very big building. The food isn't very good, nor is the company. I only had one room to myself and it was very, very small. I like the big rooms here better."

Harry grinned. "Me too. I don't like small rooms."

When Dobby brought the afters, Harry convinced the elf to vanish his broccoli when Dorea was busy looking over the **Evening Prophet**, and Sirius didn't say a word about his godson's manipulations for treacle tart. Instead, he decided to help keep the witch distracted. "What's the plan?"

Dorea folded up the paper and set it aside. "Nothing you need to worry about, love. Let the witches and I handle everything."

Sirius snorted. "A coven. Really? That's a bit extreme. Not that I was ever looking forward to being Patriarch, mind." The idea was actually quite horrifying. Raising a child was one thing—and about the limit of Sirius's desire for responsibility—but to have to look over the entire family and their magic? He would rather not, and he had always felt so.

"It was either create a family coven to protect the family magic and restore our House or hope that there was a grove-born witch somewhere around miraculously waiting to save us all." When Sirius laughed, she smiled. "I'm too impatient and controlling to have left that to chance."

He took a bite of his rice, chewed, and swallowed before grinning. "I would not have objected to a Keeper," he said, wagging his eyebrows.

Dorea teasingly narrowed her eyes and reached over to flick his ear. "I imagine not. The coven and I are to have several meetings set up over the next few days. I imagine Harry would love it if you would spend those days with him. However, if you're not feeling up to the task, I can always ask Ted if he is available."

"No," Sirius said quickly. "I can do it. I'm . . . I'm his godfather. I need to start—"

"You do whatever you can and nothing more," Dorea insisted. "I'm here to take care of both of you while helping to create a world in which neither of you is ever harmed again. If I have my way, you'll be standing by Harry's side at King's Cross in a few years, and not a single person will dare to blink in your direction. Although, I'll not make promises of simpering witches, batting their eyelashes."

Sirius frowned at the thought of going out in public. The courtroom had been stifling. All those people sitting and watching him, thinking terrible things, wondering what Dark and evil crimes he had committed. He knew it would be years until Harry left for Hogwarts, but the idea of going to the
train station made his skin itch. "Maybe it would be best if you take him." His gaze flickered to the paper. "I can't imagine what the papers are saying about me."

"The papers are saying exactly what I want them to say." Dorea pushed the Prophet over to him. "I met a reporter—sycophantic little beast—who's more than willing to put in a good word for my approval. Smart of her, really. Besides, it's not just your infamy that I am concerned about. Harry here is also quite well known."

Sirius's eyes widened at one of the headlines. "The Boy Who—Really? This is profane!"

Dorea sipped at her drink and nodded in agreement. "I do not disagree with you."

"Can I see?" Harry asked, sitting up in his chair as he tried to look at the paper in Sirius's hands.

Sirius opened the Prophet up and pulled out the centre section, passing it to the boy. "Here, son, read about Quidditch."

Harry licked treacle from his lips and stared at the pictures moving. "Quidditch. Is that brooms?"

Sirius smiled. "Sure are. I'll teach you how to fly one day soon."

Groaning, Dorea pressed her fingers to her temples. "I am not ready for letters home from Poppy again. You and James were absolute nightmares on brooms."

"Don't listen to your grandmother, Harry," Sirius whispered as he pulled the boy's chair closer to him so that they could look at the Quidditch stats together. "Your dad and I were the best Quidditch players that Hogwarts had ever seen."

Dorea grimaced. "Menaces."

Harry's eyes were wide with excitement at the thought. "Teach me to play? I can fly?"

"Absolutely," Sirius said. "We'll have so much fun playing Quidditch together. Now, the first thing you should know about Quidditch is that we are a Puddlemere United family. This here is the Puddlemere team." He gestured to the paper. "They won their game this week. See? Read that right there for me."

Dorea frowned, recalling what Ted had said about Harry's educational lapse in the Muggle schools. "Sirius—"

"I can't." Harry cut her off, frowning and pushing the paper away from him in a small tantrum.

"It's fine, dear," Dorea said reassuringly. "I promise, you'll be reading in no time. We'll all help you."

Sirius watched curiously, looking at the way that Harry's fingers brushed over the pictures on the bottom of the paper in front of him. After a moment of silence, the boy pulled the Prophet back into his hands and squinted at it. To a casual observer—especially after the little outburst of attitude—it looked like Harry was glaring at the article, trying to burst it into flames with his mind. Sirius, however, noticed what was actually happening.

"Mum," he said, getting Dorea's attention before he took the paper from Harry, set it back down on the table and pointed to one of the photographs. "Harry, can you tell me what number is on this bloke's shirt?"

Harry frowned. "No."
Sirius moved the paper closer to Harry's face, watching as Harry squinted again before he moved it back just a touch. "What about now?"

Dorea's mouth fell open in absolute mortification. "Oh, for Merlin's sake!"

Harry looked up, confused. "Did I do something wrong?"

Sirius ruffled his hair and smiled. "Not at all, son. Your grandmother just had a bit of a memory lapse," he said teasingly, watching as she tried to get her bearings again without looking incredibly embarrassed over the fact that she had completely missed something so obvious. "You need glasses, son. It's nothing to worry about; your dad wore them too."

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**Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry**

"Interesting," Minerva said as she stepped into Severus's quarters. The room was dark and smelled heavily of lemon and disinfectant. His personal potion's bench in the corner of the room was so clean that it was shining. She smiled, recalling years earlier when he had been a student caught out after curfew. She had punished him by assigning detention with Professor Slughorn—cleaning cauldrons; the boy had actually looked relieved, as though he had been wanting to give the things a good scrubbing, but had not the time for such chores in between classes.

"What?" Severus snapped, staring up at her with a sneer fixed to his face. It made him look at least a decade older than he actually was.

She had half a mind to press her fingers against the creases in his forehead to stop the wrinkles from forming early. "I was just saying that I found it interesting that I was not barred from your personal quarters."

He huffed and looked back down at the book in his hand. "You are the deputy headmistress. Hogwarts would likely allow you through, even if I were inclined to set up personal wards around my space."

"You banned Albus," she retorted knowingly.

Severus grumbled in frustration. "The headmaster is . . ."

Minerva bit her tongue to prevent herself from finishing his sentence. After seeing what Azkaban had done to Sirius Black and what the Muggles had done to Harry Potter, she had an alphabetical list of exactly what Albus Dumbledore was.

"Bothersome."

"You are not beholden to him," she said, taking a seat when Severus did not seem eager to ask her to leave.

"You are incorrect."

"You feel like you owe him because it was his word that spared you from Azkaban?"

"My loyalty runs . . . in a different direction."

*Different, not deeper.* Minerva reflected on that. "You read the *Prophet*?" At his curt nod, she sighed and sat up straight. "I want you to meet with the coven."
"With Potter's mother," he said angrily. His previously aged expression falling into a petulant one reminiscent of his youth as he said the name "Potter" with derision. "Black's mother," he added with even more contempt.

"With my coven," Minerva corrected. "I am aware that Sirius Black, while innocent of the crimes he was accused of, was a particular thorn in your side."

"Thorn?!" he asked incredulously, black eyes widening.

"And I am not asking you to meet with him, nor make friends, nor go to Godric's bloody Hollow and put flowers on James Potter's grave!" There was a strange look in his eyes then, and Minerva sighed. She had been privy to some of Severus's Halloween mishaps, one of which included a drunken attempt at Apparition that ended up with him splinching his knee. As he had fallen asleep on her sofa, Severus confessed that he had been trying to visit Lily. "I am asking you to come before the coven, like all other marked Death Eaters, and speak with the witches and request sanctuary."

He grimaced at her words. "And why would I do that?"

"Because you are a brilliant wizard, a good man, and I think you would find a better sense of accomplishment in helping us fix some of Vol—" she began to say but stopped when Severus's entire body tensed in the type of long-term fear an abused animal would have. "You-Know-Who's errors. Nothing has changed since he vanished. Nothing. We wish to change that for everyone, not just purebloods. It also should go without saying, that in accepting our assistance, you would be cutting the puppet strings Albus seems to be holding you up by."

She stood without another word, barely stopping to register the burdened expression on his face.

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**Ottery St. Catchpole - The Burrow**

"There's grandma's big boy!" Cedrella grinned as she snatched up the little redhead in her arms and held him tightly against her, peppering his face with an abundance of kisses—one for each freckle. Ron giggled and fought against her hold, kicking his little legs up in the process. He was a good size for his age, not like poor Harry. At the thought, she hugged him a bit closer.

"Grandma loves her ickle Ronnie!" Fred and George chanted from the doorway.

"Keep it up," she cautioned them, pointing a finger in their direction. "I'll pinch those cheeks so hard, they'll still be red when you get to Hogwarts, you little geese!"

The twins laughed and then stuck their hands into their armpits and began making loud, honking sounds. Molly shooed them both away when she walked into the room, huffing a bit in the process. "Ron, go after your brothers and get that room cleaned."

Pouting, Ron sighed dramatically. "Can't I have my own? I'll even live upstairs with the ghoul!"

"Go," Molly insisted, smiling when Cedrella kissed him once more on the cheek before patting his bum on his way out of the room. "Sorry about that, Mother. Ginny... Oh, isn't that lovely."

The little girl looked painfully bored out of her mind as Lucretia finished tying off an intricate plait with a ribbon. The ends of the bow were terribly frayed from Ginny pulling at it. Despite the colour matching her dress, it did little to distract from her skinned and dirty knees. "Can I go?"

"Off with you, love," Lucretia said with a smile, kissing the top of Ginny's head. "Go and mind those wretched brothers of yours."
Once alone, Molly sat down between her aunt and mother-in-law and frowned. "I don't like it," she said as politely as possible. "Aunt Muriel said that she heard from Elphias Doge that Albus Dumbledore knew nothing about what happened during that trial. She says that some people are blaming him for what happened to the Potters. I don't know everything, of course, but Albus Dumbledore has always been a good, upstanding wizard. He defeated Grindelwald."

Lucretia sighed. "Molly, no one is accusing Albus Dumbledore of anything. I'm sure that if he knew Sirius was innocent, he would have stepped in to do something." She almost broke when she felt Cedrella nudge her beneath the table. It was a lie, of course, but the coven was well aware that even some members of their own family were too enamoured with the legend that was Albus Dumbledore to think him capable of human imperfection.

"But errors were made. As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, not to mention Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, we need to know that he is not being stretched too thin. It's one thing to let something of this nature slide, but he is also the headmaster of a school where your children attend. What if this type of negligence got one of the boys hurt?"

Molly's frown deepened at the thought. "And you think that a Black coven will solve all the world's problems?"

"We think that someone needs to hold the Wizengamot, the Minister, and even Albus Dumbledore accountable," Cedrella answered her. "We know that we are far from perfect ourselves, and would hope that our community will hold us to higher standards as well. We need to stop putting one authority above all others, and work together to solve problems."

Molly pursed her lips. "Fine," she said. "We would be grateful for protective wards, Mother, Aunt Lucretia. Please give my thanks to Madam Potter and Madam and Miss Longbottom."

Lucretia and Cedrella shared a look before the former asked, "None of the others? We'll need the whole coven to put up the wards."

Looking torn, Molly angrily wiped a falling tear from her eyes. "I . . . I don't want . . . I don't care what anyone says, some of those witches are Dark. One works on Knockturn Alley, and another married a Death Eater! I may not get out much, or socialise with society witches, but I know what Narcissa Malfoy's sister did, and she is—"

"Family," Cedrella interrupted. "Whatever else Narcissa Malfoy might be, she is family first. Everyone in the coven is a Black witch. We practise Black Magic—not dark or light."

"Blood Magic," Molly whispered. "It troubles me. I don't want the children involved. Fred and George tried to put Ron under an Unbreakable Vow last month. Merlin knows where they heard about that. I don't want them knowing about Blood Magic."

Lucretia reached out and took Molly's hand. "Ginny is—"

"No!"

"Molly, you and Ginevra both would be welcome additions to the coven. Even the boys, once they are old enough, could participate in certain rites and rituals." Molly's cheeks turned bright red, and her mouth fell open. Lucretia smiled. She often found her niece too stubborn for her own good—which was annoying—but when a Prewett of all people had the nerve to look scandalised, it was downright hilarious. "Don't sit there and act like it wouldn't benefit their magic. And in a controlled environment instead of in a Hogwarts broom cupboard like someone else I know."
"That was a lie," Molly said quietly. "Gideon and Fabian made that up. Arthur and I never went around in broom cupboards."

Cedrella finally burst out laughing. "Oh, dear girl," she said, taking Molly's hand when she finally laughed as well. "Won't you join us?"

Frowning almost as if on cue, Molly shook her head. "Covens need to be of one mind," she said softly. "I will end up holding you back because I know that I won't ever trust the wife of a Death Eater. Imperiused or not. I'm a bad fit, though I do appreciate the considering you both have for me. I will allow the coven onto the property, however."

"And the children?" Lucretia prompted.

Molly huffed. "I'll . . . I'll talk to Arthur about it. I suppose when they're of appropriate ages, they can make their own choices. I will try not to influence them one way or another."

The stairs rumbled nearby, and Molly reached out to still a shaking frame on the wall behind her as her children came thundering into the room.

"Give him back!" Percy shouted, chasing Fred and George, knocking over a stack of books and a chair in the process. One of the twins was holding a fat rodent high above his head, cackling as he ran. "Mum! They took Scabbers out of his cage again. May I please have a lock?"

Molly sighed and nodded. "Yes, of course. I'm sure your father has one out in that shed of his."

She stood and put her hands on her hips as she snapped, "George! Give Scabbers back to your brother, right this instance!"

"Can't!" the twin yelled back. "I'm not George!"

"Fred!"

The three boys vanished into the other room, trailed after by Ron and Ginny. Molly looked exhausted just staring after them. "Just a few more years and they'll all be at Hogwarts."

Lucretia laughed. "What will you do with an empty house?"

"Sleep."

Cedrella chuckled and then cringed when Percy stormed back through the room, the rat tucked safely in his shirt. Once he was out of hearing distance, Cedrella looked at her daughter-in-law. "For Merlin's sake, Molly, get that boy a proper familiar, will you? Rats are potion ingredients, not pets."

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**Potter Manor**

Dobby put dinner away and cleared the table, leaving Dorea to attend to some outgoing letters to arrange meetings with the Death Eaters who had requested an audience with the coven. Sirius and Harry vanished up the stairs, both with smiles fixed to their faces. If their world did not still need fixing, Dorea would have very much liked to lock both wizards up in the home, where they would be safe and happy, and shut away from anyone who would dare think to cause them harm ever again.

Unfortunately, it would be terribly unhealthy for Sirius to become a recluse after being in a cell for five years, and the truth of the matter—despite how greatly she disagreed with it on principle—was
that Harry, like all little boys, would one day grow up.

Letters written and sent, Dorea made her way up the stairs to tuck Harry in. She stopped in the doorway of the bedroom when she saw the boy already asleep in his bed, his small hands caught up in the tangled black fur of the enormous dog beside him. The floor was covered in toys, books, crayons, and parchment.

"Nox," she whispered, smiling when neither flinched as the light was extinguished.

As she headed toward her own room, something pressed against the boundaries of the wards. The feel of them was not threatening, but it was Dark. She first wondered if Narcissa and Lucius would call on her this late, but realised that she had specified the wards to react to a Dark Mark, and the feeling she was getting was not that.

Hesitant to leave the house but determined to make sure whatever was on her property did not get further than the boundary line, Dorea clutched her wand and stepped outside, looking over her front yard all the way to the gate, where she could see the magic of the wards reacting to a disturbance. Trusting the non-threatening feel, she closed her robe around her tightly as she made the short walk to the gate, stopping only to cast a Disillusionment Charm on herself.

Her mouth fell open when she identified the intruder.

The man was much too skinny for her liking, almost as thin as Sirius, though he had always been lithe, especially for his height. Even from where she was standing, she could see that his eyes were red, and the circles beneath them were dark.

"Remus."

As her disillusionment faded away with a brush of her magic, the man's head shot up in her direction. He opened his mouth to speak before his lower lip trembled. He barely made out a hoarse greeting of, "Mrs Potter . . . Dorea . . . I . . ."

She flicked her wand and opened the gate, pulling down the wards briefly to let him slip inside. He fell to his knees before her, face in his hands looking as though he had done some terrible wrong. "I . . . I heard . . . He didn't do it?"

She frowned, realising immediately why he looked so guilty. "Sirius is innocent of James and Lily's deaths. I swear on my magic."

He looked up at her and shook his head as tears fell down his cheeks. "I didn't know. I swear I didn't know. I left him there, in Azkaban, and I didn't—"

"Come here, sweet boy," she said, pulling gently on his arms until he stood. She looked up, noting the position and brightness of the waxing moon, nearly full. It was no wonder that he looked ready to fall apart. "Come inside. Everything will be fine. You're home now."

Chapter End Notes

For those wondering what a "grove-born witch" is, this was my little nod to the AMAZING fic by MaryRoyale, Arx Domus Nigrae featuring the Black family and Hermione. It won't come up again in this story, but I love adding little Easter Eggs like
that to my stories.
January 13th, 1987
Potter Manor

Sirius had fallen asleep in his Animagus form, having shown the "trick" to Harry earlier in the night. The boy took to magic so well, and Sirius had relaxed a bit. He knew his dog form was less than puppy-like, and most grown wizards would scream at the sight of him. He was a canine, certainly, but also very obviously a Grim. He tried not to think too deeply about the implications of his form. Harry, however, saw only the dog. Perhaps some long lost memory unlocked itself from inside the boy, and he recalled being small enough to ride Padfoot's back around the living room at Potter Cottage. Either way, Sirius had gone to sleep feeling more himself than he had in years.

When he woke, he was in human form with his godson tucked under his arm—the child had a messy mop of black hair to rival his own. Sirius ran the fingers of his free hand through his hair, remembering that Ted had magically untangled the disaster the night before. Sighing, Sirius realised he would have to look respectable enough soon if he wanted to take Harry anywhere outside of the manor. He was not quite sure when that would be, but Harry would eventually need friends, and as much as Sirius would have loved to be his best and only, he would not take from Harry what he himself had been denied until Hogwarts.

Carefully, so as not to wake him, Sirius edged his arm out from under Harry's head and made his way to the door. In the distance, he could hear talking, but could not make out any voice other than his mother's. Instinctively, his mind told him to be alert and on edge, having learnt to do so while in Azkaban, but magically he still felt safe and protected within the walls and wards of the home.

Closing in on the conversation, Sirius realised why his magic did not detect a threat.

"Moony."

The name felt heavy and dry on his tongue, and his throat tried to close itself up as sound forced its way out of his mouth.

Sirius had not seen Remus in years, and their last encounter had not been kind, nor the several preceding it. Toward the end of the war, Sirius followed Dumbledore's Orders and tried to infiltrate Voldemort supporters in other countries, sadly leaving James, Lily, and Harry behind. Peter was off on missions of his own, but the Order had been appraised of all his comings and goings—or so they had thought. Remus, however, had mysteriously vanished one day, leaving behind only a letter of apology and a request that no one try to owl him. Sirius and James had asked Dumbledore point blank where their friend was, but the old man gave them apologies, platitudes, and the ever-grating speech about the "Greater Good."

Suspecting Remus of turning spy had come too easily, and Sirius hated himself for it now.

Remus turned at the sound of his name, eyes wide but soft, filled with obvious guilt and pain. He was pale, like always, and Sirius took note of the additional scars on his face and arms that had not been there the last full moon they had all spent together, right before Harry was born.

"Pads."

Dorea stood then, looping her arm through Remus's, walking with him toward Sirius as though the man needed a good shove to move his feet.
Sirius bit the inside of his cheek and looked away. The dementors had not stolen away his good memories—he had been able to protect those—but the bad ones they played like a broken record whenever they were near him. In between flashes of James and Lily’s dead bodies, Harry’s cries, and Peter’s bleeding hand, Sirius recalled his last fight with Remus.

"I didn't mean it," he blurted out, tears in his eyes. "Not a word. I was just . . ."

Remus looked confused. "What?"

"The last thing I said to you. You're not a monster. Never were." Sirius glanced back up at his friend and shook his head side to side rapidly. "I-I didn't know how to protect them, and everyone said there was a spy in the Order and . . . You wouldn't write us, and whenever you came back to visit you were different, like—"

"The werewolf packs," Remus said in understanding, awkwardly sticking his hands in his pockets when Dorea let go of his arm. "It's hard to disconnect once you're living there amongst them. And Greyback . . . His influence has always been substantial. I was horrible to you as well. To everyone."

Sirius nodded, remembering in vivid detail.

Remus had been gone for almost a year, the entire length of Lily's pregnancy, when he showed up randomly at Sirius's flat, interrupting an impromptu baby shower that Sirius put together when he realised that, as a man, he would not be invited to any of the pre-baby parties. Sirius demanded to know where Remus had been, only to be shut out by his friend.

Words were exchanged, many of which should not have been said in front of mixed company—especially Remus's ex-girlfriend Mary Macdonald, who was unaware of her former beau's blossoming bisexuality until Sirius announced it in front of everyone, demanding to know if Remus had ditched them all for some random bloke.

James tried to ease the intensity with ill-timed humour, suggesting that Sirius and Remus take their sexual tension in the other room; Lily slapped him on the arm. In a jumble of curious stares, jabbing accusations, and two punches to Sirius's jaw followed by another to Remus's stomach, the whole of their very short-lived sexual affair spilt out in front of all of their friends.

"It was just sex," Remus insisted to James, who looked shocked at the revelation that two of his best friends had spent most of their fifth year at Hogwarts shagging until Remus took up with Mary, and Sirius started dating Marlene McKinnon.

Peter, on the other hand, looked revolted.

Defensively, Sirius told Remus, "It wasn't even good sex," which reignited the argument.

Eventually, Lily was able to get the Marauders into a private room, complete with a Silencing Charm that Sirius suspected Snape had taught her back when they were still on good terms.

"Wait, are you two like . . . in love or something?" James asked.

Peter gaped in open horror. "Remus made you gay?"

"What? I'm not gay," Sirius insisted. "I'm . . . I'm whatever I am."

"You can't make someone . . ." Remus began only deciding mid-sentence to ignore Peter's obvious disgust. Grabbing Sirius's arm, he muttered, "Can we discuss this outside?"
Sirius shoved him. "Not until you tell me where you've been!"

"None of your business!" Remus shouted, eyes gold, the wolf getting the better of him. "Fuck! This is why I never want to come back! Because of you... fucking... humans!"

"Forgive us for not putting out a plate of raw meat on the floor to welcome you home," Sirius said, scoffing as he crossed his arms over his chest defensively.

"Can we go back to the fact that Remus and Sirius have been shagging this whole time!?" Peter demanded.

"So what if Remus and Sirius dated in Hogwarts," Lily said reproachfully, lifting her chin. "There's nothing wrong with it."

"Nothing wrong with it?!!"

James stepped between Peter and Lily. "Watch the tone, Wormtail."

"This has nothing to do with who I'm fucking," Sirius said, shoving Peter behind him before Lily's furious gaze set him on fire. "This is about how Moony up and bloody vanished one day in the middle of a war. Where were you?"

"Don't act like you don't know me, Sirius," Remus growled. "Or that I'm the bad guy here. I'm not the one off having parties with Death Eaters."

"Excuse me?" Sirius's eyes widened. "I was on a mission trying to figure out who in Ireland supports Voldemort. How the fuck do you even know about that?" When Remus did not respond, Sirius snapped, "Get out! Leave us humans to our business and go back to the other monsters!"

Remus had done just that, and Lily scolded Sirius for a good fortnight over his words. Peter finally came back around after James talked to him, but he remained awkward around the rest of his friends. Sirius and Remus spent the rest of the war on edge, never seeing one another, passing like ships in the night—up until James and Lily were targeted, and Sirius assumed Remus had fallen in too deep with Greyback and the werewolves.

"I heard about your trial," Remus said. "You switched with Peter? Without telling me?"

Very slowly, his grey gaze never leaving Remus's face, Sirius nodded.

Remus pulled his hands from his pockets and stepped toward Sirius, seizing him, and pulling him into a tight embrace. "I'll never doubt you again, Pads. I'm so sorry."

Sobbing into Remus's shoulder, Sirius held his friend tighter.

"I'll leave you boys to catch up," Dorea said with a soft smile. When they didn't bother letting go of one another, she sighed in relief. "Make sure Harry gets something healthy for breakfast, Sirius. And feed this young man as well," she added, gently touching Remus's shoulder. "I'll be back this afternoon."

The last thing she saw before the green flames of the Floo Network carried her away, was Sirius wiping the tears from his eyes and Remus smiling.

_____________________________________________________________________

Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place
Grimmauld Place had been chosen for a discreet location. While Cedrella, Lucretia, Callidora, Enid and Belina tackled the upstairs in search of Dark artefacts—of which there were plenty—Dorea, Cassie, Theia, Camilla, and both Narcissa and Andromeda remained downstairs to interview the Death Eaters that had contacted them, requesting sanctuary. Minerva and Nymphadora remained, of course, at Hogwarts. Dorea hoped that eventually, their schedule would calm enough that the whole group would only be required for intense rituals or family gatherings. As it was, Dorea felt more comfortable having as many together as possible when outside of their warded homes, at least until the coven security wards were properly set and the press had died down a little.

Dorea decided early on in her meetings that she would much rather have stayed home with her family. Eavesdropping on Sirius and Remus as they caught up after all these years, and feeding Harry waffles to his little heart's content would have been much better than watching accused and branded Death Eaters grovel at her feet, all while lying about the reasons they had taken up with their fallen Dark Lord.

It was, however, interesting to watch each of them cringe and cry every single time she said "Voldemort."

Lysander Yaxley had glared at her after flinching, and Charles Avery had actually thrown up at the mention of his former master's name. While Yaxley had clearly joined Voldemort's cause because he believed in it, Avery had been threatened into joining up because his father had been a Death Eater before him. One of the firsts, if the young man was to be believed.

"Avery was a shit at school," Theia said disapprovingly. "Friends with Mulciber. Even the rest of us Slytherins didn't like Mulciber. I don't know what happened, but there were rumours going around that he'd done something to a Gryffindor girl. You might want to ask Sirius what it was."

Dorea shook her head. "I'd prefer not to involve Sirius in coven business until he's recovered. He has a terrible temperament when it comes to Death Eaters, and for good reason. But he has little ability to think rationally and imagine the big picture. Perhaps Minerva would know more about it."

"Or Snape," Theia suggested. "He wasn't exactly friends with Mulciber and Avery—or anyone from what I recall—but polite enough to let them drag him about during Hogsmeade weekends. Is it true you've got a werewolf staying with you now?"

"What gave you that impression?" Dorea blandly replied while looking over notes that Andromeda had been taking during their meeting with Yaxley.

"Lucretia said so."

Dorea looked up, obviously irritated. Before she could say a word, Camilla held out her hands in supplication on behalf of their cousin. "She mentioned before that you had asked her husband to look into finding the boy. Lupin, correct? He apparently stopped by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures yesterday."

"He was friends with Sirius and James," Dorea finally said after a long moment of contemplation, studying each of their faces for hints of prejudice. Only Narcissa and Camilla displayed any signs, and even that appeared more like an attempt to hide fear than something like disgust. "I consider that boy family," she finally stated, firmly putting the matter to an end.

"I remember him," Theia eventually said. "Gryffindor Prefect."

Dorea nodded thoughtfully and then changed the subject. "Can Avery be trusted?" she asked, turning to look at Narcissa.
Her niece had been exceptionally helpful in regards to sussing out the intentions of the supposedly former Death Eaters, perhaps in an attempt to make up for her own husband, who some might have believed had gotten a get out of Azkaban card from the coven because of who he had married. Narcissa arrived that morning with a bottle of Veritaserum to dose the Death Eaters with. Most had not given a second thought to taking the potion, but a few baulked in a panic when Cassie informed them that they would be using Legilimency as well as the truth serum.

Cygnus Black, for all of his many faults, had raised three charming, beautiful, and absolutely ruthless daughters; Bellatrix, Andromeda, and Narcissa were all well-trained in Occlumency and Legilimency.

Though Andromeda was just as skilled as her younger sister, she had not practised the ability since her youth. Narcissa, however, actively used Occlumency and Legilimency during the war to protect her family, and was more than happy to dive into the minds of Death Eaters, so long as they consented.

"Avery can be trusted," Narcissa said. "He's terrified of Voldemort but much more of us. His grandmother actually worshipped Morgana. Yaxley, on the other hand, will follow his own ambitions. If he can be controlled, his position in the Ministry could be influential for us."

"If," Dorea muttered with a sigh.

"Have him watched," Cassie suggested. "We'll have an abundance of friends in the Ministry that would willingly turn spy. We'll need them regardless, considering we'll never know if Dumbledore has his own, or if any Minister for Magic will have our best interests at heart."

"See that it's done." Dorea raised her focus to the doors. "Who's next?"

"Technically, my brother," Camilla said with a snort. "Barty wrote me a letter, pleading for an audience with the coven to apologise. Apparently, he was accosted by two old witches on Diagon Alley yesterday. They threw eggs at his head and told him that he was disrespectful to traditions and to women."

Cassie sniggered. "Send him a reply that we'll fit him into our schedule in five years. If Sirius can wait that long, so can he."

"He's responsible for Sirius's incarceration. Your brother is lucky he's alive right now," Narcissa said in a cold tone.

"Gustavus Goyle," Andromeda said, changing the topic to stop her sister from going on a rant. "He is who is actually next on our schedule."

Dorea smiled at the way Narcissa huffed. "Tell me about him."

"He's a bit of a conundrum, really," the blonde said thoughtfully. "Gustavus has been friends with Lucius since Hogwarts. I've known him and Vincent Crabbe for many years. I'm not surprised that Gustavus has chosen to ally with Lucius, and therefore, the coven. Still, he and Vincent seemed inseparable. I would not put it past the Crabbes to open a blood feud with the Goyles over this."

Camilla's mouth fell open. "He would start a blood feud because his friend decided to side with a coven?"

Narcissa inclined her head. "A coven who very openly proclaimed their Dark Lord as an enemy. The Crabbes are true believers."
"But not the Goyles?" Dorea asked.

Smiling primly, Narcissa shook her head. "It was only a rumour, of course, but Gustavus was teased a bit in school. Some of the older boys thought they saw his father out with a woman who was not his wife."

"It's not a strange thing for a man to take a mistress," Cassie noted, running her fingers along Kreacher's ears as he refilled her drink.

"No, but this mistress was a Muggle-born," Narcissa said. "For all the talk about keeping the bloodlines pure, all rumours and signs point to the fact that Gustavus's father kept a Muggle-born mistress. He supposedly even moved her into the manor when his wife passed on."

"What of Gustavus's wife?" Camilla asked.

"Dead."

"Illness?"

Narcissa frowned. "Complication when little Gregory was born. Poor thing. Iris went into early labour and bled out. She was allergic to something in Blood-Replenishing Potions; there was nothing to be done by the time he got her to St. Mungo's."

"It amazes me that even with magic on our side, things like that can happen," Theia muttered softly. "I could never be a Healer."

"You could do a sight better than a waitress," Camilla said, looking at the younger witch with a stern gaze. "You're smart."

"I know," Theia said with a wry grin. "And drunk men are very stupid. Which is why I flash them a smile when I bring them a fifth round that they assume is on the house, and I go home with all of their pretty, pretty Galleons."

Andromeda and Narcissa sighed loudly at the same time and then shared a look with one another, each realising in horror that they were mimicking their mother, Druella. "Do you think you'll find a good husband in the Leaky Cauldron?" Narcissa finally asked incredulously.

Theia threw her head back and laughed. "Not on my life! Sure, some good blokes come in from time to time, but I'm not looking to settle anytime soon. You want to marry someone off, start with Enid. She's ages older than me." Her gaze flickered to Camilla. "Or . . ."

"Don't even think about it," Camilla said, raising a finger and pointing it at the girl. "Not only does the thought of wedding a man repulse me, but I imagine he'd be quite put out to find that our marital bed would be filled with other women, and he would be most unwelcome in it."

Cassie tilted her head to the side. "I tried it with a witch once."

"Liar," Dorea said under her breath as she took a quill to her parchment and made a notation in the margin.

Throwing her sister a glare, Cassie corrected. "Fine. She was a Muggle. Pretty little thing. She smelled like cinnamon and brought me pastries from a local shop every time we met. Shame it didn't work out."

"Why didn't it?" Andromeda asked.
"Oh, I've a terrible addiction to great big cocks."

Dorea threw her parchment down and sighed, while Theia burst into laughter that was infectious. It was only moments before Narcissa had her head buried against Andromeda's shoulder to stifle her very unbecoming giggles.

Someone clearing their throat loudly drew all of their attentions to the door, where an anxious-looking man stood, staring wide-eyed at Cassie. She grinned and winked at him. "Don't worry, dear. I promise to behave myself. I do have some restraint."

Narcissa stood up and smoothed her hands down her robes before she stepped forward to greet the wizard. "Gustavus, welcome. May I introduce my coven: Camilla Crouch, Theia Blishwick, Cassiopeia Black, Dorea Potter, and my sister, Andromeda Tonks."

Gustavus nodded politely, his attention intensely focused on Dorea, as though he were purposely trying not to look at Cassie, clearly embarrassed over what he had overheard. "Ladies."

Dorea offered him a polite smile, gesturing to a chair in front of them. "Would you have a seat, Mr Goyle? I'm certain you're more than willing to take Veritaserum?" At his nod, she added, "And undergo Legilimency?" He seemed hesitant for a moment, but a smile from Narcissa had him silently agreeing to that as well. Dorea relaxed her shoulders as the man drank from the cup given to him by Theia. They waited a full minute in silence to make sure that the potion had settled into his system, and for Narcissa to ready herself.

When the blonde gave a nod, indicating that she was prepared, Dorea looked Gustavus Goyle in the eye and asked, "Tell us how you became acquainted with . . . Voldemort."

Predictably, Goyle flinched.

Despite having been coerced into joining Voldemort by his friends and his father, Gustavus Goyle was absolutely certain that he had gone to his death when he sat in front of the Black Coven. Between the Veritaserum and Legilimency, Goyle painted a horrifying picture of what he most certainly did not enjoy doing for Voldemort, but between threats, torture, and even a legitimate Imperius, he felt as though he had little say in the matter.

The coven had been torn.

Unlike the previous Death Eaters that had come before them, Goyle was admittedly guilty of kidnapping Muggles for his Dark Lord—though he admitted to not recalling their eventual outcomes. However, very unlike the previous Death Eaters who had openly confessed to financially backing Voldemort and wearing his Mark on their arm, Gustavus felt sickened by his actions.

"Will you look after my Greg?" he had asked Narcissa, fully under the impression that the witches would sentence him to death.

Remorse. It was an interesting thing.

After discussing it with the rest of the assembled coven, Cassie levelled the man with a stern gaze and said, "If you swear fealty to the coven on your magic, we'll allow you to keep your Dark Mark and your life, Gustavus Goyle. We may have need of both in the future."

Dorea wanted Death Eaters to be punished and their victims to have justice, but guilt was a long-acting poison, and Gustavus Goyle would have no problem punishing himself. If Dumbledore could see it possible to redeem Severus Snape, why could Dorea not pick and choose as well? At least she
was being honest about her intentions. They did not yet know how to remove the hideous tattoo of allegiance to Voldemort, but Lucretia, Camilla, and Belina were all very eager to play with a Dark Mark. Lucius had been stubbornly against the idea of playing guinea pig. Gustavus Goyle would do.

Besides, Dorea could not tolerate the thought of tearing a father away from his son.

A small smile crossed her face as she stepped out of the fireplace to find Sirius, Harry, and Remus sitting on the floor playing Exploding Snap. Harry's eyes were alight with joy, and Sirius was actually laughing. Despite the full moon only being a few days away, Remus looked immensely better than when she had left Potter Manor earlier that morning.

"Grandmother!" Harry said excitedly, turning and sending a grin her way so big that it very nearly broke her heart. She could almost forget about the scared little boy in the cupboard under the stairs. Almost. "Come and play!"

She made a small snorting sound. "On the floor with you ruffians?"

"Afraid to get your hands dirty, Mum?" Sirius asked with a sly smile.

Dorea briefly thought of her plans for Albus Dumbledore, scattered Death Eaters, and Voldemort. Her grey eyes flashed purple, and she smiled coyly. "Never."

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**January 15th, 1987**

**Ottery St. Catchpole - The Burrow**

Most of the witches were not used to being around children, especially in droves. Despite there only being a handful of little Weasleys running around the Burrow, each child was boisterous enough to be counted as three; and to think, two of them were at Hogwarts! Percy was the only one who was even remotely quiet, and he had sequestered himself in his room with his familiar and a book to avoid dealing with his younger twin brothers, who were trying to forcefully trigger their accidental magic. One had set the curtains on fire, while the other turned his face green.

Dorea had no clue as to what they had originally intended to happen, as both seemed fairly thrilled with the results regardless.

The youngest two Weasleys switched back and forth between being attached at the hip like the closest of siblings one minute, and quite literally ripping hair out of one another's heads the next. The girl, in particular, was a vicious little thing.

"If all children were as interesting as this one," Cassie said, gesturing to the tiny witch, "I might've actually thought twice about having some of my own."

When Ron pulled Ginny's hair, she bit his arm, actually drawing blood. The boy cried and ran away, and Ginny growled and gave chase. Cassie beamed. "Can I keep her? I don't care what Molly says, this little witch will be one of us when she's old enough."

"Don't step on toes," Dorea cautioned. "Black blood or not, Molly and Arthur are the parents of those children. We'll not force any issues unless they conflict with our greater plans. And I hardly see the Weasleys giving in to blood prejudice and supporting Voldemort."

The Floo roared to life, and Minerva stepped out, followed by Nymphadora. The older witch met Dorea's gaze and sighed. "He's not interfering much, but he's being a right grump about coven business. Hasn't said two words to me about it, but Pomona said that he voices his concerns to her that the coven is overworking Nymphadora, and that it might not be best for her to participate in
"You all need me," Nymphadora said with a happy grin as she bounced across the room to throw herself into an armchair next to Cassie. "And it's Tonks."

Minerva bristled, ignoring the correction, too frustrated. "You are correct, and Albus knows this." Taking a moment, she added, "And it doesn't mean that you have the right to be disrespectful to the headmaster. He is still in charge of Hogwarts."


"Why would you want to do that?" the twins said simultaneously as they walked into the room, grinning at the young witch.

"You two," Molly said as she entered with a pot of tea in hand—a tray of scones floated behind her. She pointed at her sons as she followed after them. "Up to your room. I said before that you could stay and say hello, but once they'd all arrived, you were to make yourselves scarce. These witches are sparing a great deal of time for us, and I'll not have you mucking about and causing a distraction or getting into mischief." Ron and Ginny followed behind their older brothers, complaints of missing the approaching ritual falling on deaf ears.

Dorea waited until Molly had properly shooed them off before she said, "My sons were just like your twins when they were young."

The redhead turned, meeting Dorea's softened gaze. "Bill and Charlie have always been a handful, and Merlin knows that Ron and Ginny can be a bit much, but those two . . . Does it get better?"

Smiling innocently, Dorea said nothing.

Molly served everyone a cup, and Tonks eagerly dug into the scones, not quite understanding the importance of breaking bread with the Weasley family. Everyone remained quiet as they sipped and snacked, Molly visibly relaxing the longer she sat with the coven.

The front door of the Burrow opened, and Arthur and Cedrella stepped inside. "Right," Cedrella said, wearing a no-nonsense expression on her face, "the moon is high, and the others are all set up around the perimeter of the property. I know you're not completely on board with it, Molly, but blood wards are the best. Arthur will have to come with us to create a baseline for the Weasley blood. I could do it myself, but I'd rather lend my magic to the creation of the wards instead of being a focal point."

"You should add some of your own as well," Dorea said to Molly. "I set up blood wards around my home years ago, keying them to my husband's line because I didn't feel I could trust many members of my family, specifically my elder brother, Pollux. However, your Prewett line would only allow Ignatius through the wards in addition to your family and Arthur's brothers and parents. It will save you a hassle, should you ever need the wards adjusted."

Molly frowned, understanding that were she to ever need such a thing, it would mean that Arthur would have died. "I'm not a fan of blood magic," she whispered, "but I trust my mother-in-law and Aunt Lucretia. Do I have to come with you? I'd much rather stay here with my children, especially when . . ."

"When Narcissa's on the property?" Cedrella offered.
"You don't like my aunt?" Nymphadora asked curiously.

Caught off guard by the question, Molly nervously worried her apron in her hands. "It's not that, dear," she said kindly. "This is just quite a bit to take in. Weasleys and Malfoys haven't always been on the best of terms, you see."

Arthur snorted behind her and then let out a yelp, rubbing his arm where Cedrella had clearly pinched him in reproach. She pinned him with a look, and he shrank under her gaze. "I said I would try to be nice to Malfoy. He's not the friendliest of—All right! All right!" Arthur said, literally jumping away from his mother's pinching fingers.

"Good boy." Cedrella closed in on him and stood up on the tips of her toes to kiss his forehead. "Right. Let me grab a phial from the other room. We can collect Molly's blood and leave the poor girl in peace to deal with her little brood while the rest of us get to work."

Cassie scoffed. "Little brood?"

The coven was arranged to provide balance.

On one side of the boundaries of the Burrow, Camilla cast protection charms that dug their way into the ground. Opposite her on the far end of the border near the orchards was Enid, who likewise cast the same charms—both excelled at melding their magic with the earth.

Callidora and Cedrella stood on opposite side of one another, each in a position that, when paired with Camilla and Enid, formed a rectangle around the perimeter. Their calm magic directed the charms that the other cast, and light flickered out of the ground as it created a very literal border between the security wards and the rest of the world.

Moving along the edges of the light, Lucretia and Belina worked in tandem. While Lucretia burned protective runes deep into the ground, Belina worked the blood magic—channelling it through to Arthur, who stood in the centre of the property as the focus for the wards. Dorea was at his side, pouring Molly's blood onto the ground while Arthur's dripped from his right hand, where Dorea had cut him.

Nymphadora and Theia stood as fixed points, one close to the house and the other near the pond. The purest of witches in practice. Furthest removed from being raised by a Black, and traditional prejudice, Theia's magic was well-grounded in the Light. Likewise, Nymphadora was too young to have much experience with Dark Magic outside of her Defence classes. They were anchors—beacons for light magic. Each of their amulets shimmered in the darkness, drawing on the light of the full moon above them.

Best with mind magics, Andromeda and Narcissa stood opposite one another, arms lifted with wands in hand as they chanted simultaneously, using their Occlumency to create an additional layer to the wards sussing out intentions. Narcissa, familiar with the necessity of it, added a charm to prevent Death Eaters from crossing the borders.

Lastly, Cassie and Minerva knelt on the ground, pushing their Animagus magic into the earth with a force that shook the ground. Blue light spread out over the dirt and grass, rushing over the nearby rabbits, gnomes, and chickens, pausing as though inspecting them before moving on.

Moments after the blue light passed over the tall house, someone screamed.
January 15th, 1987
Ottery St. Catchpole - The Burrow

It was, as Sirius would say, a complete shitstorm.

Theia and Nymphadora were the closest to the house during the ritual, so when a scream came from within, the two youngest members of the coven made a beeline for the Burrow. Dorea and Arthur were a ways behind them, but the other witches had not heard the commotion, too far away or too caught up in the vibrating magic of the ritual.

When Dorea and Arthur burst through the front door, a loud CRACK of Apparition echoed from upstairs.

They reached the very top landing to find Molly actively checking each of her children for injuries. Most of the young Weasleys wore expressions of complete disbelief. Theia was tending to Nymphadora, who hissed as she clutched at her knee, completely unaware that she was also bleeding from the mouth.

Percy stood in the corner looking like he could break down at any moment.

"What happened?" Arthur asked.

No one had the chance to answer because Ginny began to cry, flinging herself into her father's arms. Arthur took his daughter and shifted her onto his side as he approached Percy, putting his free arm around his son. Eventually, Percy muttered, "I let him sleep in my bed."

Theia looked up and frowned at Dorea. "Percy had a pet rat."

Purple eyes widened, and Dorea felt her heart sink. "No."

"I'm sorry," Percy blurted out. "I d-didn't know. I swear it! I swear!"

Molly huffed, briefly abandoning the twins and Ron for Percy. Pulling him from Arthur's side and into her arms, she said, "Of course you didn't. No one thinks you did. You are not in any trouble."

"The Anti-Animagus ward," Dorea whispered in understanding. "Pettigrew transformed?"

"We heard Percy yell," one of the twins said, looking solemn and concerned for his older brother, who had his face buried in his mother's embrace. "We got there before Mum did. Percy was on the ground and that man was screaming, grabbing his arm and such like he was in pain."

"Narcissa's ward to block Death Eaters," Theia said.

"When we got there, he took Ginny," the other twin whispered angrily. "Pushed her toward the window, he did—"

"—like he was gonna throw her out of it."

"Told us to give him a wand or else."
"But none of us is old enough to have one."

"Said we had to go find one—"

"—steal Mum's even if we had to."

"I can't believe I was so foolish," Molly whispered, resting her cheek on Percy's head. "I ran up the stairs without even thinking, leaving my wand downstairs in the kitchen. Who does that? What kind of mother—"

Dorea winced, recalling a brief conversation days earlier with Sirius, when he had told her about the night that James died, and how his body had been downstairs, where he had faced off against Voldemort, but his wand had been in another room, left behind. "Don't blame yourself, dear. It could have happened to anyone."

"Ow!" Nymphadora yelped, jerking her head away from Theia.

"Mrs Weasley, do you have any dittany?" Theia asked.

Molly shook her head. "Ran out yesterday. I'd meant to go to Diagon Alley later this week."

Dorea knelt in front of the young witch to get a look at her. Focusing on her little niece was helping to keep her from thinking about Peter Pettigrew, living here with her own blood, hiding as a pet and being fed treats to his heart's content, all while Sirius rotted in Azkaban for five years, and James . . . "What happened to you?"

"She ran ahead of me," Theia explained. "Got upstairs first."

Tears welled in Nymphadora's rapidly colour-shifting eyes. Her hair was a dull, mousy brown; it was not a colour that Dorea had come to associate with the girl. "I'm so stupid," the young witch said, sniffing in embarrassment. "I came to help. He didn't even have a wand, but I did. I was gonna hit him with something, but I panicked. I forgot that I'm allowed to use magic outside of Hogwarts because of rituals.

"He threw Ginny at her brothers and then tried to grab me. I ducked out of his grip, but he elbowed me in the face, and I fell," she said, gesturing to her knee and then her mouth. "He stole my wand right outta my hand. It's my fault he got away."

Running her fingers through Nymphadora's hair, Theia sighed. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Sirius will hate me, won't he?" Nymphadora asked, tears falling onto her cheeks.

"Absolutely not," Dorea said.

"It's not your fault." Theia hugged her young cousin close, looking up and meeting Dorea's gaze. "I got him with a Slicing Hex just before he Disapparated. He's missing one finger and his left ear now."

"Can the wand be tracked?" one of the twins asked. "She's underage, so there'll be—"

Molly shook her head. "The trace isn't on the wands, dear. It's on the witch or wizard."

"So, you're saying that technically we could use your wand and not get in trouble?" the other twin asked.

Arthur shot both boys a look that said now was not the time.
It sounded like thunder when Andromeda stormed up the stairs, followed by the rest of the coven, having figured out that something had gone awry when Arthur and three of their fellow witches were nowhere in sight following the closing of the ritual and the wards.

"What happened?" Andromeda demanded as her gaze landed on her daughter.

Theia licked her lips nervously. "Peter Pettigrew was here."

Having witnessed some of Bellatrix's tantrums when the girl was young, Dorea was able to positively say that Andromeda had never looked more frighteningly like her elder sister. From the shocked expression on Narcissa's face, the blonde agreed.

Andromeda touched Nymphadora's cheek gently, taking note of the tear tracks and blood. Her nose twitched and her eyes narrowed as she hissed, "He's a dead man."

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**Tonks Residence**

Dorea escorted both Andromeda and Nymphadora to their home after leaving the Burrow, despite the fact that the girl was supposed to have returned to Hogwarts with Minerva following the ritual. Nymphadora had a split lip and a skinned knee that was scabbing over, and Molly Weasley was out of dittany since her family apparently went through the stuff faster than milk. Minerva had promised that she would deal with Albus, but that Nymphadora would need to return to Hogwarts the following morning.

"Well, look at all these pretty witches," Ted said as Dorea, Andromeda, and Nymphadora slipped out of the fireplace and into the living room. "I wasn't expecting to see anyone for a few more hours. And you," he said, smiling at his daughter. "I wasn't expecting to see you until Easter." He looked over her face and frowned in concern at the noticeable split in her lip. "You get into another fight?"

Nymphadora sighed heavily. "You could say that. I'm gonna go to bed, if that's okay."

His brow furrowing in concern, Ted nodded. "Put some dittany on that lip. There's some in the bathroom. And don't wake your cousin. He's sleeping in the guest room." As his daughter sulked down the hallway, Ted turned to Dorea. "I just tucked Harry in for the night. What's going on?"

"Where did you hide that good Muggle whisky that your mother gave us?" Andromeda asked, throwing open cabinet doors, looking like she was back on a warpath. "What's going on is that I need a stiff drink."

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**January 16th, 1987**

**Potter Manor**

"Why's Remus sick?" Harry asked in a hushed tone, attempting not to wake his sleeping uncle who was curled up in a guest bedroom beneath the covers, empty potion phials next to the bed.

Sirius cuddled the boy against his chest in the large, fluffy armchair across the room from Remus's bed. The full moon had been rough, leaving both men exhausted and badly bruised by sunrise.

*Despite spending the majority of the previous five years as Padfoot within the walls of Azkaban, Sirius was ill-prepared to return to Moony's side under the weight of a full moon. Likewise, the werewolf was no longer used to spending the night in the company of another creature. Much like when they were younger and had to find a comfortable go-between in handling their canine and lupine urges to fight and dominate one another, Sirius and Remus spent the majority of the full moon...*
wrestling, biting, and clawing.

The silver lining was that, instead of the cramped Shrieking Shack, they were given free run of the orchards behind Potter Manor, where they could stretch their legs and run out the excess energy until dawn. When Remus finally transformed back into his broken, human body, Sirius carefully carried him inside the house and put him to bed.

Harry's arrival home an hour later did a lot to ease Sirius's stress, though the expression on Dorea's face left him concerned.

"We'll talk once you've rested," she whispered, kissing his and then Harry's forehead before making her way to her study.

"Have you ever been sick, Harry?" Sirius asked.

"Yeah. I got a cold on my birthday, last time."

"Well, Remus has a sickness that's a bit like a cold. It makes his muscles ache, and his head hurt, and he's very tired much of the time. Only, unlike a cold, this sickness never goes away," Sirius explained quietly, watching the way Harry's brows furrowed in concern as he described Remus's lycanthropy. "Even though he can't get rid of the sickness, he can take potions to feel a little better. They make him have good sleep without bad dreams, and they make him hurt less. They're like the kind of medicines you take when you have a cold."

Tilting his head to the side, Harry asked, "You're s'posed to take medicines for colds?"

Sirius closed his eyes and took in a very slow breath. There had already been far too many moments since reuniting with his godson where Harry said something to implicate Lily's sister and that wretched husband of hers in the very obvious neglect that the boy had been living with. Despite wanting to Apparate away to Surrey—and make himself the murderer that people had believed he was up until recently—Sirius fought to calm himself, remembering that the last time he had lost control of his temper, it had not ended very well for either him or Harry.

"When you're sick, you . . . sometimes . . . take medicines. Depends on how sick you are," he finally said.

Harry thought about that for a moment and nodded. "Oh. I wasn't very sick; don't worry," he said, patting Sirius's arm. "Uncle Vernon said to walk it off. Dudley got real sick, though. He had to be taken to the doctor. Aunt Petunia said he got sick from me. Can we get sick from Remus?"

Sirius rubbed his temples, doing his best to focus on the boy's question and not the stream of rage-inducing information that came before it. "No," he answered. "Once a month, Remus gets very sick and only then can you get sick from him. That's why you stayed with Uncle Ted last night, and I was here taking care of Remus. I can't get sick from him."

"Why not?"

Sirius grinned. "I'm special. I learnt a secret trick that makes it so I can't get sick from him, but I can still stay with him every month to make sure he's taken care of."

"I wanna know."

Yawning, Sirius pulled Harry closer, feeling relieved when the boy echoed the sleepy gesture and slowly grew heavy in his arms. "Maybe I'll teach you when you're older," he whispered against Harry's mop of hair.
Remus was still unconscious when Sirius woke up an hour later. Harry was curled up in a ball with his head tucked up under Sirius's arm, lightly snoring. Carefully lifting his godson into his arms, Sirius made the long walk across the manor to Harry's room, tucking him into the bed that used to belong to James.

Without potions for himself, sleep didn't come easily to Sirius. He thought about taking a draught, just to force the issue, but then he recalled the look on his mother's face and decided to ease his worries before making his way to an actual bed.

"Knock, knock," he muttered, rapping his knuckles against the door to Dorea's study, which had been left ajar. He smiled when she looked up at him; the very sight of her was comforting.

When she and Charlus had fallen ill, Sirius had gone to St. Mungo's with James to see to their care. Sirius had spent days by her bedside until she had been put into the magically induced coma that kept her alive for years. While Sirius had been close to Charlus and thought of him as a father, there was something very different about Dorea. Perhaps it was the fact that Sirius's own father was not the instigator behind his nightmare of a childhood; rather, Orion Black often left a room when his wife got herself into a snit. Sirius had not liked his father very much, and Charlus was a damned good replacement, but Dorea Potter was without a fucking equal when it came to mothers, especially in comparison to Walburga.

Losing Dorea had been like losing what little good there was about Sirius's childhood. Seeing her alive was like breathing life back into the hope that had been stolen from him.

"You should be sleeping," she said reproachfully.

He grinned and sauntered into the room, plopping into the chair beside hers and resting his head on the desk. His smile softened when she brushed the hair back from his forehead, tsking at a bruise near his hairline that had been obscured by the black strands. "Not a big deal," he muttered. "I've had worse."

"I don't care," she said. "My boys are the most handsome boys there ever were, and I don't like to see such perfection blemished."

He chuckled. "You know, it's that kind of thing that gave James such a big head."

She shrugged, unrepentant. "He needed a big head for that hair. He would have looked silly if the proportions were off."

Sirius snorted and sat up, pushing all of his hair out of his face, grimacing with the knowledge that he could probably do to shed a few inches. "Lily humbled him down a bit. Made him . . . I dunno. He was happy. Goofed off less, but he was stupidly happy. I hate to say it, but you probably shouldn't make Harry think he's the most handsome, perfect boy to ever exist," he suggested with an amused tone.

Dorea narrowed her eyes playfully. "I'll do whatever I like. I'm the grandmother. That alone means that Harry is even more perfect than either you or James ever were, and Harry will get nothing less than adoring praise from me. You're the parent," she said, pointing her finger in his face and gently flicking the tip of his nose. "You turn him into a respectable, humble person. I'm going to spoil that boy silly."

Sirius barked a happy laugh, a bit of light igniting inside of him when he saw how the sound of it made her smile. "Just want to make my job harder?"
Dorea shrugged. "I would not oppose to having more grandchildren to spoil." The corners of her mouth twitched up at Sirius's widened gaze. "Even if they were adopted."

Rolling his eyes dramatically, Sirius snorted. "Subtle, Mum. I wouldn't count on more grandchildren. And Remus and I . . . We're not what you think. We were only . . . It was Hogwarts," he said, trying to explain. "A romantic relationship isn't something that will happen between us."

"I wouldn't care. Most wouldn't. It isn't as though we're in dire need for you to carry on the name, after all," she said, waving her hand, "and even if that were the case, I'm sure there are plenty of witches who would be more than willing to carry a child—"

He smiled, snatchng her hand out of the air to stop her from talking. "I'll let you know if things change." Curious—and eager to change the subject—he turned his gaze down at the parchment in front of her. "Writing to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?"

Her smile vanished instantly. "I have good news and bad news." Without prompting, she avoided his worried stare when she said, "Peter Pettigrew was found last night, but he escaped. He was at the Burrow, hiding as one of the Weasley boys' pets. The wards forced him out of his form, but he tried taking one of the children hostage. Stole Nymphadora's wand and Disapparated before any of the adults could get there." Lifting her gaze to meet Sirius's, Dorea frowned and squeezed his hand. "We'll catch him. I swear it to you."

Bitterness rolled in his belly as Sirius remembered the sickening, demented grin on Peter's face just before he had blown up that street, killing those Muggles. His friend. His brother. This man who had once been afraid of the dark, who had been too awkward to talk to girls, whom Sirius had grown up with had been completely unrecognisable, as though something had burrowed inside of him, infecting him with malevolence, and rotted his heart.

Sirius had been murderous before, certainly—especially toward Peter after what he had done—but the idea of betraying a friend, of killing innocent people . . . it was sickening. It reminded him too much of the one time that he had gone too far back in Hogwarts with Snape and the full moon. But even then, Sirius had spent a whole month being ignored by James, and he had been forbidden from going to the Shrieking Shack for longer, as though the full moon became a reminder to his friends of what he had almost forced Moony to do.

Peter, though . . . Peter had not wanted to kill Sirius; he wanted Sirius to suffer. He had taken joy in that suffering, as clear as day.

"What will we do when he's found?" Sirius asked, his voice hoarse due to the tightness in his throat—an invisible wall that was forcing down the hatred, bile, and sadness. He wished that he had a similar wall in his mind that could hold back the memories of Azkaban—the bone breaking coldness, the sound of screaming, and the smell of shit and rotting food.

Dorea looked down. "I want him in a cell. Some of the others would like him to be given to the Ministry. Cassie wants to leave him in his Animagus form, drop him in the middle of a field and spend the better part of a year repeatedly hunting him. Your cousins, however . . . Narcissa and Andromeda will be out for blood. I almost pity him if they find him before anyone else. What do you want?"

Thinking of Harry, and Remus, and the utter fuck up he had made the last time he had tried to deal with Wormtail on his own, Sirius scrubbed his hands down his face, willing away the tears caused by stress, spite, and severe sleep deprivation. "I just don't want to think about him ever again. I just want him gone. Even hearing his name reminds me of that night . . . that . . . I can't unsee it. If he were right in front of me . . . I'd murder him without a thought in the world; no regrets. I worry that I
wouldn't be able to think of anything else, to be honest. He would be dead, no question. But he's not here."

Dorea took his face in her hands and kissed his cheeks. "You take care of Harry, son. Leave the rest to us witches."

"Fucking dangerous, the lot of you."

She flicked his nose again, her lips pursed halfway between annoyance and amusement as she scolded him. "Language."

When Sirius finally went off to bed, Dorea finished her letter to Amelia Bones, letting her know about the events at the Burrow and Peter Pettigrew's escape. Twenty minutes later, an owl hovered at the edge of the wards, triggering a security alert to let Dorea know that it carried a letter. Allowing the creature in with a flick of her wand, she stared at the black bird curiously, surprised that Amelia had been able to reply so quickly.

It was, however, when she opened the letter that she realised it was not the head of the D.M.L.E. that was writing to her. Inside the small envelope was an old, familiar brooch: a moonstone banded with a ring of rose diamonds on a silver mount. Dorea closed her eyes and sighed in irritation. She did not even need to turn the pin over to know that her name was engraved on the back.

Glaring down at the open letter on her desk, she cursed herself for her brief moment of mercy.

Sanctuary, my good Lady Black.

Sanctuary for peace.

Thoros Nott

January 17th, 1987
Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place

It was annoying that Thoros Nott was still handsome. He did not have the sharp bone structure that AbraXas Malfoy had—which caused every girl at Hogwarts except for Dorea to swoon—but Thoros was a presence without a chiselled jaw and high cheekbones. He had a striking blue gaze that dug its way into a person's soul and an air about him that was not the smug ego that many pure-blooded, privileged wizards carried with them, but instead a quiet confidence that was often unnerving.

The Malfoys were wealthy and well-bred; the Blacks were powerful and a tad unhinged; the Notts, however . . . The Notts were smart.

Thoros Nott was a former Death Eater who had escaped Azkaban on a technicality. He had also waited more than the allotted three days that the coven had publicly given Death Eaters to come to them for potential forgiveness and sanctuary. Dorea knew that, as a marked servant of the coven's greatest enemy, she had the ability to do away with him, if she so pleased. She would need to, of course, provide a good enough reason so that the Ministry did not kick up a fuss and the press did not make up their own reasons. Knowing Thoros the way she did, he would have left behind "evidence" linking the two of them as former lovers—regardless of the truth—and she would be accused of killing him out of jealousy or some other nonsense.

She still wanted to do something terrible to the man.
But Thoros Nott was smart . . . and had brought his son with him to the meeting, knowing that Dorea would not murder a man in front of his own child. The fact that he knew her so well used to be appreciative in what had been a friendly acquaintance in their youth; now, it was just really bloody irritating.

"Say hello, Theodore."

The little boy's soft, bright eyes were not a trait shared by his father, but his hair was just as dark—nearly black. Dorea purposely refused to make comparisons to Harry. He was dressed in formal robes, and he took practised steps toward her, lifting his feet an inch higher than a child would normally when walking, indicating that he had likely tripped over the robes at some point and taught himself to avoid further falls by taking larger steps.

Theodore bowed his head. "My Lady Black."

"Potter," she corrected out of instinct, sending a glare at Thoros when his son looked embarrassed, as though the mistake had been his own. Her expression softened when she returned her attention to the child. "Not your fault, dear. Surely, your father was mistaken when he prepared you for this meeting. Silly men make mistakes when they get very, very old," she said with a smile. "Their brains turn into porridge."

Theo pressed his lips together to hide his smile.

Thoros rolled his eyes. "You and I are the same age, Dorea," he said with a small huff.

"Men age poorly," she said, lifting a challenging eyebrow. "Perhaps I took care of myself better over the years. I'm curious to know how you have spent your time, and in whose company, since Hogwarts."

Thoros tensed—a minute adjustment of his posture that might have gone unseen by anyone who was not watching his every move. "Theodore, go and read your book in the corner. I'd like to speak to Madam Potter alone."

"I'm never alone," Dorea said, gesturing to the witches standing behind her. Belina looked like she had not had a proper duel in far too many years, and was itching for a good one. Narcissa was carefully examining her nails.

Dorea watched as Theo walked to the corner, sitting down and opening a book that he had brought with him. Even from where she sat she could see that there were no pictures. Bitterly, Dorea recalled Harry's inability to read properly and did her best not to be jealous on behalf of her grandson.

When she returned her attention to Thoros, he was glaring at Belina and Narcissa. Casting a Silencing Charm to keep his son's attention focused on his book and away from adult conversations, Dorea narrowed her eyes at the Death Eater. "Don't pout, Thoros. I would have thought that you would be used to not getting what you want from me."

He looked at the brooch she held in her hand. "I see you haven't thrown it at my face like the last time."

"If you'd be so inclined to bend over, I'll be happy to shove it up your arse," she hissed. When he laughed, she did throw the brooch at him, hitting him on the left side of his forehead and drawing blood.

Wincing, Thoros reached up and put his fingers against the cut, grinning when he saw red. "Your aim has improved, though your language is a bit appalling for a lady. And here I thought with the
uncouth blighter, Abraxas, dead, I could sway a more . . . affectionate attention from you."

"I should cut you open and paint the walls of this house with your entrails," Dorea said, her eyes flashing purple and then silver. "You, more than anyone, know very well that Abraxas Malfoy never had any proper claim on my affections."

Thoros inclined his head. "No, you are correct. That was Potter who stole you away when I was not looking."

She turned her hand, palm up and fire ignited without a word or a wand. "Give me a reason."

He smiled at her, his gaze dancing over the flames appreciatively. "You've always been filled with fire." When she actually snarled in response, he sighed and stuck his hands into the pockets of his robes. "I'm not here to speak ill of the dead."

"You just spoke ill of Abraxas, and he's not been dead a full month," she said incredulously.

Thoros scoffed, irritated. "Malfoy was a cunt." If he expected a reaction from Narcissa, she gave him none. Her focus was, instead, on Theodore, staring at him with a mother's attention, as though she would abscond with him should Dorea decide to get creative and nail Thoros's spleen to the wall. "Your husband is dead, as is my wife."

Sneering, Dorea demanded, "Show me your arm."

"What? This old thing?" he asked, pulling his sleeve and revealing his Dark Mark. "Folly of youth?"

"Do it," Dorea said.

Confused for a split second, Thoros had not the time to prepare himself for when Narcissa's gaze met his, and she whispered, "Legimins." She was inside his mind for less than thirty seconds, but he still fell to his knees from the harshness of her digging before he threw up his Occlumency shields. He held out a hand to his son, who had stood the moment that Thoros collapsed. The boy could not hear the conversation, but he could still see that his father was in distress.

"He's genuine," Narcissa concluded, adding, "For now," as an afterthought. "He closed off the memories, but his intentions were laid bare for me. His loyalty to Voldemort is currently as weak as most of the others. He does not care for Muggles or Muggle-borns, but he's not hell bent on their complete subjugation or destruction. He joined Voldemort for power and a strange sense of loyalty. He's here to save himself, nothing more."

"Get out," Dorea ordered. "My brief moment of mercy for Death Eaters ended several days ago."

"Theo was sick," Thoros admitted quietly, looking as though he hated to bring himself to such tactics. "I swear it. I would have sent word before—"

"You've always been prideful," Dorea said, looking away from him. "I want nothing from you, Thoros. I never have, no matter what you always assumed."

"You'll want this. You know he's coming back, right? You know he's not dead. Not really."

"Then why are you not out seeking your master?"

"Because I never wanted a master to begin with," he said angrily. "I joined the Dark Lord back when we were to be equals. When he was my friend, and we made plans together with others like us, Abraxas included. And then the Dark Lord grew in power in ways we could not comprehend."
His cruelty was extended to both ally and enemy alike if he was not pleased. We were to be Knights exploring the depths of magic, not minions doing his personal bidding in a war he waged against Dumbledore and Mudbloods."

"Don't tell me that you were upset with the lot you chose in life," she said angrily. "You survived this long; surely you were not so far out of your Lord's favour."

Thoros chuckled, a dark, bitter sound. "I was supposed to stand as his equal. Then when he'd risen above us all, I was to stand equal with my fellows, at the very least. But then Lestrange, Avery, Rosier, and even that shit Abraxas were honoured and placed above my station."

"Did they murder more Muggle-borns than you?"

His nostrils flared. "I murdered no one," he retorted. "They gave him something I could not."

"What was that?"

"Their sons." His gaze flickered to Theodore, still quietly reading in the corner. "Most married young and were provided heirs in their youth. They promised the Dark Lord the servitude of their children, which was why each boy was Marked upon graduation from Hogwarts. I, however, had no son at the time. The Dark Lord requested that I, and the others who had yet to have children, swear any future offspring into his service." Thoros lifted his chin. "I would not."

Dorea turned her attention to the boy and then back to Thoros, curiously searching his eyes for any sign of falsehood.

"As I said before, I had never wanted a master. I would not enslave my son to the fate that I had foolishly been misled into." His features softened just slightly, reminding Dorea just a bit of the well-groomed and charming gentleman that she had known in her youth. "Grant me and my family sanctuary with your coven so that we will not be presumed to be your enemies, and I will tell you everything I know about your real enemy."

Dorea was intrigued by the notion that Thoros had been friends with Voldemort prior to becoming a Death Eater. She had been Head Girl at Hogwarts and thought she had known every one of Thoros's friends—at least the ones in their year. Something was missing, and damn Thoros Nott, she did want the knowledge that he claimed to have.

Sitting up a little straighter, she demanded, "Prove it. Prove that you have anything on Voldemort that I might even think could be useful."

Thoros grinned. "Well, first . . . you might start calling him Tom."

Chapter End Notes

Check out the prequel story that Brightki wrote about the Hogwarts antics of Dorea Black, Thoros Nott, Abraxas Malfoy, and Charlus Potter. It's AMAZING! It's called Long Live the Queen. ♥
January 17th, 1987
Potter Manor

"How could nobody have known who Voldemort really was?" Lucretia demanded angrily, pacing back and forth in the drawing room while the rest of the gathered coven looked on nervously.

Once Dorea, Belina, and Narcissa had excused Thoros Nott and his son from their presence, they had called an emergency meeting of the coven. After imparting to the others the little knowledge Thoros had deigned to give Dorea about Voldemort, Lucretia and Enid both stood, looking rather faint. Belina, herself, had been quiet since the revelation that Lord Voldemort was once called Tom Riddle.

"We went to school with that . . . that . . ." Lucretia rambled on, looking at Dorea. "How could nobody have known?!

"Because, according to Nott, Tom Riddle vanished sometime around 1961," Dorea offered.

"He came and worked for my uncle and father for a short while," Belina said. "Charming, from what I was told. Uncle Car still whinges at length about how no one works as hard as Tom ever did, how we all could learn a thing or two, and what a loss to Britain it was that Tom Riddle went travelling abroad." She anxiously cracked her knuckles. "Travelled abroad and then evidently returned."

"Nott said that he stayed in the shadows following his return, allowing his Death Eaters to do most of his work for him. Even then, only his inner circle met with him regularly. The younger recruits only ever saw him during their branding," Dorea said softly, rubbing a bit of magic between her fingers like a stress ball, her anxiety growing the louder Lucretia's voice became.

Enid had nearly bitten her thumbnail down to the bed. "He's a monster."

"We knew that already," Andromeda said.

"No," Dorea said, shaking her head. "Lucretia and I . . . He was just two years below us. In our House. Slughorn's little pet. He was brilliant and charming, but unassuming. He was younger, so I paid him little attention, but he travelled around with the heirs of well-known families. Avery, Lestrange, Rosier, and the like." She purposely left out both Abraxas and Thoros despite the fact that they, too, had been there. Perhaps, had she not been so caught up in her own personal drama back at Hogwarts, she might have noticed that not one, but two of her suitors had been caught up with a sociopath.

"It got worse after you left," Enid said softly. "Tom Riddle came into his own, stepping above the rest of his little gang, and he might as well have been their king by the time Headmaster Dippet made him Head Boy. Everyone knew he was dangerous, but no one could prove anything that he had done because his . . . minions would rally to his side. I remember Carlotta Pinkstone's little brother ended up in the hospital wing with . . . The boy was bleeding from his eyes. Rumour was that he'd accused Riddle of doing it to him, but Riddle had alibis. Eventually, one of Riddle's friends, Avery, I think, admitted fault even though everyone knew he had been at Quidditch practice when the boy was supposedly attacked. They called it an accident."
"Accident," Lucretia spat. "I suppose that Ravenclaw girl's death was an accident as well? The Muggle-born one. You remember. She was the same age as my brother. Orion shared a few classes with her."

"They said that Hagrid—"

"Oh, what a load of—"

"He was expelled."

"He was likely framed!"

"Stop!" Dorea said, standing up and holding her arms out. "Who Voldemort was no longer concerns us."

"It should," Lucretia stood firm. "We're not dealing with a rabid dog, Dorea. This creature, Tom Riddle, is smart, and calculating, and he is charming enough to bring the greatest pureblood Houses to their knees at his feet. He bent the will of both Nott and Malfoy, broke the Lestranges, and he corrupted our own family. Not a single one of us knew that he was behind it."

Cedrella crossed her arms. "He's a nasty bit of darkness. I'd hardly call that charming."

"Tell that to Bellatrix," Andromeda whispered angrily. "With luck, she could have just ended up like Walburga. A bit touched to be sure, and mad with hatred for Muggles, but that . . . thing took her fire and her venom, and he aimed her like a weapon. He gave her a cause, and she—"

"What else did Nott have to offer?" Callidora interrupted, holding up a hand to try and calm the situation with her gentle presence and tone—she had no need to revisit exactly how Voldemort had used Bellatrix Lestrange.

Belina chimed in. "That he knew little to nothing of Riddle's family. He had a deep hatred for Muggles, but Riddle is not a Wizarding name that I know of. Nott said that their friends all presumed that he was pureblood, because to suggest otherwise would be asinine. Does the Board of Governors keep records of students?"

"Not to my knowledge," Lucretia replied. "Even the Ministry's records are minimal. Most files begin with O.W.L. scores, as though none of us existed before that. Only the Headmaster of Hogwarts would have any sort of record the likes of which we're seeking."

They all frowned at that.

"We know the bastard's name now, and apparently what he got up to in Hogwarts," Callidora said, changing the subject once again, "but did Nott say anything about whether or not Voldemort survived?"

Dorea shook her head. "He's keeping what few cards he has close to his chest in order to remain in our favour. It's irritatingly smart of him. However, despite knowing Nott since our school years and being a marked Death Eater, Tom Riddle favoured Abraxas during their fallout, and Nott was placed in a position where he took orders rather than assisted in planning."

"Likely because of Malfoy's money. Notts are wealthy but stingy, and Malfoys piss Galleons to earn favour," Cassie offered. "So what do we do now? Put pressure on Nott?"

"No," Dorea answered, not wanting to deal with the man unless she had no other choice. "We have one more Death Eater to consider."
While the rest of the coven argued about what was to be done about the information that Nott had provided—and whether or not Dumbledore knew—Narcissa asked to be excused from the meeting. Running into Thoros's Occlumency shields had given her quite a headache, and even the thought of Voldemort having been a real person at one time had given her unpleasant chills that she needed to be rid of. She had gone home, eager to fall into Lucius's awaiting arms, only to find him not there. An elf informed her that he was attending a last minute meeting of the Hogwarts Board of Governors.

With a sigh, she had pulled Draco onto her lap for a cuddle, grateful that he had not yet grown too old for such things. The manor, however, was dark and awful, and with Voldemort lingering in the back of her mind, she could not erase the thought that Abraxas had allowed that man to step foot in the place she called home.

She needed to get out.

Sirius looked up when the fireplace in the library burst to life. His eyebrows lifted at the sight of his cousin, a small blond boy in tow. "Cissa."

She smiled softly at him. "Sirius. You're looking much better."

"I would hope so. You were there? At my trial?"

She nodded. "I suppose I owe you an apolo—"

"Sirius!" Harry came darting into the room, a flying toy dragon following behind him. "I got it to work! See?"

Sirius grinned, snatching the dragon out of the air. "I see that," he said with a chuckle, examining the wings. "I told you a little charm work and they'd be good as new. Of course, I think I should be given a little credit. You don't even have a wand yet."

Harry let out a snort of laughter. "Yeah, but I got it to fly from up high. Yours fell when you tried." The boy turned his gaze to the other occupants of the room, and the smile vanished almost instantly as he ducked behind his godfather, only to be tugged back around and pulled within the safe confines of Sirius's arms.

Smiling softly, Sirius patted Harry on the head, ruffling his hair. "Harry, this is my cousin, Narcissa Malfoy. She's one of the witches in your grandmother's coven." Settling his gaze on the boy behind the witch, Sirius tilted his head to the side. "And I assume this is your son?"

Narcissa urged Draco forward. "Draco, say hello to our cousin, Sirius and his godson, Harry Potter."

Obviously aware of the name, Draco blinked silver eyes up at his mother and mouthed "Potter?" At her nod, he glanced back to the other boy, took several steps forward and nodded at Sirius. "Cousin Sirius," he said, looking like a smaller version of his father, even with a matching posture that looked as though a broom had been shoved up the back of his robes to keep him upright.

Sirius snorted. "Cousin Draco," he said a bit sarcastically as he made a grand show of bowing to the boy.

The little blond looked like he wanted to laugh, but was not sure whether or not he would be reprimanded for such a thing. Instead, he focused his attention on the other child, ignoring Sirius entirely. "Are you really Harry Potter?"
Harry shrugged before squaring his shoulders defensively. "Yeah. Are you really Cousin Draco?"

The tone in Harry's voice did not go unnoticed by either Sirius or Narcissa, both looking a bit shocked by the harshness of it. Sirius patted Harry on the back and smiled down at him when he turned to glance up at his godfather. "It's good to have friends," he told the boy, wondering what kind of children—other than Petunia's beastly child—Harry had previously encountered.

Frowning a bit—though his eyes were much softer than moments before—Harry held his hand out to Draco. "Friends?"

Draco stared at the hand as though he were contemplating a very important decision. Eventually, he shook it and nodded his head. "Friends."

January 24th, 1987
Potter Manor

There was nothing and no one in the world that Sirius loved more than Harry. Being around the boy, able to raise him the way he should have for the past few years, was literally being given a second chance at life—and what a good life it was. However, Sirius had only been free from Azkaban and dementors and the Ministry for one week, and there were times that his hands still shook at the dinner table when he needed to use a fork. There were times when a darkness overtook him in the middle of a conversation, and he would snap to when Harry would ask him if he was all right. An occasional separation was necessary for them both.

With his godson off playing with Ted Tonks for the day, and his mother brewing trouble with her coven, Sirius crept down the hallway toward one of the guest rooms, and slipped inside.

He smirked at Remus's bed head—the hairs on the left side stuck straight up, while the right side was plastered to his scalp. Still, it was leaps and bounds better than James's hair had ever been; Sirius was convinced that the Potter hair was an inherited curse.

His gaze trained on the softly snoring werewolf, Sirius was overcome by loneliness and a reminder that things could never again be as they were. Pulling back the blanket a bit, Sirius scooted beneath the covers, muttering, "Move over."

Remus stirred at the movement and rolled over, his eyes still closed. "Siri—? What time is it?"

"Early." Sirius pressed his nose and forehead against the back of Remus's neck—the only physical connection between the two on the large bed. The werewolf no longer smelled like the familiar scents of Hogwarts or the cheap cologne that Mary Macdonald bought him for Christmas sixth year. Instead, the scent was both new and old, and Sirius breathed it in, teaching himself to associate it with comfort and home—teaching his inner animal to trust the scent always.

"Mum just took Harry over to Andy's so Ted can look after him for the day. Harry's been wanting to play some murder mystery game that I just don't understand. Why would someone waste time trying to kill a bloke with lead piping? There's one of those Muggle guns in the game, and the Mustard bloke uses lead piping? And why was that just lying about the house? Do Muggles have access to —"

Remus groaned and pulled his pillow over his head. "It's too early for teaching you how to Muggle, Sirius."

Sirius scoffed. "I can Muggle just fine, cheers."
Throwing the pillow aside, Remus rolled onto his back and tilted his head to look at Sirius incredulously. "Says the man who once asked Father Christmas what business he had using unauthorised Floo travel."

Rolling his eyes, Sirius retorted, "That wasn't the real Father Christmas."

"That's my point. Lily was mortified," Remus said in a scolding tone, though the small smile on his face betrayed the nostalgia. "You caused a scene."

"It wasn't that bad."

"We were escorted out of the shopping centre by security."

"Hmph." Never one to be proven wrong, Sirius said nothing more, silently telling himself that he was right and that arguing with Remus was a pointless battle, since his friend used big words and exaggerated lies to win. His toes brushed against Remus's shins, and Sirius smiled when the werewolf did not pull away from him. Moving closer, his knee touched a bare leg, causing him to grin. "Are you wearing pants, Moony?"

Remus grumbled irritably until Sirius's knuckles smoothed over the skin of his stomach. Swallowing hard, he hoarsely asked, "Where's your mum?"

"Coven thing," Sirius muttered, scooting closer with every word until they were practically sharing breath, their torsos pressing against one another, skin to skin, close enough that they could feel each other's heartbeats. "Says she'll need the whole day. We're alone."

"Mmm," Remus quietly moaned when he felt a scratchy beard rub against his collarbone. "Pads . . . I don't . . . Look, you were in Azkaban for a long time," he said, pulling away so he could look his friend in the eyes—eyes which were slate grey, clouded over with a very familiar, heated look. "And I know we've forgiven one another for how things were . . . before Prongs and Lily died, but—"

"You're not looking to settle down and get hitched?" Sirius teased, settling one hand on Remus's hip. "Mum says she's up for a litter of adopted grandchildren."

Eyes wide, Remus nearly jumped. "What the—?! Are you taking the piss?!" When Sirius chuckled, Remus shoved his chest. "Arsehole."

Sirius moved right back against Remus, nuzzling the underside of his throat, smiling when stubble scratched against his cheek pleasantly. "You're warm. You've always been warm. Azkaban was . . . It was always cold. I can still feel it in my bones."

Broken, the two of them, just like always.

Remus had been destroyed and reshaped by his illness, and Sirius had been tainted by the disappointment and utter venom of his parents. One thing they had always promised one another was that they never had need to pity the other. So, like plenty of times before, Remus ignored the ache in his chest that made him want to protect his best friend against the harsh injustices of their world, and instead, quietly laughed at him. "You crawled in my bed for a cuddle? For warmth?"

"Warmth is nice." Sirius boldly kissed Remus's jaw. "Though I wouldn't object to heat." When his lips were suddenly far removed from skin and delicious stubble, he grumbled and pouted. Grey eyes met green, and Sirius sighed. "Don't look at me like that, Moony; I'm not proposing marriage. I'd make a shit husband."

Lifting a brow, Remus snorted. "You were a shit boyfriend as well."
"I thought we weren't boyfriends. Thought it was just sex."

"It was Hogwarts." Remus ran his fingers through the black strands of Sirius's hair that had come undone from the messy knot he kept it pulled back in. "We were exclusive one day and then just fooling around the next. Being a teenager was bloody dramatic. I miss it. I miss when worrying about whether or not you were going to run off and shag Marlene was my most pressing social concern."

"You weren't concerned," Sirius said. "You were mental for Mary, anyway."

"Both are gone."

"Yeah." Pushing further, Sirius's hands drifted south from Remus's hips. Watching for a reaction that would tell him his touch was unwelcome, and glad when he found none. Sirius ran his fingers over the outside of Remus's legs and then over the tops, moving to the inside of muscular thighs. He moved up, licking his lips and swallowing hard when his mouth watered at the touch of soft and hard at the same time.

Remus closed his eyes and whimpered. "We're still here. Alive."

Sirius nodded, wrapping one hand around Remus's length and running the other up his bare chest, brushing over a pattern of scars. "Left behind," he said as he kissed his way toward Remus's mouth.

Breathing heavy, Remus asked. "Are you sure?"

Not answering, Sirius ran his tongue against Remus's bottom lip. Already the scent of arousal in the room was heavier than the memories of Azkaban—of mouldy walls, damp cement, and the salty air from the water that surrounded the prison. He breathed in the musky hot air around him now—the smell of clean blankets, polished wood, and whatever soap Remus used now that clung to his skin. It all temporarily erased the ingrained odour of death and dementors.

When Remus responded eagerly, tongue brushing against tongue, Sirius let out a needy little noise that was much less manly than any sound he had ever let slip past his lips before. Much too like a beaten dog being kindly petted for the first time. Torn between wanting to crawl on top of Remus and hold onto him for dear life, and begging to be fucked until he couldn't see straight, Sirius did his best to concentrate on multitasking—stimulating the hardness in his hand and kissing at the same time.

When a large hand wrapped around his own erection, Sirius broke the kiss and gasped against Remus's neck. "Don't stop," he begged. "I don't care if this is . . . I just want to disappear for a bit—forget that the last six years ever happened, don't you?"

Remus licked his lips, squeezed a little harder, and muttered, "Yeah," before kissing Sirius again.

When the pad of Remus's thumb ran over the tip of his cock, Sirius let out a series of swears that Dorea would have Scourgified his mouth over. He shivered, mouthing Remus's jaw as the werewolf chuckled. "Glad I haven't lost my touch. It's been a while."

"Since touching a prick that's not your own? Or sex in general? 'Cause if it's been less than five years for you, I've got you beat there, Moony. Not that Azkaban guards aren't sexy in their hideous robes and looks of utter disdain, but, well . . . I wouldn't have wanted to look like I was seeking special treatment."

"You always want special treatment," Remus said, rolling over and hovering over Sirius's body, resting his weight on one arm near Sirius's head. "No other blokes. A Muggle girl here or there over the years."
Sirius thrust against Remus's hand, too distracted to keep up his own ministrations. Letting go of the werewolf and allowing his hands to fall to the side, Sirius embraced the warm pleasure that rushed through his blood, heating up his body. "Fuck . . . It's been too . . ." He groaned, tilting his head to the side until his mouth was close enough to Remus's wrist to gently nip at the skin. "If you're this good at stroking my cock after all these years, I'm a bit eager to see how good you still are at fucking."

"Not today," Remus said softly, kissing just below Sirius's ear.

"Arsehole."

Chuckling, Remus muttered, "You never used to call me such nice things in bed."

Sirius shrugged, closing his eyes as he tried to focus on his building climax. "I-I . . . I save all the pillow talk for women. Are women still good, Moony? I haven't seen one that I've not been related to in . . . Granted, Theia's removed far enough, I think, and she's got a tight little—Fuck! Fuck!

Grabbing onto Remus's arm, Sirius moaned, jaw open in awe as he came. All pleasure, no pain. No pain for the first time in years. Exhausted and cursing himself for already being so spent, he sunk against the pillow, eyes droopy. "Gimme a . . . minute, and I'll finish—"

"Sleep," Remus whispered, pressing his lips against Sirius's forehead. "Get some actual sleep. I'll be awake right beside you."

A silent guard to protect, Sirius thought, glad that Remus knew enough to know that nightmares about prison and dementors were a plague. He was more happy that his friend knew better than to mention it.

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**Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry**

Albus exhaustedly made his way down the stairs from his private quarters to his office. The portraits of previous headmasters were all asleep with the exception of Phineas Nigellus Black, who was missing and had been for a week now. When the Black Coven made a spectacle of the Wizengamot, Albus had returned to Hogwarts to demand of Phineas what he knew about his family. The portrait had been quietly amused as Albus recounted the tale of Dorea Potter and the Black witches—Minerva apparently included—embarrassing Bartemius Crouch and those who had a hand in Sirius Black's arrest.

"Good girls. They get that from me, you know," was all Phineas had said before vanishing off to his portrait at Grimmauld Place to have a look around. He had not returned since.

The other former headmasters had spent the week lecturing Albus on meddling in the affairs of a coven. Elizabeth Burke and Eupraxia Mole were particularly vocal, as were several of the other former headmistresses. Eventually, when he could not take the lectures any longer, Albus silenced every portrait save for Armando Dippet, his predecessor who offered no wisdom whatsoever, other than to remind Albus what happens to an intruder when they step into a den of snakes.

The rest of the week had been what felt like a limitless drudgery of wasted efforts. He had reached out to Alastor Moody to investigate what had happened to the Dursleys. Certain that Dorea or her sister had used magic against the Muggles to kidnap Harry, Albus was shocked to discover that Lily's sister and family were no longer living on Privet Drive.

"Burned right to the ground," Alastor informed him. "Only magic I could scrounge up was bits leftover from a Locating Charm. Muggles looked into it. Said something about leaving a cooker on
or some such. And before you ask, I checked the Muggles for Obliviation. Not a bit."

"Do you honestly think that it's a coincidence that the Dursley's home was destroyed the same day that Harry Potter was taken from them?"

Alastor scoffed. "I don't believe in coincidences. Those Black witches were behind it. I've no doubt. Nothing can be done. Magic wasn't used on any Muggles, they left those people alive, and Harry Potter's right where he should be. You put that boy with those Muggles, Dumbledore? Had you been drinking?"

A morning nip sounded quite good, actually. Albus sat at his desk and removed an old bottle from a drawer, eager to pour himself a glass of the amber liquid. Normally, he would not imbibe so early in the day, but he had no plans on attending breakfast in the Great Hall. Minerva would be there, and he was officially unnerved by the way she acted as though nothing had happened during the last fortnight. Granted, his curtains had been shredded to pieces, his chair was clawed some more, and he was pretty certain that she had charmed all of his lemon drops to taste like bogey-flavoured Bertie Botts.

But nothing more.

The waiting was the worst.

A soft hoot of an owl drew Albus's attention to his window. He normally left it open so that Fawkes could hunt at night if he so chose. The loyal phoenix was on his perch beside the desk, a fresh copy of the *Daily Prophet* beneath him. At the sight of the beautiful Snowy owl, Fawkes preened. The white bird was lovely, with black spots freckled down her wings, and her amber gaze was penetrating.

"Behave yourself," Albus told Fawkes, amused. He stood, making his way to the window, lifting a finger to stroke the feathers of the owl only to have it pull away from his touch. "Hello, there. Aren't you a beautiful creature. It doesn't look like you have any messages for me," he said, looking down at the owl's feet to see no envelope or message attached. "Did you lose your way, girl?"

In a rush of magic that caught him off guard—either due to lack of sleep or early morning drinking—Albus stumbled backward as the owl shifted into the form of a tall, blond, witch. Blue eyes wide, Albus clenched his fist, feeling his magic crackling in his palm.

Cassiopeia Black grinned smugly at him. "Not at all, Albie. As a matter of fact, I have come to give you a message."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you wonderful readers for being patient with me during this transfer process. You are all wonderful ♥ I am still planning on trying to stick to a schedule of updating every 2-3 weeks.
January 24th, 1987
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dorea looked up from her seat in Minerva's quarters as Cassie led Dumbledore into the room. The man was forced to duck his head to avoid hitting the doorframe—the structure too low for him, but it suited Minerva's stature just fine.

Much like several other professors at Hogwarts, Minerva's quarters looked more like the inside of a home, rather than a spare room in a large castle. The single window overlooked the Quidditch pitch, and there was a shelf next to it containing a collection of trophies, Snitches, and framed photographs of previous Gryffindor teams. In addition to having an office where students could visit with her, Minerva kept a small desk in her living space as well; most of the desk was covered in essays that needed grading, books on History of Magic, and a copy of Transfiguration Monthly. Though it was out of view from most, from where she sat, Dorea could see a ball of grey yarn hidden behind the rubbish bin.

Dumbledore scanned the room as he entered, looking wary as though preparing to be attacked—which was smart of him—but more than that, he looked intrigued, curious even. The expression swiftly changed to concern when the door closed behind him with a bang, and he found himself in the room with thirteen Black witches.

They sat in a semicircle around the room like a great tribunal council, no one positioned any higher than another; even Nymphadora sat on equal ground with her coven sisters. The wooden chairs were ornately carved with intricate patterns and rune work—protections mostly, though it was very obvious that an altered Notice-Me-Not had been worked in as well, considering Dumbledore had been unaware that the Black coven had even entered the school. The chairs sat against the cold stone floor; the rug had been rolled up previously, now leaning against a cabinet behind the circle and next to Minerva's desk.

All the witches trained their gaze on Dumbledore. The only two who were not seated were Minerva—who was closing the Floo to her office, and Cassie—who was . . .

"Is that a phoenix on your shoulder?" Dorea asked her sister, tilting her head to the side at the peculiar way that the Dumbledore's familiar was rubbing its beak against Cassie's cheek, making odd cooing noises.

The blonde grinned in delight, stroking the tail feathers of the creature affectionately. "I've always had quite a way with animals. Remember that pit viper that Pollux had when we were young? The one that he tried to teach to bite us?"

"You had that thing hanging around your throat like a necklace," Dorea said with an amused smile. "Mother said you were gifted."

"Animals just adore me." Cassie beamed, then her expression briefly soured, lips pursed. "Well, all except one."

Unable to hold back the quiet chuckle, Dorea asked, "What exactly did you do to Aberforth's goat?"

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Nothing she didn't have coming," she said, adding in a mutter, "Intrusive little bitch."
The phoenix gently lifted off from Cassie's shoulder with the barest of nudges, flapping its wings twice before landing on the outstretched arm of its wizard. Dumbledore smiled kindly at the bird. "It's all right, Fawkes. I believe these lovely ladies would like to have a word with me in private. Go on back to your perch and rest up." In a short-lived blaze of fire, the phoenix vanished from the room, and Albus turned his attention on Dorea. "How may I assist the High Witch of the Black coven?"

"No greetings for the rest of us?" Cassie asked. "I thought you would be more hospitable than that."

Albus inclined his head. "Forgive me, Miss Black."

Dorea waved her wand, transfiguring a large chair for him. It was not as delicately designed as the chairs the witches sat in, but it was much larger. It might have looked like a throne, had it not been magically shoved against the door, blocking the only way out.

"Share a drink with us?" Dorea suggested.

Before he answered, Enid stood and made her way to Minerva's desk to remove a dark bottle of wine and two silver goblets with beautiful snakes etched into the metal—reappropriated heirlooms that Cassie had fetched out of Walburga's cabinets. After pouring, Enid carried both goblets and returned to her own seat just as Cassie and Minerva took theirs. She passed one goblet to her right to Andromeda, who passed it to Nymphadora, who passed it to Minerva. One by one, the goblet moved from hand to hand until Cedrella passed it to Dumbledore.

Albus looked down into the goblet. "It is said to be good luck to drink a summer wine with friends."

"These were harvested in winter," Minerva said coolly.

"Should I wonder then, if the wine is poisoned?" he asked. "At the very least with Veritaserum?"

"I'm not here to kill you, Dumbledore," Dorea admitted impatiently. "And we're all very well aware of your Occlumency skills. You're one of very few people alive who is able to truly fight against even the highest doses of truth serum; at least, non-lethal doses."

"What shall we drink to?" Albus asked, holding up his goblet. "Your health? The good fortune of your coven? Family?"

"In vino veritas," Callidora said, the words coming out of her mouth like a threatening hiss, and the rest of the coven echoed her.

Albus gave a slight nod and added his own, "In vino veritas," before drinking.

Enid drank from her goblet, swallowed, and then dipped her fingers into the wine, flicking droplets of it onto the floor in front of her. Andromeda then took the goblet, drank, dipped her fingers inside of it, and flicked the droplets onto the floor before passing it on to Nymphadora who did the same. Albus watched the witches carefully as they kept their focus trained on him as they repeated the action, one by one. He rubbed the stem of his goblet with his thumb before setting it aside and glancing down at the floor, now speckled with wine. "It looks a bit like blood, don't you think?"

"Does it?" Belina asked incredulously, raising a challenging brow. "Interesting."

"Did you know that the Muggles have a deity that can turn wine into blood?" Narcissa asked conversationally, as though they had all sat down for tea to discuss the latest social gossip. "They all gather weekly and drink it together for cleansing or . . . immortality, I'm not sure which. I did not know that Muggles could work Blood Magic."
"It's not quite magic," Andromeda said with a smile. "It's symbolic."

"Symbolism is powerful magic," Lucretia offered, running the tips of her fingers over the runes along the arm of her chair. At her touch, the markings briefly glowed. Her focus was on the ground, studying the wine drops as though they created an interesting pattern.

"Do these drops symbolise bloodshed?" Albus asked, sounding curious rather than concerned, only to be met with the amused smirks from far too many powerful witches. "Why are you here, Madam Potter?"

Dorea broke eye contact with him to look down at the wine on the floor. "In vino veritas, Albus. I've come for the truth. The truth about blood, I suppose. The blood of my womb, lying in the cold ground in Godric's Hollow. The blood of my family, forced under the cruel hand of ignorant Muggles. The blood of my House, sitting in Azkaban for five years without trial—without justice."

She raised her gaze back to his, purple eyes cold and hard. "We would like to ask you a few questions, Albus."

"I am more than happy to—" he began to say, only to be cut off when Dorea raised her hand quickly and narrowed her gaze at him.

"Let me first say, that if you do not answer our questions truthfully, I will take my grandson, my son, and my coven, and we will abscond to the continent. And when Voldemort returns, as you believe he will, and Britain is burned to the ground, and those left alive taste nothing but ash in their mouth. When I am asked why I left my country to ruin, I will tell them to ask Albus Dumbledore. These are my conditions."

"You believe he will return then?" Dumbledore inquired, masking whatever emotions and concerns that her statement evoked inside of him. "That Voldemort is not gone forever?"

"I believe that when my James was murdered, Aurors should have looked for the body of Tom Riddle," Dorea said, earning the look of shock on Albus's face that sent a delightful shiver down her spine. "Ah, so you knew. You knew the identity of Voldemort, and yet... the rest of our world was left in the dark."

"You knew the identity of a killer, and yet you told no one," Camilla said accusingly.

"He murdered innocent children," Enid said, disgusted.

Cedrella's nose twitched in anger. "You recruited yourself an army and sent them into battle without knowing who their enemy truly was. Young men and women barely older than most of our grandchildren."

"Some actually were our grandchildren," Callidora added.

Andromeda and Narcissa glared at the wizard, the brunette bitterly adding, "Voldemort subjugated his own people, and turned blood against blood."

Albus sat calmly as they spewed vitriol at him for his misdeeds, mistakes, and inactions regarding Tom Riddle. His expression showed no hint of aggression on his part, although the obvious guilt that weighed on him was evident in his eyes as the words piled on.

They shouted and hissed and snarled their accusations and grievances at the man, words overlapping one another until Narcissa broke her graceful and prim facade and raised her voice. "He was afraid of you! Only you! They all knew it. Every Death Eater whispered under their breath that..."
Albus Dumbledore was the only one who could defeat their Dark Lord.

"Albus Dumbledore defeated Gellert Grindelwald, who would have destroyed the world in his quest for power. A great duel that landed one wizard in prison, and another famous throughout every magical community there is," Cassie said as though reading a fairy tale from a book. "Albus Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald, who had true and proper armies, not a handful of followers in silver masks and black robes. So why, I have to wonder, was Albus Dumbledore afraid of Tom Riddle?"

Dumbledore met her gaze, showing no emotion. "War is a complicated thing, Miss Black. Often times, communities are unaware that a battle has even begun before death comes to their own door. War creates wounds in every home, and our war with Voldemort was no different. It was never about two men meeting in a duel."

"It should have been," Cedrella insisted, dabbing a handkerchief angrily at her eyes. "How many lives could have been saved? How many children?"

"My nephews would still be alive," Lucretia spoke up. "Fabian and Gideon faced five Death Eaters before they fell."

"My grandson and his wife would be whole and healthy, raising their boy," Callidora said, wiping away a stray tear from her eye and flinging it to the floor angrily to mingle with the spilt wine. "Frank and Alice withstood torture at the hands of four Death Eaters, never once giving up a shred of information."

Dorea stood, and the others mimicked her, jumping to their feet. "My James would be alive. His wife would be alive. There would not be some vile statue in the middle of the village where they'd intended to raise their child. How many died, because Albus Dumbledore was not the courageous Gryffindor he led the world to believe?" Fire crackled at the tips of her fingers, turning red and then black.

Dumbledore watched the flames curiously before looking up at Dorea. "Covens are not untouchable, Madam Potter. I urge you not let this new power go to your head. Blood Magic is a delicate thing, and I worry about the stability of the Greater Good if you thirteen good witches let your anger overcome you. That is the path to darkness. That is, perhaps, a path that Tom Riddle was set on from a young age. One that I could not deter. It is a path that Gellert Grindelwald walked.

"You chastise me for not stopping one Dark Lord. What am I to do when one of you crosses a line and becomes a Dark Witch?" he asked, his eyes filled with sadness as he looked at each of them one by one, frowning when his attention landed on Minerva last. "Am I supposed to correct my inactions with Tom Riddle by destroying you, the way I was forced to stop Grindelwald?"

"That's quite an assumption to make, Albus," Minerva said, narrowing her eyes. "Do I look the type to use Dark Magic? I have never given you or anyone reason to think that I would attempt to harness such wickedness."

"And an accusation like that offends the entire coven," Lucretia chimed in, looking quite insulted over his words. "Covens must be of one purpose. If any of us were truly Dark, it would tarnish and ruin the magic that we create together. It would be unbalanced, and any rituals we performed would likely cause more harm to us than good to anyone."

"And yet," Albus said, remaining in his seat, "if one of you did fall to the temptations of Dark Magic, would it be left to me to bring about your end, as you wish I would have done with Tom Riddle? As I did when I captured Gellert Grindelwald?"
Cassie smirked deviously and leant closer to him, bending at the waist with her hands on her knees as though she were speaking to a small child. "If one of us becomes a Dark Witch and forces you to take action against us, I can tell you one thing, Albie: unlike Grindelwald, it's unlikely any of us will be acceptable to a good, old-fashioned buggering before the duel even begins."

Blue eyes went wide, and Albus's mouth dropped open in shock as his greatest secret was laid bare before them all.

"Aunt Cassie!" Andromeda scolded, her hands over Nymphadora's ears. The teenager rolled her eyes and tried to shrug her mother off of her, even as she shared an amused smirk with Narcissa.

"How did—?" Albus began.

"Bathilda," Dorea answered for her sister. "Mrs Bagshot is a kind woman, but prone to gossip. We were friends, once upon a time when I considered Godric's Hollow a second home. I was unaware, of course, that you and I had that in common until I met with Bathilda. Lovely lady enjoys a good firewhisky from time to time, and my Charlus had some exquisite vintages. She and I spoke of family quite a bit. She told me about your father, who died in Azkaban after attacking Muggles. Did he have a trial? She also told me a great many things about your relationship with her nephew, Gellert."

"Is it a crime to love?" Albus asked quietly. For the first time since entering the room, he appeared genuinely distraught. "We cannot make decisions for others, we can only do our best to influence them with a sense of goodness and—"

"Aberforth told me about your sister," Cassie confessed, watching as the self-righteousness melted away from his expression leaving behind an almost petulant glare. "We know a great deal about your life, Dumbledore. You have no reason to look down your crooked nose at us. You also had no place raising a group of vigilantes to fight a war—children, most of them. Few were barely older than your own sister when she died."

Albus looked down, properly shamed. "Arianna . . . That's why I had to stop Gellert. I was correcting my mistakes."

"You knew his weaknesses," Callidora said. "You used his love for you against him, didn't you?" When Albus refused to answer or meet her gaze, she continued. "Tom Riddle was a different matter entirely. So what? Fear? Afraid to die at the hands of one of your own students? We know who he was, what he was . . . Prefect. Head Boy."

"The Ministry was not stopping him," Albus said quietly. "It was not immediate that I realised who Voldemort was, not until some of his followers were arrested. Young men, heirs of powerful families, sons of wizards that Tom went to school with. By the time I realised what Tom had become, he had infiltrated the Wizengamot, using the families of his followers. Nott, Avery, Rosier, Lestrange, Malfoy . . . It is not wise to place all of one's trust in the Ministry.

"So I gathered those I knew I could trust. Those with unquestionable values, who would stand against an uprising. Tom had his own army, and I . . . I never wanted to be a general of any sort. Gellert was a Dark wizard when we faced one another, but he was honourable. He met me in a duel face to face, all spoils to the victor. Tom would not have done so. I could not trust that I could fight him on my own, and live to see the war end in our favour. I needed to make sure that, should I have opportunity to face Tom myself, I would have the upper hand—perhaps even the element of surprise on my side. When the murders began to . . . When things grew much worse, he was untraceable. I did not know where to find him so that he could be stopped. I knew I needed to lure him out of hiding—to use his own followers against him."
Albus looked away from Dorea shamefully. "I cannot tell you how much I regret believing that Sirius was a Death Eater, or could have been involved in the murders of James and Lily. I let my own prejudice control my actions, and my thoughts... I won't placate you or your son with an apology. I could not say sorry enough to erase the damage of Azkaban."

"You left Sirius there."

"I thought him guilty."

"A fact that should have been decided by the Wizengamot, legally," Dorea snapped.

Albus lifted his gaze to meet hers. "Is this my trial then?"

"Voldemort wanted the Potters," Andromeda interrupted. "Everyone assumed as much, considering what happened that Halloween. And Sirius mentioned to me that they had gone into hiding."

"So you put them under a Fidelius Charm."

"Do you think of how her son was manipulated in such a way. "They could have made the cottage unplottable, put up blood wards like what James grew up with. But you put them under a Fidelius Charm, knowing how easy it could be to break it down. All you needed was one weakness. And you thought it was Sirius."

"I thought... I did not think James and Lily were in more danger than they had been before," Albus admitted. "They were fighters—brave, the both of them. I believed that Sirius was the spy. Believed that I could not use Legilimency against him to figure out the truth because Tom Riddle is also a master Legilimens. I wondered that perhaps Tom had used Dark Magic to keep me from seeing the truth of Sirius's actions. It was rumoured that the Blacks were also quite adept at Occlumency and Legilimency," he said, cautiously glancing at both Andromeda and Narcissa, who were glaring at him.

"A member of the Order had an unfortunate encounter with Bellatrix Lestrange. Benjy Fenwick was a skilled Legilimens and had tried to find out secrets about Voldemort from one of his most trusted followers. He escaped, just barely, and informed me that when he tried to use Legilimency against Bellatrix, she manipulated her memories while he was inside of her mind to the point that he almost was unprepared when she attacked him."

When the other witches looked to Narcissa and Andromeda for confirmation, the blonde nodded. "It's possible that she could do that."

"Because I could not trust what I might have seen in Sirius's mind to prove my theory, I suggested the Fidelius Charm, I set Sirius as the Secret Keeper, and I had him followed. I did not want the Potters harmed, and I took every measure I thought... I was certain that Sirius would lead me to Tom."

"You used my James as bait," Dorea accused, feeling her stomach tighten and bile sting the inside of her throat. She knew her boy. James, without the concern of his wife and child, would have willingly agreed to such nonsense. He was as much a Gryffindor as his father had ever been. "How could you have—?"

Before she could say another word, the doors on the cabinet behind them burst open, sending shards of wood flying forward, scattering against the floor. Wands were drawn and aimed in the direction out of instinct, but most were lowered just as swiftly when they saw what had caused the interruption.
Albus looked up, shocked eyes wide, into the furious face of Severus Snape.

What worried him most, was that none of the witches seemed surprised to see the man.

"I'm not sure what happened outside of Albus putting his foot down in the Wizengamot to keep Severus from Azkaban, but you would think that being spared that conviction would endear you to someone," Minerva told the coven the night before Sirius's trial, when discussing what would be done about the Death Eaters that evaded prison.

"Severus hates Dumbledore," Narcissa said. "He won't speak a word about him to Lucius or myself. He's indebted to the man. No one wants to owe someone their life. Severus has always taken such debts very seriously. He's a man of honour, in that fashion."

"So Dumbledore knows something about the boy. Blackmail, do you think?" Dorea asked carefully. She watched the way that both Minerva and Narcissa tensed a bit in reaction. They were emotionally invested in the young Death Eater, which made Dorea at the very least curious—especially considering how often James and Sirius complained about him when they were young. Dark, they said. "How do we get Dumbledore to admit what he knows?"

"Let him talk," Callidora suggested. "We are prideful creatures, especially the more power we have. Dumbledore has spent the past forty years sitting on a pedestal that our world made for him. Let him talk, let him give you whatever excuses he sees fitting for what he did or did not do in regards to our children, the war, and Voldemort. Eventually, compare Sirius to the Snape boy. Dumbledore spared a Death Eater from Azkaban, and he allowed Sirius to rot there. Let him tell us why."

"I want Severus there," Minerva insisted. "I want to see how Severus reacts."

"Dumbledore will know who is all in the room when we confront him," Camilla said. "He acts the feeble old man when he wants to. We're risking a great deal sneaking into the castle without his knowledge. Once he's in a room with us, he'll cast detection charms to know who all is present. Let's not pretend that we'll be able to fool him into hiding the boy behind a curtain or in a wardrobe."

Sitting up straighter, a sly grin crossed Belina's face. "I have an idea," she said, turning her attention to Minerva. "An interesting item came into my uncle's shop last month that could assist us in hiding Snape but keeping him connected to the room enough to listen in."

"What's that?"

"A set of Vanishing Cabinets."

Black hair hung in his face, but Snape's eyes were still visible, and there was no mistaking the blazing look of pure hatred in his glare as he levelled his focus—and wand—on Dumbledore. For all that Albus had admitted to wanting to save his own skin against Voldemort, he did not even reach for his wand when Snape began screaming.

"YOU DIDN'T EVEN TRY!?"

Albus frowned, masking his shock at the sight of the man with an expression of genuine sorrow.

"I came to you asking—begging—to save her! I fell to my knees in supplication. I humiliated myself and gave you everything I had. I went back at your request and knelt at his feet, kissed his robes, and pleaded for more just so that I could bring it all back to you! Information to end it, to finish him. In exchange for what?" Snape demanded. "For nothing! You gave me your word that you would protect her, and you did worse than nothing."
"Severus—"

"You set her up to die!"
Dorea had gone along with Minerva and Belina's idea of placing Severus Snape at one end of the Vanishing Cabinet back at Borgin and Burkes, allowing him to eavesdrop on the conversation in Minerva's quarters through the twin cabinet. She had assumed that Dumbledore and Snape knew something that the public did not, though the young man's outburst was rather unexpected—at least in regards to the timing of it. She had expected that if Snape were to make his presence known, it would have been after they had gotten around to the subject of him. The look of loathing, heartbreak, and betrayal on the young man's face was particularly horrifying. Though she did not know the details, it was quite obvious that both sides of the war had been grievously injured by Voldemort and Dumbledore.

While some of the witches stepped forward to intervene, others—including Dorea—stood back, watching curiously to see if the former Death Eater would take care of their Dumbledore problem for them.

"Severus," Minerva said, placing a gentle hand on the man's wand arm, even as it trembled, "as much as we would all like to hex Albus Dumbledore, I'm asking you to calm yourself and lower your wand. I think we are all owed an explanation."

Dumbledore seemed properly worried, and Severus looked grief-stricken. It was then Dorea recalled something that Aberforth had said about the young man. Her mouth fell open in shock as she whispered, "Lily," and saw Snape flinch as though she had struck him. "You asked Dumbledore to protect Lily, James, and Harry."

At the mention of her son's name, Snape's grief gave way to bitterness. "Not quite, Madam Potter."

Understanding his meaning, Dorea nodded her head. "Just Lily then."

Snape turned his wrist, steadying his aim, wand still pointed in Dumbledore's face. "I was informed that a husband and child were a part of the non-negotiable deal that I made," he said. "All or none. All of them protected in exchange for all of my soul, my life, my word, and my honour. I gave it all to you and for what?" he spat at Dumbledore. "You used me."

Albus frowned, no twinkle in his eyes, instead his gaze was filled with obvious remorse. "Voldemort needed to be destroyed, Severus. You know what he is capable of more than most. I was willing to go to any lengths to stop him. Lily and James Potter were willing to do the same."

Sneering, Snape pressed the tip of his wand against Dumbledore's throat. "Did she know? Did you tell her?"

"Of course."

Dorea narrowed her eyes at the older wizard. "Know what? What did Lily know? That you had willingly set up her family as bait to a madman? That you presumed James's own brother to be his betrayer?"

Snape shook his head firmly. "Lily would never have put her son at risk," he told Dorea. "He didn't tell her a thing." Shaking off Minerva's hand from his arm, the man pressed into Dumbledore's space,
intimidating by stature alone, which said a lot as Albus Dumbledore was still quite tall for his age. "Did she know my part in this, Headmaster? Did you tell Lily what it was all for? Why she was being hunted?"

His gaze flickering to the witches behind Snape, Dumbledore swallowed nervously. "Severus, now is not the—"

"Did you tell her it was me who heard it? That I was the one—"

"Severus! Don't—"

"—who gave the Dark Lord the prophe—"

Faster than even the best of them could react, Dumbledore drew his wand, shoving Snape away from him to give room to cast, and shouted, "Silencio!"

Snape stumbled against Minerva, who steadied him just as the spell bounced off of an invisible shield that shot up between the coven and Dumbledore, ricocheting back and hitting the man square in the chest. Dumbledore flew backward, reseating himself in the chair and knocking him unconscious. Moments later, he began to stir, looking as though he had been punched by someone of Hagrid's size.

Cassie tilted her head to the side in amusement and reached a hand out, brushing the tips of her fingers against the magical shield that glimmered when touched. "Well . . . that's interesting."

Lucretia breathed a sigh of relief, waving her wand and bringing down the shield. "Oh good, my spell worked. I hadn't had a chance to test it, yet."

Belina raised a brow. "You charmed the wine?" she asked, looking down at the spilt droplets, noticing now the arc pattern they had created in front of their chairs. "And here I thought we were just being dramatic."

"Rune work and charms," Lucretia said with a proud grin. "Took me four days to get the arithmantic equations to line up properly, especially since it all depended on the seating arrangement."

Albus groaned and rubbed his head.

Cedrella huffed. "Is he going to be all right?"

"The spell reflected with more power than I had assumed he might have used. He was emotional." Waving her wand once more, Lucretia reverified the strength of her spell, noting the small crack where Dumbledore's Silencing Charm had fractured it. "Granted, we were all a bit on edge when he arrived. Little less than a proper stunner, I'd think."

Taking advantage of Dumbledore's momentary silence, Dorea turned on Snape. "What did you tell Voldemort?" she asked, watching as the man flinched away from her. Briefly, he tried to mask his emotions but failed miserably and instead turned and glared at Dumbledore.

Minerva once again reached out to Snape. "Severus . . . You are not beholden to him."

"Either him or you," Snape said, returning his focus to Dorea.

"Why me?"

Squaring his shoulders, he angrily, but formally announced, "I owe your family a life debt. Several,
now that I consider how my actions have been played against me."

Pursing her lips, Dorea said, "I was unaware of any life debts owed. Sirius said nothing."

Rage flashed in Snape's eyes, something Dorea found a bit predictable considering the animosity she knew that her sons had for him. It could only be presumed that the dislike would be mutual. "No, he wouldn't have," Snape ground out. "It's because of him that I even owe the first."

Folding her arms across her chest, Dorea cast a glance to Dumbledore to make sure he was still barely rousing before she turned her full focus on Snape. "Explain."

"Black tried to have me killed by the werewolf," he said, almost grinning at the way that Dorea's mouth actually fell open. Minerva's eyes widened dramatically, clearly shocked. "Tricked me beneath that ridiculous tree. Were it not for Potter—much to my disliking—I would have been eaten alive by the monster at best, infected at worst. Potter pulled me out of the tunnel just in time."

"When did this happen?!" Minerva demanded, outraged.

"Fifth year."

At a loss for words, Minerva looked to Dorea. "Did you know of this?"

Dorea shook her head. "I . . . I didn't know. Sirius was . . ." She wanted to accuse the Snape of lying, but realised how ridiculous and childish that would come across, especially since she needed more information from him and did not want to provoke his silence.

Thinking back to James's and Sirius's fifth year, she frowned remembering several outbursts during the holidays, and plenty of letters home from Minerva about Sirius's behaviour. Granted, there were just as many Howlers sent to Potter Manor from Walburga, demanding that Dorea and Charlus mind their business and leave the raising of Sirius to her and Orion—something that they absolutely refused to do.

"That was the year that he left Grimmauld Place," she told Minerva. "It's possible."

Snape narrowed his black eyes at her. "You question my honour?"

"I question how no one else knew about this event," Minerva said, stepping across the pattern of wine on the floor and kicking Dumbledore in the shin with her pointed shoe.

Still a bit groggy, Dumbledore winced, muttering, "I . . . Mr Lupin . . . should not have been . . . He would have been expelled, Minerva. I would have had no choice."

Dorea felt sick to her stomach. Her son could have killed a student, and Remus would have ended up in Azkaban. There would not have been a thing that she or Charlus could have done to spare him. "And Sirius? What was done to punish him for his actions?"

Snape stiffened, his grip on his wand looking painful as it tightened. "I believe he was banned from Quidditch for the rest of the year," he said in a mocking tone.

Minerva exploded in a temper, and the glass surrounding her Quidditch trophies shattered. "Is that . . . Quidditch?! Albus!"

"My son nearly killed a classmate, and you did not think it important to inform us?" Dorea demanded angrily. "It was our job to correct such . . . wretched behaviour!"
"You and Charlus were not Sirius's parents . . . at the time," Dumbledore weakly replied.

Swallowing down the plethora of spells she wanted to use against the man—most dark in nature—Dorea focused her attention on the other wizard in the room. "Mr Snape, though I imagine it means very little to you now, I offer apologies on behalf of Sirius, for the danger he put you in." When he raised an incredulous brow at her and sneered, she held up a hand. "I can assure you that since he was innocent of all other crimes previously accused, I will personally consider his years spent suffering in Azkaban the equivalent of payment for whatever debt you owed James for saving your life.

"Had my husband or I known about this event, I can assure you that we would not have sat idly by and allowed such antics to occur. I was aware that you and my sons did not get along very well, but little went beyond what I assumed was typical House rivalries."

Seeming to weigh his options, Snape looked back and forth between Dorea and Dumbledore before letting his full attention land on her. "So long as I do not have to interact with Sirius Black, I accept your apology, Madam Potter."

"And the other debts?" Cassie asked. "What? He said there was more than one. What else happened without your knowledge, Dorea?"

Dumbledore looked up at Snape with pleading eyes. "Severus, please. It's not safe."

Ignoring him, Snape stood aside as Minerva crossed back over the shield lines, glancing down to make certain that he, too, was within the protection should Dumbledore act again. Glancing back up at Dorea, he cleared his throat. "There is a prophecy about your grandson, Madam Potter. One that I overheard being given to the headmaster years ago by Professor Trelawney."

Minerva rolled her eyes. "Oh please."

"It was real," he assured them. "Different than her other . . . nonsense. She claimed that a child would be born who would bring about the fall of the Dark Lord. I . . . I took the information back to him," he confessed with a heavy frown that made the lines around his mouth stand out. "I have no excuses for my behaviour or my foolishness in believing a wizard like him could have benefitted me anything in a world of his own creation. It is a world I would not deem fit for anyone to live in."

Swallowing hard, Dorea thought of her little Harry, sitting scared in a cupboard. The Boy Who Lived. A prophecy. A Chosen One. A sickening chill ran down her spine. "That's why they were targeted?"

Snapes inclined his head. "They were already his enemies, but the prophecy redirected his attention, yes. A child born as the seventh month dies, to parents who have thrice denied the Dark Lord. When I realised what I had done—that I had selfishly placed the life of a child in jeopardy, and that it could have been Lily's child, thus endangering her as well . . . I went to Dumbledore, begging him to protect her in exchange for my participation in spying on the Dark Lord."

Cassie's normally amused expression gave way to a coldness that Dorea had not seen in quite some years. The blonde levelled a glare at Dumbledore that could freeze Fiendfyre. "You knew about this prophecy that put Harry life in—"

Before Cassie could finish her thought or raise her wand, Enid, tears streaking down her face, launched herself forward at Dumbledore only to be caught in her mother's arms. "You son of a bitch!"
Minerva gasped. "Enid!"

"It could have been Neville! Couldn't it?" Enid cried, bottom lip quivering. "He and Harry were born just a day apart. That's why they were attacked! You not only set up the Potters, but you let Frank and Alice . . ." Unable to finish her sentence, she turned into Callidora's embrace and sobbed.

Albus looked down. "The prophecy was unclear. The Longbottoms were protected behind blood wards."

"That's why the wards are eroded," Callidora concluded, sickened. "Death Eaters must have been attacking them non-stop trying to get to the baby."

"And I put Sirius in place to betray Lily and James," Dumbledore admitted. "They knew of the prophecy, which was why they accepted my protection. Had Sirius been the traitor, as I believed him to be, then I would have known when Voldemort was in Godric's Hollow, with his servant, to attack. I had planned on using surprise to my advantage. Voldemort would have been captured before he could even step foot in the house. I had hoped that once secured and without the use of his wand, I could look further into the prophecy, and how best to destroy him."

Cedrella growled low in her throat. "But you let a rat trick you."

Unable to say anything more in his own defence, Dumbledore averted his gaze. The great wizard, Chief Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, defeater of Grindelwald and Saviour of the Wizarding world . . . The one person that Tom Riddle was afraid of crumpled against the large wooden chair—pitiful. Dumbledore had never looked so old or feeble.

Dorea could barely stand the sight of him.

She held her hand out to Snape. "Severus Snape, the Black Coven offers you sanctuary so that you might find in us allies, and no longer be obligated to share in the shame of Albus Dumbledore's actions."

The young wizard looked at the extended hand, contemplating the offer that came along with it. One more glance to Minerva had him nodding and closing his own hand around Dorea's. "Accepted. I'll go and pack my things and take leave of this castle."

"Not so fast," Minerva said with a sly smile. "I would like you to stay."

Snape glared down at Dumbledore. "And work for him?"

"He works at the whim of the Board of Governors, just like the rest of the staff."

Narcissa grinned, eyes bright with mischief as she stepped forward, looping her arm through Severus's—much to his obvious annoyance as he tried to brush her off to no avail. "I'm acquainted with a newly appointed governor," she primly said, a teasing look in her gaze. "I'm sure Lucius would be delighted to reassure the rest of the board that Hogwarts students are being taught Potions by the very best Potions Master in all of Britain."

Grimacing, Snape tried to shake her off again only to fail. Eventually, he relented. "I will . . . think on it."

Feeling successful in her efforts, Narcissa chastely kissed his cheek. "We hope to see you over for dinner sometime soon, Severus. Draco misses you terribly." As she finally let him go, the man rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath something about already having to deal with enough children every day.
He gave a sharp nod to each of the witches before stepping toward the fireplace. Minerva followed, waving her wand against the mantle to open the Floo Network. Severus inclined his head once more, muttered, "Ladies," and called out his destination, vanishing into the flames.

As the fire died down, and Minerva closed the Floo once more, the room fell into silence. The witches retook their chairs, some repositioning them back into the semicircle that had been disrupted by Snape's outburst. For several long minutes, Dorea and Albus just stared at one another.

"You put my grandson in the hands of Muggles."

He sighed, a heavy sound that showed his years and the weight of his choices—his mistakes. "Lily's sacrifice . . . I did not want it to be for nothing. I used her death to construct blood wards around the Dursleys' home, attaching them to Harry's blood connection to Lily's sister, Petunia. Death Eaters could not cross the boundaries. He needed to be kept safe."

"He was not safe."

"He was with family."

While the other witches growled and glared, it was Cedrella who snapped. "We are his family! That boy—same age as plenty of our children and grandchildren—was neglected, abused, and thrown in a cupboard, you stupid, stupid man! Harry Potter, who lost everything . . . And you treat that boy . . . You treated the Potters' sacrifice this way?"

Before Dumbledore could respond, Dorea hissed, "He is not a boy to you. He is a weapon."

Even if he had wanted to deny such a thing, Dumbledore's emotions were easily read on his face. He was not thinking about Harry, but about what Harry could do. "He'll destroy Voldemort," he said quietly—a pleading tone. "He's the only one who can."

"How is Voldemort still alive?" Dorea asked, redirecting the conversation. "Who is he, really? Where did he come from? Why is Tom Riddle more powerful than any of us, and why is he afraid of you?"

Albus's fingers twitched, a reflex that most witches and wizards had when threatened—a need to touch their wand to feel safe. "Forgive me, Madam, but I do not trust you with that information," he said, dipping his chin as though his words were a genuine apology. "Tom's power and knowledge needs to die with him. I did not even wish for many to know about the prophecy. Not even Tom knows the full extent of it."

Dorea stood, smoothed her hands down her robes, and stretched her fingers; fire flowed over her fingertips.

Warily, Dumbledore leant back against his chair, watching her hands as he spoke. "If you kill me in anger, how are you any better than him?"

"That's just it, Albus," Dorea said, exhausted. "We're not going to kill you."

"We're not?" Cassie whinged.

Dorea stepped forward, folding her hands in front of her and snuffing out the flames dancing along her skin. "You stupidly betrayed an ex-lover in a duel long ago, endearing the world to you, and accidentally creating your legend. Hell, I have members of my own family who think that you are greater than Merlin. I'm sure my James put a great deal of faith in you."
Albus frowned, wrinkles around his mouth deepening as he did so. "He was a good man, James Potter."

"I'll do my level best to ensure that Harry knows better," Dorea replied coolly. "No, even besmirching your name publicly will do the reputation of our coven little good, and will ultimately act against our best interests. While you are an ineffectual Chief Warlock and Supreme Mugwump, you are an icon that our community looks to. Somehow, though Morgana knows why, your very existence provides hope to others, most too naive to question anything written in the Daily Prophet. Going against you would split our community even further in regards to allegiances, and I am not so selfish to seek my own revenge above the welfare of Wizarding Britain and the future of my family. We will interact as much as required of us, Albus Dumbledore, which I hope is very little. And when my Harry comes to Hogwarts, you will not speak to him without a member of this coven present. I imagine the same could be said of Neville. Callidora? Enid?"

Narrowing her eyes at Dumbledore, Callidora nodded firmly. "I'll be speaking with Augusta."

Dorea took a step back, allowing the man to stand up. She waited patiently as he did so, squaring her shoulders and putting on the same expression she wore when she had decided to make peace with Severus Snape. "You are a school headmaster and nothing more. You are not Merlin, or Godric Gryffindor, or any god you might think yourself to be. The lives of others are not yours to control as though you were fate. The rest of the world will think that we are at peace because that is what I want them to believe for now."

Purple eyes blazed like a fire, and her nose twitched in anger; her voice was low and shaking as she whispered, "But make no mistake, you killed my son."

Furious and as quick as a snake, Dorea struck him, connecting with Albus's face and knocking him back with the force of her swing. The expression on his face told Dorea that he had expected to be slapped—at some point during the meeting—but when his hand touched his cheek only to pull away wet with blood, his eyes widened in shock.

Three long scratches crossed his face from cheekbone to nose—deep, jagged, and ugly.

She hissed a spell under her breath and then spat in his face, causing him to flinch. The other women stood, mimicked her casting, and spitting on the floor like witches of old who worked their magic around large cauldrons and bonfires, dancing naked beneath full moons, and casting without the need of laws or wands.

"Sutura," Dorea muttered, and the skin on his cheek that she had clawed away stitched itself closed, leaving behind long and ugly scars. "A reminder," she snarled, "of the wounds you left on others."

Angrily, she flicked her wand at the chair in front of the door, causing it to burst into shredded splinters and dust. Shoving her way past the wizard, she flung open the door and stormed out of the room. One by one, the witches followed, each glaring at Dumbledore on their way—though Nymphadora, who would have to return to being his student once she crossed the barrier of Minerva's office, averted her gaze entirely.

The door slammed behind the witches as all but one left the quarters. When Minerva and Albus were alone, he levelled a pleading stare at her. "I meant to help our world. Save us all from Tom Riddle."

"Then you buggered it up proper, didn't you?" she tersely asked, taking a seat behind her desk, flicking through a stack of Transfiguration essays as though it were any normal day of work.

"Harry needs to be trained," he said, looking down with an expression that showed his shame.
"Then maybe he should not have been half-starved and living in a cupboard," she spat.

Swallowing down the rising guilt, Dumbledore moved closer to her desk, carefully stepping over the wine stains on the ground, relieved when nothing attacked him. "You have always been a reasonable woman, Minerva." At his words, she lifted an incredulous eyebrow at him. "You must make Dorea Potter understand. I was trying to protect Harry Potter. Only he can defeat Tom."

"Hogwash," she said, rolling her eyes and returning her attention to the essays with a heavy sigh. "I should have kept Nymphadora here after the meeting. I worry that she's using her abilities as a Metamorphmagus to half-arse her Transfiguration homework. She cannot get by in life without knowing the essentials of transmogrification, regardless of how many shades of colour she can turn her hair."

Irritable over being ignored, Albus leant forward, placing his hands on her desk. "The prophecy said that Harry possesses a power which the Dark Lord know not."

Minerva looked up from her papers, adjusting the glasses perched on the bridge of her nose. "Perhaps you're right." Flicking her wand, she summoned a handheld mirror and showed it to him. "Take a good look at your reflection, Albus, and tell me what power you think Harry Potter might have at his disposal that Tom Riddle is sorely lacking."

She watched as he glanced at his face in the mirror, touching the dark slash marks on his face with what might have been the tiniest shred of injured vanity.

"How will I explain these?" he asked her.

Smirking in more amusement than she had felt all day, Minerva suggested, "A cautionary tale for the students: never try to take what belongs to a dragon."
January 24th, 1987
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

After being informed of everything that the coven had learned regarding Dumbledore and Snape, Sirius had wanted to go on a rampage, much like before. Thankfully, the very necessity of Harry needing dinner made him stop and rethink his actions. Enemies could wait; family came first. Once Harry was tucked into bed with a stuffed toy owl under his arm, Sirius joined Dorea and Remus in the drawing room where the two were sharing a bottle of firewhisky.

"Snape," Sirius growled as he poured himself a glass of the amber liquid.

"Accepted the sanctuary of the coven," Dorea said, setting her own now-empty glass down on the small table beside her chair; the wood was old and and worn, adorned with circular rings of years old condensation from Charlus's inability to use a coaster. She took in a soft breath as she let her fingers brush lightly against the marks along the surface of the wood.

"He's responsible."

Sirius and Dorea made eye contact, and the witch sighed, weighed down emotionally by the day's events. "Everyone is a bit responsible."

"That may be true," Remus interjected quietly, "but from what you said, Snape was the one who brought the prophecy to Voldemort. If he'd not known—"

"There are too many ifs in the world, Remus," Dorea said with a sad little smile. "What it all comes down to is that we must pick and choose who our true enemies are. Who poses real threats to our family, and who can be used as tools or allies. Snape, I believe, can be a very effective ally."

Anger and tears in his eyes, Sirius demanded, "Why?"

"Because I saw a familiar grief in his expression when he turned on Dumbledore," Dorea said. "I do not know the extent of his relationship with Lily"—as both Remus and Sirius opened their mouths to speak, she raised a hand—"nor do I want to. What I do know is that in his own way, he must have loved her.

"Killing him would end his misery and do nothing to ease my own grief and rage. I would much rather watch as he fashions himself into a proper wizard instead of the servant Voldemort would have or the puppet that Dumbledore tried to create. I have a great appreciation for symbolism."

At their curious expressions, Dorea forced a small, tired smile. "Severus Snape is an ever-present symbol of Dumbledore's failure. I enjoy the thought of that man waking every morning to see Snape in that castle, no longer at his beck and call."
Sirius closed his eyes, his hand clenched tightly around the glass. Before he could counter with anything, Dorea quietly added. "He owes us a life debt. Several, actually, though I assured him that the one he owed James from your little . . . prank," she said and watched as both Remus and Sirius looked shocked and then ashamed, "has been fulfilled to account for your actions against him."

"Mum . . . I . . ."

Shaking her head, Dorea reached out and squeezed Sirius's free hand. "We are all different people now." Meeting his gaze, she sighed softly. "Be a different man, Sirius. You must think of Harry. Your actions must pause while your thoughts catch up to you."

He nodded, taking the seat to her right and setting his glass down in order to free both of his hands, which he used to cradle hers. "I'll be better."

"What about Dumbledore?" Remus asked, looking torn. "I never thought he would be capable of hurting anyone who wasn't, you know, dark. He's the whole reason that I was even allowed at Hogwarts to begin with. Who knows where I would be without—"

"And he used that gratitude to send you into a werewolf pack," Sirius said, narrowing his eyes. "He's manipulative. James trusted him beyond anyone else except us. We all trusted him. We were all wrong."

Thinking back to the way that Dumbledore looked—crumpled in a pile of his robes, his own spell reflected back on him, knocking him on his arse—Dorea grimaced. "He fought Grindelwald because it was his responsibility, and he knew how to get leverage over his opponent. It was the world who thrust him up on a pedestal and praised him so. He's just another wizard like you. Talented, yes; powerful, yes. But to my knowledge, Albus Dumbledore did not figure out how to become an Animagus at sixteen."

Meeting her teasing smile, Sirius automatically corrected, "Fifteen."

Her eyes narrowed. "I ought to throw you over my lap, young man," she said in a scolding tone. "You could have been severely injured."

Sirius grinned.

"So what do we do about Dumbledore?" Remus asked.

Dorea shrugged. "He's been warned. I could not reasonably destroy him without the rest of the Wizarding world turning on me. I would not make that man a martyr. He will, like the rest of our enemies, be watched."

"And in the meantime?"

Reaching across the table, Dorea grabbed Remus's hand and gave it a squeeze. "We move forward. We look to the future. We work for a better tomorrow. We live," she said with a smile that was both tender and mischievous at the same time. "We live to spite them all."

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June 21st, 1987

Potter Manor

The manor was flush with people.

The family had wanted to celebrate together for Beltane, but in what would likely be the first of
many pushbacks on Dumbledore's part, the Hogwarts Headmaster insisted that students would return home for Easter holidays, which were several weeks too early to celebrate Beltane. Considering the Black Coven was taking a public stance to include Muggle-borns, it would hardly do to fight back against their own holidays, so Dorea and the other witches stepped back, losing the battle in favour of long-term goals.

Hogwarts, however, let out for summer hols just in time for the Solstice.

The garden was cleared for guests. Dobby and elves from other households were busy at work cooking up a feast for the gathered family. Honeysuckle and wild thyme grew in abundance, surrounding the area that had been set aside for feasting. Oak burned in every fireplace, including the pit that Remus and Sirius dug a month earlier when Harry wanted to go "camping" in the yard.

"Do you think that there are enough yet?" Remus asked, carrying a large rock that had been transfigured from a smaller stone. Sweat poured down his face and collected in the creases of his shirt from charming and moving the rocks to form a large circle where the family would sit together later in the evening.

Theia and Nymphadora smiled innocently as they watched him with dilated eyes. "Just a few more?" Theia suggested with a grin. "Thank you so much, Remus. You're a prince."

He smiled awkwardly and cleared his throat before turning around and placing the rock down next to several others. Theia and Nymphadora tilted their heads to the side, watching him. "How come it's okay to use magic to make the rocks bigger, but it's superstitious to levitate them?" Nymphadora asked.

Putting an arm around her young cousin, Theia chuckled. "It's not. But we'd hardly get a view like this if he was just flicking his wand about, don't you think?"

"I dunno."

Theia and Nymphadora screamed, jumping and turning around to see Sirius grinning at them, mischief in his eyes. "Wretch!" Theia snapped, shoving him in the chest.

"Me?" he asked with a laugh. "You two are the ones out here goggling my mate's arse."

Nymphadora blushed to the roots of her hair, the locks swiftly following in a bright red colour that washed to the tip of each strand. "I should go and check on Bill and Charlie," she said quickly, and then dashed away toward the orchard, where the two Weasley boys were flying their brooms in between the trees—a herd of smaller children running after them on the ground.

"You're such a bad influence on her," Sirius said, draping his arm over Theia's shoulders. "And for the record, it is quite a fit arse."

Biting her lip, Theia nodded. As Remus turned to pick up another rock, he raised a brow, looking at them suspiciously. Sirius and Theia waved innocently at him. "Mmm. It really is," she muttered through her teeth as she smiled.

"You ought to see it without trousers," Sirius suggested, wagging his eyebrows when she gasped and stared at him.

"Sirius!"

He trained his gaze on Harry, who was running toward him with a carefully wrapped bundle in his arms. A very smug-looking Narcissa followed the path that the boy created through the grass; she
looked pristine as always, not a single hair out of place, despite having Apparated just outside the wards to a special security point for coven members. The smirk on her face unnerved him.

"What have you got there, son?" Sirius asked as Harry reached him, out of breath but beaming.

With his hands full, Harry used his arm to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose, still not entirely used to wearing them. "Aunt Cissa got me a cat!"

Already horrified by the word, Sirius was not prepared for the look of the thing when Harry pulled back the small blanket covering the tiny kitten. What hair the feline did have was sparse, black, and wiry. Bald around its eyes and muzzle, it looked like something out of a horror movie; worse, it was staring right at Sirius with eerily bright golden eyes. "That . . . is not a cat."

"It's called a Lykoi," Narcissa said in an amused tone as she reached them. "I have a friend who has been playing with some off-breed kneazles that got mixed up with regular cats. They're trying to keep the population under control, but a few escaped into Muggle neighbourhoods."

"A Lykoi?" Remus timidly asked as he approached the group, offering Harry a smile before reaching out to scratch the kitten behind the ear.

Narcissa grinned. "Yes. It means 'wolf cat.'"

Pausing his petting of the kitten, Remus stiffened in shock long enough for the little beast to sink his teeth into his finger. The cat growled in response to having the finger quickly jerked away. "It's cute," Remus muttered with narrowed eyes, watching as the kitten nuzzled Harry's chest and purred.

Harry smiled, his face lit up with joy. "I'm going to name her Max, like from the book Uncle Ted got me. Because she's got a wolf costume," he said, holding the kitten up with his hands tucked under the little beasts arms. "See?" Max hung there, looking only slightly annoyed at being dangled, before she meowed and squirmed until Harry tucked her back against his chest, darting off to the house to show Dorea his new pet.

"That thing looks diseased," Sirius said, staring at Narcissa as though this were her idea of a prank.

"It has character."

"It looks like it will eat my face in my sleep."

Theia snorted. "You say it's part kneazle?" she asked Narcissa, who nodded. "Smart. Kneazles are very intelligent. She'll grow to be very protective of Harry. That couldn't hurt."

"I hate cats," Sirius grumbled.

"You like werewolves," Theia pointed out, tossing a wink at Remus, who paled and then blushed awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck as he looked skyward to avoid her gaze. "Besides, every boy needs a pet."

"I hate cats," Sirius retorted.

Narcissa flicked the tip of his nose with a slender finger. "A parent is not a pet," she said before linking arms with Theia and walking toward the house.

"Wolf cat," Sirius said sarcastically under his breath, rolling his eyes.

When the sun began its descent beyond the horizon, the bonfire was lit. Dorea sat down beside Sirius
with a smile as they watched Bill and Charlie Weasley take turns jumping over the fire for luck. Nymphadora joined them, discarding her robes until she was dressed only in her Muggle jeans and a t-shirt, much to the mild discomfort of several purebloods gathered around the circle.

"Be careful, Nymphadora," Andromeda cautioned.

"Don't call me Nymphadora, and maybe I will," the teen replied.

Ted laughed at his daughter's snark, and Andromeda pinched him.

When the children were done playing, and as plates of food were passed around the circle, several witches stood and began walking around the fire. Harry, with his new kitten in his arms, sat down on the grass in between Sirius and Dorea. "What are they doing?"

Dorea smiled and affectionately combed her fingers through his hair, her smile widening a fraction when she looked across the flames to see Augusta Longbottom doing the same thing with Neville, who was half asleep on her lap, exhausted from a day of meeting new friends and family members. She noticed Augusta glance away from the fire when Narcissa passed her, the blonde keeping her focus on her hands, which she kept gently folded in front of her as though cupping water.

"It's a tradition, love," Dorea told Harry. "You take a small stone and carry it in your hand as you walk around a Solstice fire. You think of something you want very much, and you put that wish into the stone on a whisper. After you walk around the fire three times, you give the stone to the flames."

He tilted his head to look up at her. "And the wish comes true?"

"Sometimes."

Harry went back to quietly observing as Narcissa finished her walk, tossing a stone into the fire before rejoining her husband and son on a set of transfigured rocks they had chosen for seats. Draco crawled up into her lap, ignoring the disappointed look that Lucius gave him. Narcissa grinned smugly at her husband as though she had won a great victory, and nuzzled her face in Draco's hair.

"I'm sorry about Molly," Arthur said as he approached Dorea and Sirius. "I'm sure next year she'll be fine with having the younger children come along."

Dorea reached out to the man and squeezed his fingers when he took her hand. "We all grieve differently, Arthur. I do not think poorly of Molly for the way she's chosen. It's a mother's job to look after her children, and that is all she is doing. Please, give her my best."

"When do the faeries come out?" Neville asked on the end of a yawn as he opened his eyes.

"They're not really faeries," Draco muttered. "They're only fireflies."

"And who says that fireflies aren't really faeries?" Nymphadora challenged her little cousin with a smirk. When he glared at her, she scrunched up her nose and her hair shifted white-blond to match his.

"They're not," Draco argued.

"They could be."

"How?"

Nymphadora stood up and moved in front of the fire. "Once upon a time, long ago, when Morgana
finished her apprenticeship of Merlin," she said, her hair shifting from white to black, and lengthening into soft curls like her mother's, "Merlin saw that she was mighty in magic. So powerful, in fact, he worried that she might one day usurp him. So Merlin cast her out of his presence. He returned to Hogwarts, where he was teaching, and informed the Houses that she was not to be trusted."

"To the brave Gryffindors, he said, 'Do not trust Morgana, for she is a Dark witch,'" Sirius chimed in, smirking at his little cousin as he added his own spin on her developing tale. "And the Gryffindors trusted him because they had been told Merlin was brave and had fought dragons," he said, emphasising the word with a deep rumbling growl as he attacked Harry, tickling his sides until the boy was tipped over, giggling.

"To the loyal Hufflepuffs," Ted said, carrying on with the story, "he said, 'Do not trust Morgana, for she has betrayed me even after all I have given her.' And the Hufflepuffs believed him because Merlin's love, Nimue, was the Head of their House, and they were loyal to her.

"To the wise Ravenclaws," Augusta offered, clearing her throat when everyone turned to look at her, most surprised, as she had not spoken much to anyone since her arrival, "Merlin said, 'Do not trust Morgana, for she has learned much, and she keeps the secrets of her knowledge to herself, instead of sharing them with us all.' And the Ravenclaws agreed with him, that Morgana's knowledge should be shared."

"What about the Slytherins?" Draco asked.

"They were too busy stealing my Quidditch Cup to care about Merlin and Morgana," Charlie said under his breath, earning chuckles from some of the adults. He cringed when Cedrella kissed his cheek, dramatically wiping off her lipstick with the sleeve of his shirt.

"To the cunning Slytherins," Theia said, sitting down between Sirius and Remus with a plate in her hand that Sirius snatched away from her, "Merlin said, 'Do not trust Morgana, for she conspires to be greater than us all.' And the Slytherins believed him because they knew Morgana was powerful, but she was also one of their own, and so they did not shun her."

"Then what happened?" Harry asked, enraptured by the tale.

Sirius smirked, flinching when Theia pinched him and took her plate back. "It's just a story, son," he said, ruffling Harry's hair. "What do you think happened?"

"Umm . . . I think that Morgana proved that she wasn't dark, and she got her friends back?"

Dorea grinned. "Quite the contrary, my dear. Morgana sought out new friends among the fae, and they knew her power and recognised it as beneficial to the world. So happy to have a witch who understood them, their inner light shone so brightly that all could see it," she said, looking at Draco who was suddenly overcome with excitement and belief that perhaps fireflies were faeries. "And so they made her their queen. And she welcomed them into Avalon, and made it unplottable to Muggle and magical folk alike, so that she could learn from the faeries, and they could learn from her."

"What did she teach them?" Neville asked, just as entranced by the story as the other children.

"To dance," Cassie announced, as she stood, kicking off her heels and stepping forward onto the grass. She clapped her hands together to create a rhythm before she began to prance around the fire to the tune.

Others laughed and cheered and joined in with clapping. Nymphadora joined her, grabbing ahold of
Bill and Charlie as she circled around to them, dragging them to their feet to dance with her. Camilla and Belina groaned when Theia stood and urged them each to their feet to participate in the merriment.

"How are you doing?" Dorea asked Sirius when Harry stood up to dance, taking Nymphadora's hand when she held it out to him.

Sirius smiled tightly at his mother. "Because of all the people? I'm . . . I'm all right. I'll be fine. It's strange, but I need to get over it. Besides, this is all family, right? People we can trust?" His gaze flickered to Lucius, who was staring at a bit of food on the end of a stick on his plate, unaware that Ted was beaming at him and nudging Andromeda's side with his elbow to get her attention.

"Even families aren't perfect, love," Dorea answered, leaning forward to kiss his forehead.

"The faeries are here!" Neville shouted, pointing off toward the trees where fireflies began to show up, glowing among the shadows in between tree trunks and hedges. The children all dashed off to chase the fireflies down, most ignorant of the fact that—even if the little lightning bugs were fae—faeries were not the type of creature to be chased for sport.

"He's just like any other little boy," Sirius said with a smile as he watched Harry run off after his cousins.

"With any luck," Dorea agreed. Noticing the way Sirius's foot began tapping impatiently, she patted him on the back. "Go on. It's fine to be nervous. It's a parent's job to worry."

Shifting into his Animagus form, Sirius bounded off after the children, barking loudly to draw their attention before darting past them, tail wagging furiously behind him. Bill and Charlie did their best to keep pace, but Draco all but gave up, returning his focus on the fireflies. When Padfoot turned around to play with Harry, he found Neville following Harry's kitten, who was prowling after a firefly that was close enough to the ground to potentially catch.

Shifting back when he could not see Harry, Sirius called out for his godson.

"Here!" Harry called back.

Following the sound of his voice, Sirius walked around a small pond in the orchards where he and James used to wash when playing Quidditch got them too dirty to step back inside the house. A quick dip in a pool of water was less abrasive than a Cleaning Charm, especially since neither could perform magic outside of Hogwarts at the time.

"What have you got there, Harry?" Sirius asked as he approached the boy, who was kneeling over a small bush beside a tree, whispering to himself.

Harry turned and smiled up at his godfather. "A new friend."

Quirking a brow, Sirius knelt down beside Harry, only to see the beady eyes of a little snake in the bush. He opened his mouth to tell Harry to get away, but the words stuck in his throat when Harry whispered again. Only it was not a whisper, but a strange, unnatural hissing sound that sent a cold chill down Sirius's spine.

Especially when the snake looked up at Harry and nodded its head.

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June 22nd, 1987
Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place
The mouldy stench of Grimmauld Place was still sunk deep into the walls and wood flooring, but the gloom and doom decor had been lightened over the past year thanks in part to the coven's diligence, Kreacher's hard work ethic, and Cassie's style. Walburga had tried to attempt a gothic design, but failed miserably, leaving the house looking more like a Muggle haunted mansion, complete with cobwebs.

Still, as improved as the place was, it was hardly a residence that anyone in the coven would prefer to live in, especially since they had yet to figure out how to remove Walburga from the wall. While she was pleasant enough to Cassie and Narcissa, more than half of the other witches got her screaming at deafening levels.

Cassie wanted to close the house up, which meant she had to finally take care of an item on her to-do list that she was none too pleased about.

"Does it hurt?" she asked Kreacher as she waved her wand over him, watching as his magical core became visible to her, fractures and all.

"Mistress does not hurt Kreacher," he deflected.

Sighing, Cassie inspected the breaks, noticing that they were still progressive and obviously painful. There was no doubt that he would go mad eventually, and they could not risk having a deranged elf around the children, nor privy to coven secrets, especially since he was responsible for the death of Pollux and the incarceration of Cygnus.

"Are you ready to end your service, Kreacher?"

Great relief washed over the elf's features, and his eyes watered at her words. His shoulders, usually hunched due to age and poor health, slumped forward more, looking almost relaxed. "Kreacher lives to serve the Ancient and Noble House of Black."

"You have served it well, good elf. You have obeyed every order, and this House releases you of your bond, granting you, in death, a place on the wall with those who have come and served before you."

He looked anticipatory, excited and even joyful, but then his eyes widened just a fraction, and he began tugging on his ear nervously.

"Do you have any parting words, Kreacher?" Cassie asked as she raised her wand.

The elf burst into great, racking sobs and fell to his knees, gripping the hem of her robes. "Kreacher is a bad elf! Terrible, horrible, wretched thing! He disobeys Master. But Kreacher tried . . . He did! Kreacher's magic was not strong enough to obey."

Confused, Cassie knelt down. "Kreacher, what master do you speak of?"

Shaking his head, Kreacher continued to weep. "Kreacher couldn't destroy it. It would not break under any magic no matter how hard Kreacher tried. Years, he tried."

"Kreacher, I'm sure you did your best. Tell me what you were ordered to destroy, and I will assist you."

Looking up at her with eyes filled with grief and shame, Kreacher whispered, "Master Regulus's locket."
Grey eyes slowly blinked open. Sirius squinted through the gentle morning light to glance at the battery-operated Muggle alarm clock on his dresser. Sighing, he realised that the time was certainly off, as it read half one in the morning. Batteries were a terrific way to get around the complications that came with Muggle electronics and magic, but he always forgot to replace the damned things.

"The fuck?" Sirius muttered and rolled over in bed, wincing when his ribcage located the broken Muggle record player he had been fiddling with before eventually falling asleep the night before.
"Cock it!" Grasping at his side, Sirius pushed at the record player until it was dislodged from his ribs.

Sitting up in search of the noise, Sirius's gaze narrowed as it landed on the sight of the large kneazle wolf cat, coughing up a furball on a discarded pair of jeans. Max looked up, her golden stare meeting Sirius's as though challenging him, before she let out one last kaaahhkkk and dropped a saliva-covered ball of fur on the trousers.

"Goddamned cat," Sirius muttered, knowing there was no point in yelling—the little beast could not be frightened by a damned thing, and she certainly wasn't intimidated by him. Max sauntered out of Sirius's room without a care in the world, and Sirius swung his legs over the side of the bed, reaching down to rub at his feet, which still ached in the mornings even years after his release from Azkaban.

Letting out a deep sigh, he ran a hand through his hair as he contemplated the rest of the day. The first of September. King's Cross. As much as he was dreading the thought of sending Harry away to school and releasing him from his constant supervision, Sirius was thrilled to be rid of the cat.

Hiking a clean pair of jeans up around his hips, Sirius grabbed his wand and flicked it at the hairball, vanishing it from existence, before leaving the room. There was still plenty of time to get a move on, and he planned to enjoy every last moment of it before saying goodbye to his godson. Which was why he was determined to wake the boy up as early as possible; he could catch up on sleep during the trip to Hogwarts, after all.

On his way toward Harry's room, Sirius passed by Remus's and stopped at the distinct lack of sound. Having roomed with his best friend for seven years at Hogwarts, and then living with him since being reunited—sometimes even sharing a bed—Sirius knew for a fact that Remus snored. Which meant that he was either awake . . . or . . .

Cracking the door open with a mischievous smirk, Sirius rolled his eyes over Remus's lack of a Locking Charm. Especially considering the way that the blanket around his hips moved up and down, up and down, up and down. The werewolf in question had his head tilted back, eyes closed, one hand behind his neck, and the other beneath the covers, presumably tangled up in a head of hair.

Far too amused by the situation, Sirius pushed his way past the barrier of the Silencing Charm, walking into a wall of quiet moans and groans. Just as Remus moved the hand from behind his neck
to the blanket at his side, clenching the fabric in his fist, Sirius cleared his throat loudly.

"Ah!" Remus screamed, bucked his hips in shock, causing the person beneath the covers to gag and cough loudly. The blankets twisted, Remus spun to glare at Sirius, and his bedmate fell off the mattress backward, landing on the ground with a *thunk*! "Pads!"


A head of black hair popped up from the other side of the bed, and the witch glared at him. "You're an arse."

"And your gag reflex is embarrassing," he retorted with an innocent smile. "Honestly, I've taken bigger cocks than his."

Remus groaned and scrubbed his hands down his face. Theia actually laughed as she stood, entirely unashamed of her nudity as she searched the floor for her clothes. When she bent over to snag her knickers, which were caught up under the bedside table, Sirius tilted his head to the side and watched in appreciation until a pillow struck him in the head. "Ow," he muttered and looked over to see Remus scowling at him. "What?"

"Besides the fact that she's your cousin?"

Sirius shrugged and resumed his staring. "Third cousin," he countered. "One and two times removed. I double-checked the family tree just in case she takes pity on me one day and leaves your bed for mine."

Theia laughed as she slipped into her jeans. "If I left his bed for yours, who's to stop you from letting me sleep there on my own and just coming over here. You boys have fun without me? I can't stand for that, now can I?"

Sirius grinned rakishly. "I'm good at sharing."

"I'm getting up," Remus said. "I can't deal with you before coffee."

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*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

Green eyes slowly blinked open as a finger tapped against his forehead. Harry groaned at the dark blur above him, the general shape of his godfather, at least from the black halo of hair he could make out around a head. "Five more minutes," he mumbled and rolled over, taking his blanket with him. He could feel Sirius lean close to whisper "Hogwarts" in his ear, causing Harry to grin. Merlin, he had waited so long. He knew well enough that other magical children waited longer than he had, considering prior to the age of six, he had not even known that magic existed. But from the very moment that his Uncle Ted had placed *Hogwarts, A History* in his lap and pointed out the blurry image of the large castle, Harry knew that he wanted to go more than anything else in the world. A great big castle filled with other children just like him, wizards and witches, all magical. No wretched Dursleys telling him that he was weird or a freak. He would be just like everyone else.

Of course, he knew now that he would be different. His godfather and grandmother had prepared him well for going out into public. The few times that they did go out, they did so as a family or Disillusioned to prevent Harry from being mobbed. Despite having a good amount of control over the *Daily Prophet, Witch Weekly* and other publications went against the wishes of the Black Coven and printed articles documenting the lives of the Potters and Blacks. This had caused shopping
during peak hours to be a bit chaotic; there had been more than one occurrence where Harry had had some grown wizard bumbling over his own words, desperate to shake his hand and thank him for doing something that Harry was pretty sure he didn't actually do. He had only been a baby when Voldemort was destroyed, after all.

Groaning, he rolled over in bed, wincing when his shoulder located his new copy of *A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration*, which he had fallen asleep reading. Despite being told by his grandmother and his Aunt Minnie, Harry was certain that if he studied hard enough at Transfiguration that year, he could convince either Sirius or his Aunt Cassie to teach him how to become an Animagus.

"Better get that in your trunk," Sirius said, gesturing to the book before prying open the trunk in the corner of the room. It had been a fairly organised situation the day before, but Harry had rummaged through it before bed in search of the book.

Shopping for the items had been a bit of a hassle. Harry had wanted to go with Ted, Remus, and the Muggle-borns that they would be bringing to Diagon Alley for school shopping. He figured that if anyone wouldn't recognise him on sight, it would be Muggle-borns. Unfortunately, the family schedule had not worked out, and Sirius and his grandmother had taken him early one morning before most of the shops opened, having made special appointments to avoid the crowds. Madam Malkin fussed a great deal, especially since a good portion of his everyday robes had been purchased through Twilfitt and Tatting. While he was fitted for his school robes, his books were picked up at Flourish and Blotts by his grandmother, and Sirius darted off to fetch a new cauldron and scales.

Before they left the Alley, they had gone down Carkitt Market to Gregorovich's shop to get his first wand: eleven inches, cedar, supple, with the core of a horned serpent horn.

Unlike those who shopped at Ollivander's, customers of Gregorovich received custom wands. After having discovered that Harry was a Parselmouth, Sirius had done every bit of research on the subject he possibly could while remaining discreet. Even now, only the immediate family and the Black Coven knew about Harry's ability. It was Belina, in fact, who learned how a wand with the core of a horned serpent horn was the best fit for a Parselmouth. Despite the cost and the last minute order—not to mention being retired—Gregorovich had made Harry's wand himself. Of course, it helped that he owed a favour to Cassie. Harry had asked what that was but had been told by his aunt to mind his business.

"Is it still just us today?" Harry asked with a smile as he adjusted his glasses, blinking a few times.

Sirius smiled at him. "Yep. You can say goodbye to your grandmother here. She says that the first trip to King's Cross is special for a parent and their child." His expression pinched a moment before his smile widened into something that looked forced.

Harry knew the look well. "I'm glad it's just going to be us, Dad."

Sirius let out a breath and walked over, pulling Harry into a hug. The word was used rarely, and Harry had figured out from the first time he had accidentally used it, that it was a swift way to break his godfather of any emotion he got stuck on—grief and guilt being the strongest.

"Is Remus going to go with the mops?"

Sirius snorted. "You'd better not call them that when you're at school. It's the Muggle-born Overview Programme, and your grandmother would skin you alive if she knew you called one of those kids a mop."

Harry grinned. "No, she wouldn't."
"Fine. She would glare you sick."

Laughing, Harry stood and stretched his arms above his head, mentally reminding himself to rearrange his things once Sirius left the room to make sure that his godfather hadn't planted anything mischievous or against the rules in his trunk. Or at the very least, that if he had, it was well-hidden. "I won't be mean to the Muggle-borns. You know me better than that."

"I do," Sirius said, and affectionately ruffled his hair. "To answer your question, no, Remus doesn't want to cause a fuss. Ted and Dora are escorting the Muggle-borns and their families to King's Cross. They didn't want to draw too much attention by having all the professors go along. They did that the first year, and Witch Weekly was there taking photographs. Scared the daylights out of some of the Muggle parents. Speaking of which, we're still leaving a bit early to avoid any nonsense like that."

Harry smiled sadly at the dining room table as he entered. The plate in front of his chair was stacked with waffles. His grandmother was right where she always sat, in the chair next to his, reading the Daily Prophet as though it were just any other morning. Harry knew that she would likely be doing her best to hide her emotions. Truth be told, he was having a hard go of that himself. He could not remember the last time he had been away from his grandmother and godfather for more than a single night. Even then, he was usually at Longbottom Keep, just a Floo trip away from home. Hogwarts would be much different.

"Did you brush your hair?" Dorea asked from behind the paper.

Harry grinned. "I gave it my best effort."

Purple eyes stared at him from over the paper, and he heard a small huffing noise. "I hope you put more effort than that into your studies."

She set the paper down as Harry approached, tilting her head to the side and offering him a cheek to kiss. Instead of the usual morning greeting, Harry wrapped his arms around her shoulders and buried his face in her hair. "I'll be good," he promised. "And I'll write every day."

Blinking back tears, Dorea gave a soft laugh. "I've heard that before. Your father said the same thing. And then he took up with a group of scoundrels, and his beloved mother came second." She sighed dramatically, adding, "By the time he came home for Christmas, he was smitten over a little Muggle-born girl, and my boy's heart was forever lost to me."

Harry laughed and kissed her cheek. "You'll always be my favourite witch."

"Little liar," Dorea accused. "I heard you say the same thing to Cassie when she bought you that life-sized chocolate owl."

"It weighed more than Max!" Harry defended. "And Max is as least two stone."

"Eat up," Dorea said with a soft smile, leaning forward to pinch his chin. "Dobby burst into tears when he set the table. I think he's going to miss you. It would be appreciated if you asked him not to follow you to school. House-elves are loyal and wonderful, but they're not the best when it comes to discretion, and I won't put it past our enemies to use him against you. I would order him myself, but —"

"I didn't mean to free him," Harry said with a wry grin as he cut into his waffles. "How was I supposed to know that giving him a jumper would set him free? He looked cold in that weird little tea towel."
"Yes, and now he looks ridiculous. He was wearing a dress this morning."

Harry laughed, chewed his mouthful of waffle, and then swallowed. "Don't judge. Besides, he's loyal even without being bound to us."

Annoyed, Dorea brought her teacup to her lips, muttering, "Still don't know how the damned little beast is maintaining his magic without a bond."

An hour later, with breakfast finished, a crying house-elf properly hugged farewell, and his trunk all packed, Harry hugged his grandmother tightly as they said their goodbyes in front of the fireplace. "I promise, I won't cause trouble for Aunt Minnie."

"Too much trouble," Sirius said with a grin.

Dorea ignored her son, nuzzling the top of Harry's head. "And do not ever allow yourself—"

"To be alone with the headmaster," Harry finished. "I know. I know."

Sniffing, Dorea added, "And do not provoke Professor Snape, or cause trouble with the children of families that disagree with our views. Do your duty to look after others, but always protect yourself first and foremost. Am I understood?"

Harry nodded. "I'll be safe."

Blowing out a nervous exhale, Dorea nodded. She took his face in her hands and kissed his forehead right in the centre. "Be good, little lamb. I love you."

"I love you, too."

Sirius gently cleared his throat as he took a fistful of powder in one hand, Harry's trunk in the other. "Grab your stupid cat, son. We need to be on our way."

Harry opened his arms for Max, who jumped up into them willingly, crawling up Harry's chest and hanging over his shoulder like a small toddler. Harry held out his hand as Sirius poured the Floo Powder into his palm. After Sirius vanished through first, Harry stepped into the grate, smiling once more at his teary-eyed grandmother before tossing the powder and shouting, "King's Cross Station!"

King's Cross Station — Platform Nine and Three-Quarters

The first thing that Harry saw when they crossed through the barrier between platforms nine and ten was the large, scarlet steam engine, puffing smoke out over the nearly empty platform. The second thing that Harry saw, was his cousin, who was having his face peppered by motherly kisses. Harry loudly chuckled, drawing attention to himself. Draco jerked his head in the direction of the laugh and then dramatically flinched away from Narcissa, glaring at Harry.

"Don't get too smug," Sirius said as he put a hand on Harry's shoulder once Max jumped down onto the ground. "I can just as easily make a scene." He pushed the trolley forward, only a bit tempted to try and run over the cat in the process.

"Sirius, Harry," Narcissa said, greeting them. "What a wonderful day."

Kissing her cheek, Sirius smiled. "Cissa, you're looking lovely. I didn't know you'd be here early as well."
"We thought it prudent that the boys arrive together to show a semblance of unity since it is very likely that the Sorting will separate them," Lucius said, not bothering to greet Sirius or Harry.

The two small families couldn't look less alike aside from the quality of the boys' school trunks. Draco was already wearing his robes, white-blond hair slicked back, and a posture and jawline that matched his father's perfectly. Harry, by comparison, was wearing Muggle jeans and a Puddlemere United t-shirt, his black hair an absolute mess. Sirius, likewise, wore Muggle clothing, though his unbuttoned day robes hung over the denim.

"Best get on the train then," Sirius said with a heavy sigh. "I'll keep an eye out for Neville and send him your way."

Draco turned away from them to shake his father's hand, and Narcissa did her very best not to burst into tears at the sight of her child acting too grown up. Sirius smiled and helped Harry load his trunk onto the train before he pulled the boy into a tight embrace. "You remember what I told you?"

"That the map is somewhere in Filch's office if the Weasley twins haven't nicked it yet?"

Sirius laughed and pulled Harry closer. "I'll love you no matter where you end up," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "No matter what. You hear me? I don't care if you come home wearing green robes that match your eyes, or you turn out to be the Huffiest of Hufflepuffs. You're my son, and I won't be any less proud of you because of the colour of your robes."

"I know."

"And you write me if Snape gets out of line."

Harry chuckled. "I think I can handle one professor."

"I'm serious."

Grinning, eyes wide, Harry pulled away and said, "I know you are."

Barking a laugh, Sirius wiped his eyes on his forearm and then sighed. "Right. Off with you. I've got a lot of work back home. I think I'll turn your room into a spare closet."

"Bye, Dad," Harry said, hugging his godfather once more before turning and darting for the train.

Having arrived so early, Harry and Draco had the pick of the compartments, but Harry was in search of the one that Sirius had said he had often ridden in when he and Harry's father were children. Counting as he moved down the aisles, Harry grinned when he found the right one, looking back over his shoulder and shouting, "Draco! This one!"

"What makes you think I'm going to sit with you?" Draco asked with a raised brow as he approached.

"Because we have to show a united front," Harry said as he threw the door open. Max walked in first, dashing between Harry's legs and then jumping up on the seat nearest the window. Harry plopped down right beside his cat and kicked his legs out, stretching across the seats.

"Hmm," Draco muttered as he set a small bag down on the seat opposite Harry. "Maybe I'll just leave my things here. I promised Greg and Theo that I would find them on the train and we'd ride up together. I would suggest that you just sit with us, but I doubt there will be room. Nymphadora mentioned that she will be bringing the mops with her, and asked that we see to it that they're not left alone. A task I gladly delegate to you."
"Don't call them mops," Harry said with a chuckle.

"It'll be the least horrid thing they're called at Hogwarts, I assure you." When Harry sat up straight and narrowed his eyes, Draco held up a hand. "Not by me, idiot. I know better than to say such things in public. But just because our families have changed their beliefs, doesn't mean that others have. Muggle-borns are still different and will be treated differently. There's nothing we can do to change that."

"Why not?" Harry demanded. "My mum was a Muggle-born, and so is Uncle Ted. He's no different than we are," Draco stared at him incredulously, so Harry amended, "Fine, he's a little different. But that's just because he's Ted, not because he's a Muggle-born."

"Get it through your head now, Harry," Draco advised. "You won't be able to save them all."

The door opened and both looked up to see Neville standing there, a small owl perched on his shoulder. "We're all first?" he asked, looking a bit green. "Great. More time to think about everything that's going to happen once we get to Hogwarts."

"You're not going to be sick, are you?" Draco asked, making a face. "These are brand new dragonhide boots. I swear to Morgana, Longbottom, if you vomit on my new boots, I will feed your owl to Harry's ugly cat."

Max growled, staring at the small brown owl. "Don't even think about it," Harry said, flicking Max on the ear. "Come sit down, Nev. We're going to be fine."

"Says you." Neville groaned as he flung himself down near the window, opposite the chair Max was taking up. "Gran lectured me for an hour this morning to make sure I didn't forget anything. Now I'm pretty certain that I did, but I can't think of what it is. Then Aunt Enid started crying as we were leaving. Thankfully she didn't come to the station with us. Had to visit Uncle Algie at St. Mungo's."

"How's he doing?" Harry asked.

Neville shrugged. "He only has to stay in hospital a few days a month now to have the boils removed. The curse is too deep, so they can't get rid of it altogether."

"To be fair," Draco offered with a grin, "the punishment the coven came up with was pretty good. I doubt he'll be dropping any more nephews out of windows anytime soon."

When more students began boarding the train, Draco leant forward and closed the compartment door. At Neville and Harry's questioning looks, he answered, "No offence, but I'm not in the mood to have a bunch of idiots file in here to gawk at the Great Harry Potter," he said sarcastically.

Almost as if on cue, they could hear talking outside the compartment.

"Did you know that Harry Potter's coming to Hogwarts this year?"

"Harry Potter? Really?!"

Draco snickered. "Oh, Harry Potter, really?" he said, mimicking a falsetto. "Goodness, do you think he'd give me his autograph?"

"Piss off, Draco." Harry rolled his eyes, even as Neville chuckled under his breath.

The door to the compartment was pulled open from outside, and all three boys looked up to see twin girls about their age, standing in the doorway. Their long black hair was pulled into a braid, one with
hers parted on the right, the other on the left. "Is there room in here?" the twin on the right asked.

"We're actually saving seats," Harry said with a small smile. "Sorry."

The twin on the left stared at Harry for a long moment before her eyes widened. "Say, aren't you —?

"No," Draco said as he shut the door, nearly hitting both girls with it in the process. The boys could hear indignant scoffing on the other side before the sound of shoes stomping faded into the distance.

"You didn't have to be rude about it," Harry said reproachfully, though he was actually grateful that Draco had cut the girl off. Still, he was eager to make at least a few friends at Hogwarts, and it might have been a little different if Draco was being altruistic about protecting Harry's identity, but in reality, the blond was easily irritated when it came to Harry's unwanted fame.

"Be civil to idiots that might come in useful later on. Be rude to idiots you never want to speak to again. When it comes to people recognising you on sight, I'd rather avoid the simpering fangirls forever, thanks very much." Draco reached into his bag, pulling out a book and flipping it open as he made himself comfortable.

When the door opened again, he stuck his foot out to stop it, hissing when it was shoved hard, causing him to lose his balance and fall onto the floor. Silver eyes narrowed up at the intruder, and Draco sighed. "Oh, it's just you."

Nymphadora grinned down at Draco, her neon pink fringe hanging in her face, partially obscuring her eyes. "And this, boys and girls," she said as she fully opened the door to reveal a small group of students, most of whom looked confused or terrified, "is where we store extra baby cousins. If you have an ickle cousin of your own, feel free to drop them off right here."

Two girls in the group giggled, batting their eyes at Draco, who glared at them before retaking his seat. "Can we help you, Nymphadora?"

She bristled at the name, turning her attention to Harry and Neville instead. "Dad said you lot are good to share your compartment? Looks like there's room here for two. I can stick the rest with the Weasley twins. Their grandmother promised that they'd behave themselves around the firsties."

"We've got room, Tonks," Harry said with a smile, shoving Max in the shoulder to get off the seat. The cat made a disgruntled chirruping noise and leapt off of the bench, stretching its long legs out in front of it.

"What a pretty cat," one of the witches said, kneeling down inside of the compartment in front of Max. She tucked locks of her thick brown hair behind her ears to no avail. Looking up at Harry from the floor, her brown eyes met his gaze. "Can I pet him?"

Harry eyed her curiously with a raised brow. No one had ever referred to Max as pretty before. "Her, actually," he corrected. "Her name is Max. You can pet her. She's not mean or anything."

"It looks sick," one of the other girls said with a grimace as the brunette beamed when Max purred against her hand. The cat angled its head to the side, forcing the girl to scratch just behind the ears. "Hermione, are you sure you should—?"

"She's lovely," the girl—Hermione—said. "She doesn't look sick. She has character."

"All right, you two stay here with these adorable little sugar biscuits," Nymphadora said, smirking when Draco scowled at her. She patted a dark-skinned boy on the shoulder, gesturing him to enter
the compartment. "The rest of you, follow me. And prepare yourselves." The group turned and proceeded down the aisle, and Nymphadora looked back. "You lot have a great trip! I'll see you at Christmas."

When the door shut closed behind the two new occupants, Harry grinned down at the witch whom Max was now actively nuzzling. "I'm Harry," he said, holding his hand out to her.

The girl took it, using his grip to help herself back to her feet. She dumped her overstuffed bookbag onto an empty seat and then smiled at him. "I'm Hermione Granger."
Chapter Notes

Writing has been going slow this month due to health stuff and holidays. I do have chapter 22 ready to post before Christmas, but 23 is not finished. Just a heads up.

September 1st, 1991
King's Cross Station — Platform Nine and Three-Quarters

"It's just like they said," Hermione whispered in awe as she watched the other Muggle-borns and their families disappear through the wall that separated platforms nine and ten. Her fingers gripped the handle of her trolley tighter as she anticipated making her own pass through the barrier, a part of her secretly afraid that she would be rejected at the last second.

"You're up, Grangers," Mr Tonks said, grinning as he approached. Hermione felt her father's hand on her shoulder, and she blinked away the tears of homesickness that were preemptively building. She had never been away from her parents for more than a night, and that usually involved staying with her aunt or grandparents, since she didn't exactly have a large group of friends who had slumber parties every weekend. In fact, the few Muggle-borns she had met since receiving her Hogwarts letter and attending the Muggle-born Overview Programme had been the first real friends she had ever made.

"I'm ready," she said and took a breath before running at the wall, closing her eyes the moment before the trolley was set to impact—except that it didn't. She came out the other side of the wall, mouth falling open at the sight of the large steam-engine. "Wow."

"Right?" Dean said with a crooked grin as he moved to her side, his mother busy chatting with the Finch-Fletchleys. He leant against his trolley, observing the crowd on the platform, laughing excitedly when a large Eagle owl flew overhead, landing on the outstretched arm of a tall wizard.

Hermione followed his gaze, wincing as the owl dug its claws into the arm of its owner. She thought about purchasing a familiar, as her acceptance letter said she was allowed to, but with so much focus on their studies and adjusting to the Wizarding world, Mr Tonks and the other teachers in the programme suggested that adding a pet to the list of responsibilities might be a little too taxing for some.

Sally-Anne Perks and Lisa Turpin giggled when an older boy walked past the group, stopping to say hello to Tonks, who must have been in his House the year before.

"Wotcher, Diggory."

"Tonks," the boy said with a smile. "Fail your N.E.W.T.s or something?"

She laughed loudly. "Hardly. I'm here helping my dad with the new Muggle-borns," she said, gesturing to the group.

He turned, shifting his smile to the incoming first years, and both Sally-Anne and Lisa clutched at
one another and blushed, ducking their heads to whisper. Hermione rolled her eyes and shared a quiet laugh with Dean and Justin.

"Welcome! I'm Cedric Diggory," the boy said, introducing himself. "If any of you ever need anything, don't be afraid to look for me, even if you don't end up in Hufflepuff. Are you sticking them in their own compartment?" he asked, looking back at Tonks.

"Nah. My cousins'll take on a few and the rest are being handed over to the Weasley twins."

Cedric tried to quickly cover his look of concern with a bright grin. "Oh. Well . . . That'll be a memorable ride to Hogwarts for them," he said and then cleared his throat. "See you all on the train. If you need a different compartment . . . for any reason, feel free to come say hello."

"Are all wizards so pretty?" Sally-Anne asked once Cedric was out of hearing range.

Tonks made a face and then shrugged one shoulder. "Eh."

"Keep your focus on your studies and making friends," Hermione's father said, looking at the other two Muggle-borns girls nervously as they continued to simper at each and every boy that passed by them. "Maybe . . . different friends. You want to, you know, expand your socialising to people other than fellow Muggle-borns."

Hermione's mother snorted in amusement and rolled her eyes. Pulling her daughter in for a hug, she whispered, "He's a fussy sort, isn't he?"

"Always has been," Hermione replied as she hugged her mother tightly. "That must be where I get it."

Taking Hermione's face in her hands, Helen Granger sniffed, giving her daughter a watery smile. "Oh, my girl, you're going to have such fun adventures."

Hermione grimaced at the thought. "It's school."

"Magic school," Helen retorted. "I always knew you were special."

Smiling, Hermione could not believe it had only been a few months since she had been introduced to this wonderful world of magic.

"I always knew she was special." Helen hugged Hermione close, as they sat down on a sofa in their living room. The three adults sitting opposite the small family were giving Hermione welcoming smiles, having been let in after a short conversation at the front door followed by a demonstration that floored the Grangers. Hermione was focused instead on the letter in her hand and the small collection of books on the table that Mrs Cattermole had brought for her.

"The Muggle-born Overview Programme is here to help Muggle-borns and their families transition into the magical world with a bit more ease," Mr Tonks said. "Diagon Alley is where you would normally purchase all of your books and things, but it gets quite hectic this time of year since all the students are going back-to-school shopping. To take some of the burden off, we've purchased the books for your first year."

"Oh, that's not necessary," Richard Granger said. "We have the means to take care of . . . Does that say a cauldron?" he asked, snatching up Hermione's school supplies list. "A real cauldron? Like for —"

"Potions," Professor McGonagall said with a polite smile. "One of many classes your daughter will
be taking this coming year. The books are a gift from the programme’s benefactors, but you’ll have to go to Diagon Alley to purchase the rest of your supplies including robes, a cauldron, scales, as well as your wand. However, once you purchase your wand, you are not to use it until you are properly taught. Magic is strictly monitored to those under age.”

"Who are the benefactors?" Richard asked. "Not that I'd even know them, I suppose."

Professor McGonagall smiled. "The majority of the programme is funded by the Black Coven, and our High Witch, Dorea Potter. The Potter family insists on investing in first generation witches and wizards. Dorea's daughter-in-law was a Muggle-born, so it's a cause dear to her heart."

"We have classes," Mr Tonks chimed in when he saw Hermione eyeing the books hungrily. "The Hogwarts Board of Governors has allowed us to schedule a small course that helps introduce Muggle-borns to our world. It helps them stand out a bit less, and it helps to answer a good portion of the questions that you all probably have.

"We have four instructors in the programme. Two of us, Mrs Cattermole and myself, are Muggle-borns. My wife, who is a pureblood, meaning that she was born in the magical world, helps sometimes. We also have an instructor who grew up with a magical parent and a Muggle parent; his name is Remus Lupin. You'll learn a bit about Hogwarts's history, the important rules regarding magic, a bit of the language that can sometimes get lost in translation, and we'll also help you prepare to understand the structure of how magic is used in the home since you weren't raised with it. You'll get to meet other witches and wizards with Muggle families, just like you."

Hermione smiled and looked up at her parents, silently asking their permission to attend. In reality, her father had been dumbstruck the very moment that Professor McGonagall had turned into a cat in their foyer. Her mother, however, was alight with excitement.

"Just like you," Helen said. "Do you hear that, love? You'll be just like everyone else. You'll make friends."

"All right firsties!" Tonks said with a grin that matched her father's perfectly, the two standing side-by-side with their hands on their hips. "Time to load up and head off!"

"I love you," Hermione whispered to her parents as she was enveloped in a group hug. "Remember what Mrs Cattermole said: when the owls arrive with my letter, you have to ask them to wait so they can take a reply back since we don't have our own owl."

"We'll see you at Christmas," Helen said, kissing Hermione's forehead. "Write us often. I can't wait to hear all about . . . everything."

"Be safe, princess," Richard whispered, pressing his cheek to the top of Hermione's hair, sniffling a bit.

Once on board, Tonks looked up and down the aisle and peeked inside two compartments. "Anyone seen Harry Potter?" Her question was usually met with gasping sounds or more questions. "What about Draco Malfoy? Kid with a pointy chin and blond hair? Damn, I knew we should have come a bit early."

She opened several more compartments before pushing at one door that seemed stuck. An amused grin crossed her face as she shoved at the door hard until there was a click followed by a loud thump. Hermione looked at the inside of the compartment from where she stood between Dean and Sally-Anne.
"And this, boys and girls," Tonks said as she fully opened the door, "is where we store extra baby cousins. If you have an ickle cousin of your own, feel free to drop them off right here."

Sally-Anne and Lisa giggled, batting their eyes at the blond boy on the floor, who glared at them before retaking his seat. "Can we help you, Nymphadora?"

"Dad said you lot are good to share your compartment?" Tonks asked, ignoring the blond and turning her attention instead to the other two boys. "Looks like there's room here for two. I can stick the rest with the Weasley twins. Their grandmother promised that they'd behave themselves around the firsties."

"We've got room, Tonks," the black-haired boy said and turned to make room by nudging at a cat the size of a small dog, who was taking up the entire seat behind him.

Lisa gasped and stepped back, grimacing at the creature, which was helpful because it gave Hermione room to move forward, enchanted by the obviously magical feline. It wasn't cute or fluffy, that was certain, but it had an elegance to it that reminded her of the wild cats she had seen at the zoo and on the nature documentaries that her father watched with her.

"What a pretty cat," she said, kneeling down inside of the compartment in front of it. She tucked locks of her thick brown hair behind her ears to no avail, doing her best not to be frustrated by them. She had wanted her mother to braid it all back, but they ended up running late and Hermione decided she would rather be on time than worry about her appearance. "Can I pet him?"

"Her, actually," the boy corrected. "Her name is Max. You can pet her. She's not mean or anything."

"It looks sick," Sally-Anne said with a grimace. "Hermione, are you sure you should—?"

"She's lovely," Hermione said, ignoring the other girl as Max began purring. "She doesn't look sick. She has character."

"All right, you two stay here with these adorable little sugar biscuits," Tonks said, guiding Dean into the compartment behind Hermione. "The rest of you, follow me. And prepare yourselves." The group turned and proceeded down the aisle, and Tonks looked back. "You lot have a great trip! I'll see you at Christmas."

As the door shut behind them, Hermione softly laughed when Max practically crawled into her lap, nuzzling her furry head under Hermione's chin. The black-haired boy grinned down at the scene. "I'm Harry," he said, holding his hand out to her.

Hermione took it, using his grip to help herself back to her feet. She dumped her overstuffed bookbag onto an empty seat and then smiled at him. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"Dean Thomas," Dean said, waving as he sat down, moving his bag beneath the seats. "So are you all pureblood or—"

"Mostly," the blond boy said, gesturing to himself and the brown-haired boy. "I'm Draco Malfoy, that's Neville Longbottom. The specky half-blood over there is—"

"You're Harry Potter!" Hermione said, eyes wide as she spotted the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. Harry cringed at the sound of his own name, and his posture turned defensive. Hermione's cheeks turned pink. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry. I just recognised your photo."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a pamphlet for the Muggle-born Overview Programme, and flipped to a page near the back that showed Harry and his grandmother standing next to the Tonks
family, the Cattermoles, and a few other witches that Hermione only knew because of the pamphlet. "You're Dorea Potter's grandson, right?"

Relaxing his shoulders a bit, Harry glanced to Draco and Neville before nodding. "Yeah."

Hermione smiled. "Wonderful. My parents were trying to figure out how to thank her for the funds she set up for Muggle-borns. There wasn't exactly an address to send post to, and we don't have an owl at home yet. Do you think if my parents sent a thank you card to me, I could give it to you to pass along?"

Harry smiled, letting out a small sigh of relief. "Sure. My grandmother would appreciate that."

Around half twelve there was a great clattering outside in the corridor and a smiling, dimpled woman slid back their door and asked, "Anything off the trolley, dears?"

"Two pumpkin pasties, please?" Neville asked, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his money. Harry tapped Neville on the arm and held out a small handful of coins. Taking them with a roll of his eyes, Neville looked at the trolley lady and added, "And as many chocolate frogs as this'll buy this hoarder."

"I almost have the whole collection," Harry said.

"Liar," Draco said, eyes still closed as he leant against the window where he had been napping for the last twenty minutes. "I have more than you."

"You have more cards, but yours are mostly duplicates," Harry argued.

Draco yawned, muttered, "You're a duplicate," before falling right back asleep.

Standing up, Harry tugged at the bottom of his shirt and let Neville dump handful after handful of chocolate frogs in. "You ever had one?" he asked Hermione and Dean. "They're brilliant." Sitting down with his collection, he tossed them each a small box. "If you get a good one, though, I'd like the card."

Hermione investigated it curiously before opening, gasping when the chocolate frog inside the package jumped. With quick reflexes, Harry snatched the frog from the air and handed it back to her, smiling at the way her eyes lit up in intrigue. "Still not used to magic yet?"

She smiled, nodding in thanks as she retook the frog. "It's still a bit new. We learned a lot in our overview classes, though. And I've already read all of the assigned texts."

"I've got Albus Dumbledore!" Dean said excitedly, half of a chocolate frog in one hand, a card in the other.

Harry sighed. "I've been looking for a Helga Hufflepuff. She's the last I need to have all four founders. I've had about six or seven Dumbledores over the years. I don't keep any."

"Why not?" Dean asked, tilting the card to the side when the image of the wizard on it vanished.

"His gran doesn't like Dumbledore," Neville supplied. "It's not something we really talk about."

"Is it all right for her to have sweets?" Hermione asked as Max crawled halfway onto the seat, stole one of Harry's frogs, and began eating it, package and all.

"I wouldn't suggest taking it from her," Harry cautioned. "She steals my uncle's chocolate all the
"I have heard of you," Hermione whispered several hours later when Dean, Draco, and Neville were all sound asleep. Harry had tried to take a nap, but Max crawled onto his lap and moved anytime Harry got remotely comfortable. Hermione watched the entire thing in amusement. Finally, when the cat had fallen asleep and Harry was busy organising his new frog cards, she had spoken up. "I don't want you to think I was hiding something, but you looked a bit out of sorts when I recognised your name."

Harry frowned. "I get it a lot is all."

"I imagine," she said with a frown. "I am sorry, though. It . . . It must be very difficult—your parents, I mean."

Shrugging, Harry cleared his throat as he tucked his cards into his pocket, shifting Max to the side to reach. "I'm fine," he insisted. "I've got my dad, er . . . my godfather. And my grandmother is always around. Plus, I have a really big family. Lots of aunts, some uncles, and cousins like this idiot," he said affectionately, gesturing to Neville. "And that git," he added, looking at Draco.

Hermione chuckled. "You don't get on well?"

"Well enough," he said. "You have cousins?" When she nodded, he smiled. "Do you have any that you mostly get on with because your parents tell you to? You're pretty much only friends because you're family? That's me and Draco. Neville's really the only one my age that I'm very close to."

"I have a cousin who—" Hermione began to say, but quieted when the door to the compartment opened, revealing a red-headed boy.

"Oi, Harry, you get anything off the trolley?"

Harry reached into his pocket and held up his chocolate frog cards. "Already ate them. Ron, this is Hermione," he said, introducing the two. "That's Dean asleep over there."

Ron nodded to the witch and then held out a small package wrapped in brown paper. "You like corned beef? Mum forgets I hate the stuff. I've been trying to find someone to trade with. Fred and George had their own money, who knows from where, but they're not letting anyone in their compartment. They even somehow tricked Percy into taking the mops."

Hermione raised a brow. "Mops?"

Harry cringed and shook his head slowly, trying to get Ron to pay attention to him to no avail.

"Yeah, y'know. The Muggle-borns." Clarity striking a second too late, Ron's ears turned pink and he bit his lower lip. "Er . . . I mean . . . Who comes up with names, right?"

Pursing her lips, Hermione sighed and reached into her bag, retrieving a bag of vegetables. "My mum packed me some snacks. You're welcome to them. I'm a bit too excited to eat much, and Tonks mentioned that the dinner tonight will have a lot of food."

Ron eyed the veggies in contemplation, looking down at his wrapped sandwich in disgust as though weighing his options. "Cheers," he finally said, taking the bag and stepping fully into the compartment, squeezing himself next to a sleeping Neville. "So what House do you think you'll end up in? My whole family's been in Gryffindor for ages; at least on the Weasley side, that is."
"I think all four Houses have merit," Hermione replied. "I first thought Ravenclaw would be interesting, but Hufflepuff would be nice as well. Mr Tonks and his daughter were Hufflepuffs."

Harry grinned. "They're the best, aren't they?"

"The best," Hermione agreed. "But then Mr Lupin said that he was in Gryffindor, and I think bravery is a good quality of character to have. I'd not consider myself very brave, but I think I would like to be."

"I think coming to Hogwarts is pretty brave, Hermione," Neville said, yawning and stretching his arms over his head. "When'd you get here?" he asked, looking at Ron as though he might have been Imperiused. "Are you eating celery?"

Ron looked down at the green stick in his hand. "S'pose so."

"I think I'll be in Gryffindor," Dean said adjusting his position to reach a hand out to Ron. "Dean Thomas."

"Ron Weasley," Ron said, shaking the hand. "Carrot?"

"No, thanks."

"I'm hoping for Hufflepuff," Neville finally said.

"They're all good." Ron bit into a carrot and continued speaking. "Gryffindor's the best, of course. We'll all be fine so long as we're not in Slytherin. Especially you," he said, looking at Hermione.

Harry sighed. "Don't listen to him."

"They're rotten snakes."

"Shut up, Ron," Harry said. "My Grandmother, all our aunts, Draco's mum, Neville's Nan . . . Ron, your own grandmother was a Slytherin."

"Yeah, and none of them are Muggle-borns," Ron pointed out. "I'm just saying. Slytherin won't let her in."

"What stinks?" Draco asked, eyes still closed, grimace firmly on his face. "Ugh, it smells like poverty."

Glaring across the compartment, Ron threw a celery stick at the blond. "Shut your gob, Malfoy."

Opening his eyes, Draco scowled at Ron as he sat up. "I would wager that Hermione here makes a better Slytherin than you make a wizard, Weasley."

"I take it this happens a lot?" Dean asked when he noticed Neville and Harry's mirrored expressions of exasperation. When they nodded, he chuckled. "What House are you hoping for, Harry?"

"I haven't decided. My parents were both Gryffindors, and so was my godfather. But I think my grandmother would like it if I was a Slytherin. I guess I'll ask the Sorting Hat about it and see what it thinks would be best. Doesn't really matter, of course, we get to pick ourselves."

"What?" Hermione asked. "What's a Sorting Hat?"

"We get to pick?" Dean asked.
"It's unconfirmed," Draco said, pausing his trading of insults with Ron to interject. "Supposedly they put an old hat on your head and it shouts out your House. One of our cousins told Harry that you can ask it to put you where you want, and it will."

"Theia said so!" Harry insisted. "She said she was supposed to be in Hufflepuff, but she picked Slytherin, so the Sorting Hat put her there."

"Do you really think that I wouldn't be allowed?" Hermione asked quietly. "Even if I were to ask to go to Slytherin?"

"You'll be fine, Hermione," Harry promised. "My grandmother told me to make sure that there aren't any House rivalries happening outside of healthy competition. We'll all be friends no matter where we end up. In fact, if you go to Slytherin, Hermione, I'll tell the Sorting Hat to put me there too. That way, you know that you already have a friend looking out for you."

"Harry, you're not going to Slytherin," Ron said, looking aghast. "It's where You-Know-Who was when he went—"

Draco smirked. "Voldemort."

Ron cringed at the name, turned, and glared at the blond. "Don't."

"What? Voldemort."

"Knock it off, Malfoy."

"I'm not doing anything, Weasley. Voldemort."

Ron stood up, looking decidedly uncomfortable. "You're a right tosser, you know that?" he snapped at Draco before leaving the compartment.

Draco grinned victoriously and stood up. "Not that this hasn't been a delight, but I promised my father I would seek out Greg and Theo. As I know for a fact which House I will end up, I'm off to find my fellow snakes and cultivate the Slytherin prefects."

"Don't ask. We try to just stay out of it," Neville offered when both Hermione and Dean looked at them once the door was shut. "Draco's parents don't get on well with Ron's parents. My gran told me to stay out of their business, and to not get involved in their fighting."

"My grandmother said the same," Harry agreed. He looked down and sighed. "You're going to smell like corned beef for days, you know," he said to Max, who had swiped Ron's wrapped sandwich, and was happily tearing it open, devouring it piece by piece.

Glancing down at a watch on her wrist, Hermione gasped and stood up. "We should be there soon according to the schedule. We'd better get our robes on." She stood and opened the door to allow for more room as she pulled the black robes down over her jumper and jeans, while the boys stood to do the same.

Just then, a voice echoed through the train: "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately."

The train eventually came to a stop, and the four squeezed their way into the crowded aisle as the rest of the students began pouring out of the exits. Max slipped in between legs and under feet, meeting Harry and the others outside of the train. Looking down the path, Harry spotted Draco standing beside two boys—Greg and Theo—having a heated argument with another boy who was mean-
looking and thickset.

When his view was obscured by the largest man he had ever seen before, Harry ducked his head behind Hermione's hair and averted his gaze.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here! C'mon, follow me—any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

"What's going on?" Hermione asked.

"Just . . . nothing. I'm sort of . . . not supposed to talk to that man," he said, wincing at how cowardly it sounded. They fell in line as the first years were led one way, the rest of the students another. Most everyone was silent, plenty nervous or scared, as they walked down a dark path lined with thick trees toward a lake the shimmered in the moonlight.

"No more'n four to a boat!"

Harry pulled Neville's sleeve, directing him toward a boat as far from Hagrid as possible; Hermione and Dean following after him. Once inside and seated, the little fleet of boats began to move forward.

"Are you going to explain why you're hiding from that man?" Hermione asked, folding her arms across her chest and pinning Harry with a stern look that demanded answers.

Sighing, Harry ran his fingers through his hair. "My grandmother doesn't really want me around him. He kind of . . . sort of . . . There was this whole thing where he . . . well, kidnapped me when I was a baby."

Dean and Hermione's mouths fell open. "He what?!"

Harry cleared his throat awkwardly. "Little bit."
"What do you mean that man kidnapped you, Harry?" Hermione demanded in shock.

Harry cringed a bit. He had known that his past would come out eventually, and he was glad that he could at least be the one to tell it, but considering most happened before he could even remember, he had to rely on the stories that his family had told him. "Look, there was just . . . this thing where he took me away from my godfather and brought me to . . . It's not important. All I know is that my grandmother offered to help him with something a few years ago, and he said no. Something about loyalties. My godfather says he's not a bad person, but that you can't fully trust someone who has blind faith in someone else."

"Makes sense," Dean said. "My grandfather's a bit mental with church. Mum never really made me and my sisters go, and she always said that Granddad wouldn't question his bishop if he was told his leg was on fire and needed to piss—" He stopped, looked at Hermione and then cleared his throat. "Er . . . wee on it to save himself."

"Wonder who he's loyal to," Hermione said thoughtfully as she looked across the water where Hagrid was in his own little boat, leading the others.

Harry looked down and said nothing, already knowing why he could not trust the man. When he heard Hermione gasp, he looked up and smiled. A massive tentacle lifted out of the cold water, dark skin reflecting the moonlight, and moved as though it were waving.

"Whoa." Dean gaped in awe. "Wicked."

"Not that," Hermione said. "Look!"

The boys turned and followed her gaze, pointed straight ahead at the castle looming beyond the edge of the lake. Excitement blossomed in Harry's chest. "Hogwarts," he said. *It's like a second home,* Sirius had told him. *It's a sanctuary,* Remus had said. His grandmother had told him that Hogwarts was where his story would really begin.

Dean nudged Harry in the shoulder and grinned. "This is awesome."

Harry beamed excitedly at his new friend, shared a small smile with Neville, and then returned his attention to the looming castle that towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer. Very quietly, just to himself, Harry whispered, "It's real."

When they reached the damp grass in the shadow of the castle, the three boys tumbled out of the boat, practically climbing over one another to be the first out. Harry and Dean were first and then second, leaving Neville a bit behind. Hermione rolled her eyes, accepting Neville's hand to help her out of the boat and onto land. Harry gawked at the amused smirk on his cousin's face and laughed. "Come on, Prince Longbottom," he said sarcastically, looping an arm around Neville's shoulders as they fell in line behind their new friends.

"Everyone here?" Hagrid asked as he beat his giant fist against the large door of the castle three times.

The door swung open at once to reveal Minerva standing behind it wearing emerald green robes. She had a stern look on her face as she examined the group of first years, her gaze only momentarily
resting on Harry and Neville before moving on. "Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

After being led into the castle and down to a small chamber off the hall, Minerva greeted them all officially. "Welcome to Hogwarts. The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your Houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your House will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your House, sleep in your House dormitory, and spend free time in your House common room.

"The four Houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each House has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your House points, while any rule breaking will lose House points. At the end of the year, the House with the most points is awarded the House cup, a great honour. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever House becomes yours.

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting." This time, she did let her gaze settle fully on Harry, pinning him with a look that she had perfected over the years of having to deal with his father and godfather. He smiled innocently up at her, and she rolled her eyes, letting out an exasperated sigh. "I shall return when we are ready for you. Please wait quietly."

Neville chuckled. "You would think she already knew you were going to get into trouble, Harry."

Harry's smile turned into a full blown grin. "Aunt Minnie loves me."

"I'd still be afraid, if I were you, Potter."

Harry tilted his head to the side and smirked at the amused tone coming from the boy who approached on his left. "Nott. Making new friends?" he asked, looking back to where a group of children had gathered together. Most were purebloods with a family history of being sorted into Slytherin, Draco included. However, Harry was glancing at an angry-looking boy who was glaring right back at him.

"Vincent Crabbe," Theo Nott said. "He had some delightful things to say about a lot of people on the train."

"I bet," Harry said, tearing his expression away from the boy, glancing instead at Hermione and Dean, who were busy chatting with other excited students. "Your dad give you any advice before you left?"

Theo smirked. "To find a pretty red-headed witch and marry her."

Harry groaned and shoved Theo in the shoulder. "Ugh. Stop. Anything that doesn't have to do with his weird thing with my grandmother?"

"They don't have a thing," Theo said with a laugh. "He has plans to begin courting the Warrington widow by Yule. Do you know her?"

Harry sighed in relief. "Yeah. She's in the coven. Works with Grandmother on the St. Mungo's stuff."

While he had never met Thoros Nott personally, there had been several years where a dozen orange roses would arrive like clockwork every Sunday. His grandmother had thrown the first few dozen away but then had begun using them to make potpourri gifts for her friends. Harry was glad to be rid of the smell of roses.
"Keep an eye on him," Theo cautioned. "Most others in our year won't care much for the issues of the past, at least anything that would be significant to us. But I've heard a few of the older Slytherins and some Ravenclaws still have issues with blood status, not to mention the amount of power they think your grandmother and the other witches have."

"Do you have names?"

"I will."

When Minerva returned, she sharply instructed them to form a line. The students walked out of the chamber and through the corridor where large doors opened to reveal the Great Hall. Floating candles hovered in the air above four long tables. At the front of the room sat the staff; right in the centre and staring directly at him, was Albus Dumbledore.

On instinct, Harry looked away from the man, reaching up to clench the amulet that hung around his neck—a gift from his aunt Belina on his eleventh birthday. Harry knew that Draco and Neville had matching ones to protect them all from Legilimency.

"It's bewitched to look like the sky outside."

Harry snapped out of his own head and looked up. "What?"

Hermione smiled at him. "The ceiling. It's bewitched."

He nodded and returned the smile. "Oh, yeah. I read about that in *Hogwarts, A History,*" he muttered as his gaze fell on a dirty, patched hat that rested on a stool in front of them all.

Hermione was about to say something more when the brim of the hat opened as though torn, and the hat began singing. The first years all watched in amusement, some listening with great interest to each and every word. When it was finished, they broke out into applause, and Minerva stepped forward, holding a long roll of parchment. "When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said. "Abbott, Hannah!"

A little blond girl made her way to the stool, reaching up to adjust her pigtails as though they would get in the way of the hat. She need not have worried, for the hat fell down right over her eyes when it was placed on her head. There was barely a moment's pause before the hat shouted, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

The table on the right cheered loudly, drawing all of their attentions. Neville stared at the table longingly.

"Bones, Susan!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!" the hat shouted once more, and the girl quickly dashed off to the table right behind Hannah.

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

The second table to the left clapped this time, and the boy excitedly made his way to take his seat with the rest of the students wearing blue and bronze lined robes. Harry's focus moved between flashes of red and green, gold and silver, still not entirely certain where he wanted to end up. He was so focused that he missed several other sortings. "Brocklehurst, Mandy" went to Ravenclaw, "Brown, Lavender" was the first to be sorted into Gryffindor, and "Bulstrode. Millicent" became the
first Slytherin. "Cornfoot, Stephen" made his way to Hufflepuff, while "Corner, Michael" went to Ravenclaw.

Despite it being obvious, Harry groaned when "Crabbe, Vincent" ended up in Slytherin, joined by "Davis, Tracey". "Dunbar, Fay" took a seat beside Lavender with the Gryffindors, "Entwhistle, Kevin" made his way to join Terry Boot with the Ravenclaws, and "Finch-Fletchley, Justin", a friend of Hermione and Dean's from the Muggle-born Overview Programme, went to Hufflepuff.

Harry tried his best not to laugh at the irritated look on Hermione's face when the Hufflepuff table excitedly began chanting, "We've got a mop! We've got a mop! We've got a mop!" so loudly, that most didn't even hear when the Sorting Hat shouted, "GRYFFINDOR!" sending "Finnegan, Seamus" to join the red and gold-robed students.

"You all right, Hermione?" Neville asked.

Her brief look of irritation had faded when the boy in front of her stepped closer to the front. "I'm next," she said as "Goldstein, Anthony" was sent to the Ravenclaws, and "Goyle, Gregory" moved up to sit on the stool. "What do I do? Where should I go?"

Harry smiled at her. "Anywhere you want, Hermione. You go wherever you want."

She nervously returned his smile just as the Sorting Hat shouted, "SLYTHERIN!" sending Goyle off to join the snakes. Hermione turned and almost ran to the stool as though trying to prove she was not scared at all, jamming the hat eagerly on her head . . . where it sat . . . for a very, very long time before opening the brim and shouting, "SLYTHERIN!"

Neville's eyes widened, and Harry grinned. "She did it."

The first years all applauded, as did many at the Slytherin table as Hermione ran to join her new House, but Harry took note of the way that several older students scowled angrily down the end of the table, very purposefully not applauding their newest addition. He glanced over his shoulder to see Theo taking note of which students had not clapped, figuring them to be blood purists or worse, Death Eater sympathisers.

Everyone's attention returned to the Sorting, where "Greengrass, Daphne" was sent to Slytherin, "Hopkins, Wayne" went to Hufflepuff along with "Jones, Megan", and "Li, Sue" joined Ravenclaw.

"Longbottom, Neville!"

Harry urged Neville forward when he did not move, and he chuckled as he overheard his cousin muttering, "Hufflepuff, Hufflepuff, Hufflepuff, Hufflepuff . . ." The hat took almost as long with Neville as it had with Hermione. Despite Neville being resiliently determined, the hat shouted, "GRYFFINDOR!" much to the surprise of many, Neville included.

"You'll be fine," Harry mouthed to his cousin, watching as Neville slowly approached the Gryffindor table. By the time he actually made it there, "MacDougal, Morag" had been sent to Ravenclaw, and "Macmillan, Ernie" went to Hufflepuff.

"Watch how it's done," Draco said with a smug grin as he pushed his way past the others, not even waiting for his name to be called, much to the annoyance of Minerva, who narrowed her eyes at him as he sat on the stool. The hat had barely touched Draco's head before it screamed, "SLYTHERIN!" and Draco hopped off the stool, looking very pleased with himself.

Another Muggle-born, "Malone, Roger" went to Hufflepuff, whilst "Moon, Lily" went to Gryffindor. Predictably, Theo was sorted and made his way across the room to sit next to Draco with
the other Slytherins. He was swiftly followed there by "Parkinson, Pansy". The pair of twins that Harry remembered seeing on the train—Padma and Parvati—were separated into Ravenclaw and Gryffindor respectively. Harry stared ahead as "Perks, Sally-Anne" was sorted into Hufflepuff with the majority of the other Muggle-borns, and then, just like that, Minerva turned and settled her gaze on him.

"Potter, Harry."

As he stepped up to the stool, whispers filled the room from one end to the other like a tidal wave of gossip. Harry did his best not to pay them any mind, though he did want to know what they were all saying about him. Most were likely shocked to see him there in the flesh, but others might be wondering just where he could end up. His parents, after all, had been Gryffindors. He glanced at the table full of eager Gryffindors, staring at him like he was some prize. Fred and George Weasley were collecting money and taking bets. Uncomfortably, he looked to the side just as the hat was placed on his head; the last thing he saw was two older girls at the Slytherin table scowling at Hermione.

"Hmm," a small voice said in his ear. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes—and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting. So where shall I put you?"

_Slytherin_, Harry thought automatically. _Put me in Slytherin._

"Slytherin, eh?" the hat said. "Are you sure? I remember your parents, both Gryffindors, and your godfather too—all very brave. I see bravery in you as well. It's all here in your head, and Gryffindor will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that."

_Aren't you supposed to take my choice into account?_

"Eh, sometimes, if I feel that you belong in more than one House and I don't feel like deciding on my own. Miss Granger, for instance, could have gone in any of the four Houses. She is brave, and loyal, and cunning, and intelligent. Mr Longbottom, as loyal as he is, needs Gryffindor, I think. And perhaps, Harry Potter, _Gryffindor_ needs you. GRYFFINDOR!"

Green eyes wide, Harry could not help but look across the room to where Hermione was clapping for him, sitting there by herself even as the older Slytherins focused their hate in her direction—though they did pause for a moment to spare Harry some as well.

Harry was shocked as he sat down at the Gryffindor table, ignoring the way that his new Housemates clapped him on the back, even as "Rivers, Oliver" went to Hufflepuff with "Smith, Sally", and "Smith, Zacharias", "Roper, Sophie" joined him at the Gryffindor table with Dean, who took a seat right beside him.

"All right, Harry?" Dean asked.

Harry nodded. "Shocked," he said. "I . . . Do you think my parents ever sat in this exact spot?" he wondered aloud, putting a hand on the table.

Back at the front of the room, "Turpin, Lisa" was sent to Ravenclaw just before the hat quickly sent Ron to join the Gryffindors. Lastly, "Zabini, Blaise" was put in Slytherin, and the Sorting Hat was taken away for another year.

Albus Dumbledore stood and smiled at the students. Harry thought he looked quite a bit older than his Chocolate Frog card. But the photograph was likely taken years ago, as the dark purple scars across the headmaster's face were not present on any of the cards that Harry had come across.
"Whoa," Dean whispered. "What do you think did that to him?"

"Dragon," Ron said. "Probably. It is Albus Dumbledore, after all. I wouldn't be surprised. He defeated Gellert Grindelwald, you know."

"Who's that?" Dean asked.

"Nah," Fred said from down the table. "Everyone knows that Dumbledore got mauled by a chimaera."

"Or a kneazle," George suggested with a wry grin. "Say, Harry, don't you have a kneazle?"

Harry rolled his eyes and kept his own theories to himself, though the annoyed look on his Aunt Minnie's face said that she, in Animagus form, might have been the headmaster's attacker. Harry would not doubt it if told so.

"Welcome! Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!"

A few students laughed and clapped their hands, whilst others rolled their eyes and groaned. They were, however, quickly silenced as the dishes in front of them were now piled with food. They ate mostly without conversation, hungry from the long trip despite having been filled with sweets on the train. Harry smiled as he watched the Muggle-borns devour foods that they had never before tasted, and he leant to the side to remind Dean to save room for treacle tart because Remus told him that Hogwarts elves made it the best.

When the food was cleared away, conversation took back up again, and Harry smirked as he watched Dean try to explain football to Neville. Harry knew the basics of the sport, having recalled watching a few games on telly from over the floor of the Dursleys' home since Dudley always pushed him off of the sofas. "Just wait until you see Quidditch, mate," Harry said. "It's brilliant. I wish first years were allowed to try for the teams, but we're not even allowed brooms other than in class."

"You've never seen Quidditch?" Ron asked, looking heartbroken on Dean's behalf. "Oh, right... Muggle-born."

"You've never seen football?" Dean countered with a smirk.

"Yeah, yeah," Ron said with a laugh. "Most purebloods don't know much about Muggles. My dad thinks they're fascinating, though. Think you could get a football for me? I bet he'd love that."

"I can bring one back after Christmas."

"Wicked. So, what're Muggles like?" Ron asked.

"They're just like everyone else, Ron," Neville answered. "Just without magic."

"How would you know?"

"He's right," a boy across the table said. "Seamus Finnigan." He stretched his arm across the table as he introduced himself to everyone with a crooked smile. "I'm half-and-half. Me dad's a Muggle, Mam's a witch. Bit of a nasty shock for him. What about you lot?"

"My gran brought me up, and she's a witch. Both my parents are magical. Everyone thought I was all-Muggle for ages," Neville said. "I didn't have any magic until I was eight."
"No one thought that," Harry said defensively. "Having a git of an uncle isn't unusual, Nev. Besides, I bet you had lots of accidental magic like the rest of us, but no one was looking when it happened. You'll do fine in class."

"Which professor is which, do you think?" Seamus asked.

"Professor McGonagall teaches Transfiguration," Harry said, pointing her out. She still had that stern expression, but this time it was directed at the headmaster, who was merrily conversing with Hagrid. "She's next to Professor Snape; he teaches Potions."

The Potions Master, as though he overheard the conversation, looked up and made eye contact with Harry. Fully prepared for the glare that he was expecting, having had a chat with both Sirius and Remus about the man who hated his father when they were children, Harry was surprised when the man blinked a few times before giving him a curt nod and then returned to speaking with Professor McGonagall.

"That's Professor Sprout," Neville said, pointing. "She teaches Herbology. She came with Aunt Camilla to Beltane. Remember, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "And that must be Professor Flitwick," he said, pointing to the tiny professor sitting on Snape's left. "He teaches Charms. My Uncle Remus said that he's the most fun in class. I don't know any of the other professors, except—ah!" Harry hissed in pain and clapped his hand against his forehead.

"You all right?" Dean asked, concerned.

Harry nodded quickly, rubbing at his scar trying to rid himself of the hot, sharp pain. "Just a headache," he said, glancing at Neville, who looked worried. Harry narrowed his gaze at his best friend, silently demanding that he not mention this in any letters home. Despite not knowing all the details about it, the coven witches always fussed about that damned scar, and the last thing Harry wanted was to give them any reason to take him out of Hogwarts to run a barrage of diagnostic spells. Or worse, storm the castle and cause a scene.

He glanced back up to the High Table again, making sure that Professor McGonagall had not seen him rubbing at his head. The pain came back briefly when he returned his attention to a professor with a turban wrapped around his head, who was nervously speaking with Dumbledore. Dumbledore, on the other hand, was distracted—looking right at Harry.

The Great Hall was still buzzing with chatter when Dumbledore got to his feet again. He cleared his throat, sighed when no one paid him any attention, and then cleared it again with his wand touching his neck, amplifying the sound. When the hall finally fell silent, Dumbledore smiled. "Just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you. First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well.

"I have also been asked by Mr Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their House teams should contact Madam Hooch." Harry and Ron both slumped forward looking utterly devastated over the reminder that they were not going to be allowed to even try out for the team.

"And finally," Dumbledore said, "I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."
A few students laughed as though it were a joke, but some of the older ones just looked as though they were making a mental note of the announcement. Harry gaped at the High Table, where the majority of the professors looked perturbed by the announcement, no one more than Professor McGonagall, who was having a much harder time masking her shock and outrage than Professor Snape, who stared coldly at the headmaster.

In fact, the only members of the staff that did not look the least bit surprised about the announcement, were Hagrid, and... 

"I would also like to offer congratulations to Professor Quirrell, who has taken over the Defence Against the Dark Arts this year. We wish him the best of luck," Dumbledore said, smiling down at the man, who was grinning awkwardly out at the students, wringing his hands together.

Harry could not imagine a man terrified of attention would be very good at defending himself. Finding himself suddenly missing home very much, Harry made a mental note to remind himself to write his Uncle Remus and ask to have some extra defence books sent up, just in case.

"That's odd," Percy Weasley said. "Headmaster Dumbledore normally gives us a reason why we're not allowed in certain areas. I wonder why he did not manage to inform us prefects."

Dumbledore held his wand up like a conductor's baton and smiled brightly, his blue eyes twinkling. "And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!"

There was a loud scraping sound as Professor Snape shoved his chair backward from the table. Standing, he did not cast one more look in the headmaster's direction as he left the High Table, black robes billowing behind him. Professor McGonagall, likewise, was leaving the table. She twisted around, pinning the rest of the staff with a look, and both Professors Sprout and Flitwick rose. The Head of each House made their way to the tables, instructing the prefects to rise and take charge of the younger years as they were all led out of the Great Hall.

Dumbledore's smile and twinkle faded and he collapsed back into his chair with a pout.

Harry remained close to Dean and Neville as they approached the stairs. The prefects directed the group into a line—as much as possible—as the Slytherins passed by. Harry waved at Hermione, but she did not see him. He, however, was still looking when two older Slytherin girls slammed into her from either side, sending her sprawling to the floor. Outraged, Harry broke from his place amongst the Gryffindors to help, but Hermione was quickly helped up by an older boy, as well as another girl in her year.

Still angry over what he had seen, Harry grabbed Draco as he passed by. "Wait."

Draco shrugged him off. "Don't you have a pretty tower to run off to?"

"You have to look after Hermione."

Raising an incredulous brow, Draco asked, "And why do I have to do that?"

"C'mon, Draco. You had to have seen that. And Nott told me that some of the older Slytherins come from families that still care about blood status."

"Yes," Draco said, nodding thoughtfully. "And yet I seem to recall someone on the train informing the little mop that she could go anywhere she pleased. Why aren't you in Slytherin to protect her?"

Frustrated, Harry ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know! I asked the hat to put me in Slytherin. It didn't listen to me."
"Well, it listened to her. And now there's a Muggle-born in Slytherin. Who knows if that's ever happened before. If you'll excuse me, I should catch up with my House."

"Draco! You can't let anything bad happen to Hermione. It's my fault she's in Slytherin, and I don't want her to get hurt."

Eyeing his cousin speculatively, Draco smirked. "I will keep an eye on your pet mop."

Sighing in relief, Harry smiled. "Thank you."

"In exchange for your Chocolate Frog collection."

Paling, Harry's eyes widened in shock and horror. He ignored the Gryffindor prefect who was calling out his name. "What? I . . . You son of a—"

"Tut tut, Potter. I think it's a fair trade. Your cards in exchange for her safety."

He did not think on it for more than another thirty seconds or so, especially since he could hear the prefect calling after him now. "Fine," Harry said with a growl and held out his hand. "You have my word."

Draco laughed and took the hand. "Idiot. She's a Slytherin. Malfoys may not have always been the biggest fan of Muggle-borns, but we're loyal to our House. I would have kept an eye on her regardless."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "What makes you think I'll still give you my cards then?"

"Because," Draco said with a grin as he patted Harry's shoulder, "you're a Gryffindor. And you just gave me your word." He turned around, still chuckling, as he caught up with his House, leaving Harry standing in the corridor looking gobsmacked.

"Son of a bitch."

"Ahem."

"Ahem."

Harry spun around and looked up into the unamused stare of Professor McGonagall. Clearing his throat and smiling, he said, "Hi, Aunt Minnie."

"One point from Gryffindor for terrible language, Potter," she said, lifting her eyebrow at him when he opened his mouth to protest.

Harry threw his head back and groaned but gave her an apologetic look, muttering, "Yes, Professor."

Momentarily breaking her stern facade, Minerva smiled at him and ruffled his hair. "Go and catch up with the others. Welcome to Hogwarts, Harry." She followed him to the foot of the stairs and watched him walk up several before he turned and looked down at her.

"Aunt . . . Er . . . Professor? Why is the third-floor corridor off limits?"

Her nose twitched before she answered, "Because the headmaster says so."
September 1st, 1991
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

When the Sorting Hat was put on her head, she tried to think of which House she wanted to be in, just like Harry had suggested, but her mind went blank. And, as if magic were not brilliant enough, the hat actually spoke into her mind:

"Eager for knowledge, and loyal . . . Yes, very loyal. You have a strong mind, Miss Granger. Brightest I've looked into in quite some years. Ah . . . What's that? You believe you have a choice?"

*Don't I?* Hermione thought.

"And what is it, exactly, that you want?"

She had barely paused for a single moment before thinking, *I want to learn everything there is to know about magic.* She felt, rather than heard, the amused chuckle coming from the hat before it whispered, "Ambitious of you," and then sorted her into her new House.

The Slytherins ate mostly in small groups. The older years caught up with friends they had not seen since the end of the previous term, and the first years gathered together in what looked like predetermined social circles. Draco sat beside Theo Nott, a boy who had been speaking with Harry while they waited in line. The girl sorted after Hermione, Daphne Greengrass, was whispering with Pansy Parkinson, giggling; Hermione figured that they had been best friends prior to arriving at Hogwarts. When Blaise Zabini was finally sorted, finishing the ceremony, he sat down between Draco and Vincent Crabbe—much to Draco's obvious relief.

She had been just a bit hurt when Harry, Neville, and Dean were sorted into Gryffindor. However, the look of pure shock on Harry's face indicated that he was just as surprised as she was, so she figured she would not hold it against him. Instead, she decided she would do what her mother had advised and make new friends.

"I read in *Hogwarts, a History* that the Slytherin common room has an underwater view of the lake. Is that true?" she eagerly asked, looking down the table at some of the older students who would know.

The second years gave her an incredulous look before returning to their conversation, and some of the even older students outright glared at her. She cleared her throat and looked at Draco desperately, but he was deep in conversation about Quidditch with Theo.

When no one bothered answering her, she cleared her throat, undeterred, and said, "I do hope they start right away, there's so much to learn. I'm particularly interested in Transfiguration; you know, turning something into something else. It's supposed to very difficult."

Pansy and Daphne stared at her like she was an animal at an exhibit before schooling their expressions into something more polite before they continued on with their own conversation.

"They won't talk to you, y'know," the brunette seated beside one of the boys across from Hermione said. "Don't take offence. They probably don't have anything worthwhile to say." When the other
two girls glared at her, the brunette grinned. She shifted her attention back to Hermione. "I'm Tracey. This is Millie," she said, elbowing the girl sitting to her left.


Hermione smiled, very briefly trying to get a look at the book Millie had been so invested in. She would hate to think that she had missed something off of her list. "I'm Hermione. So . . . How come they won't talk to me, but you will?"

"Because we're half-bloods," Tracey answered, looking dauntless when a few of the other students gaped at her as though announcing her unfortunate blood status was uncouth. "And it would be pretty hypocritical for us to judge you on something like blood status, wouldn't you say? My grandmum was a Muggle-born. Dad's side. Millie's great-grand something married a Muggle."

"Mum still doesn't like them," Millie said, picking through some of the vegetables on her plate, separating them by colour. "Dad says she needs to get over it, and that it's attitudes like hers that will get us on the bad side of the Black Coven."

Hermione had many questions—especially about the coven that she had learned very little about other than the fact that their High Witch, Dorea Potter, helped to fund the Muggle-born Overview Program. Before she had a chance to ask any of them, Tracey leant forward.

"I saw you standing next to Potter. Are you friends with him?"

"I think so," Hermione said with a smile.

"His dad is so fit. My mum took a fancy to the Black brothers when they were at Hogwarts. We didn't see them at King's Cross, but there was a photo in the Daily Prophet a few months back when Sirius Black was shopping in Diagon Alley." When Millie rolled her eyes, Tracey laughed. "What? He is! You can't disagree."

"I can," Millie said matter-of-factly as she speared a piece of carrot on her fork. "And I will because we're eleven. My Mum said that it's silly to think about boys at our age."

Tracey rolled her eyes, completely indifferent to her friend's opinion. She turned her attention back to Hermione. "Do you know the family very well?"

Hermione shook her head. "I was introduced to Harry on the train. The only people I met before going to King's Cross were the teachers of the Muggle-born Overview Programme. Is that why not liking Muggles would get your family on the bad side of the Black Coven?" she asked, turning her focus back to Millie. "Because Dorea Potter funds it?"

"The programme was created by the Black Coven," Millie said. "If you've met any adult witches already, they're likely members of the coven. Professor McGonagall is the only one in the castle," she said with a sigh. "I knew I would end up in Slytherin, but a part of me wishes that I had better access to her."

"Why?"

Millicent turned and gaped at Hermione. "So she'll sponsor me, of course. Every three years, the Black Coven accepts three new members: someone connected to the Black family by blood or bond, a half-blood or pureblood witch, and a Muggle-born. It's to keep everything balanced. You might end up on their list if Potter over there writes home and mentions you by name."
Hermione sat up straight, wide-eyed, processing this new information even as Millie went on. "I'm related to Madam Potter because we share a great-great-something grandmother on the Bulstrode side. I'm one of very few witches in Hogwarts that can say that. If I don't get in, I'll be devastated," she said, looking crestfallen. "Last year was when they announced their official plans to take on new witches in ritual, but you have to have a wand to participate, so anyone younger than eleven was out. I have two years to prepare for the next time they open the coven."

"Do you want me to whistle really loud and get Professor McGonagall's attention?" Tracey asked with a wry grin that had Hermione quietly chuckling.

Millie pinned her with a look. "Don't you dare."

"I could wave my arms," Tracey said. "It wouldn't be very difficult to get her to look this way."

"How did you ever get into Slytherin?" Millie asked, eyes narrowed.

Tracey smirked. "Green brings out my eyes."

"What about you, Tracey?" Hermione asked, intrigued to know more about her new Housemates. "Are you going to try and join the Black Coven since they allow in half-bloods?"

"Not for me," Tracey replied with a shrug, spilling a bit of pumpkin juice as she refilled her cup. "Remember what I said about my mum fancying the Black brothers? Grandfather says that when mum was little, they tried to set up an arranged marriage with the Black family, but the younger brother refused and then died like a month later."

Furrowing her brow as she eagerly listened, Hermione picked at the food on her plate, too caught up in the conversation to really pay attention to what she was eating. "Does that matter? Do they think your mother had something to do with—?"

"Oh no," Tracey said with a small laugh. "But to join a family coven, you technically have to be of the same family."

"Joining a coven is a blood bonding ritual," Millie said quietly, trying not to draw attention of the other students, though Draco, Theo, and Gregory Goyle were casually glancing in her direction as she spoke. "It would be considered . . . improper for Tracey to join a coven and share in the blood of the family that her mother tried to marry into."

Tracey nodded in agreement. "My dad works at the Ministry, and there are gits there who would treat him really badly if I did something like that. Besides, I just plan on being best friends with you two since you're so well connected," she said with an amused grin, "and I'll get coven perks by association."

Hermione's cheeks coloured. "I don't think . . . I mean if they only pick three . . ." She frowned, wondering if people would assume that she had befriended Harry with dubious intentions.

None of the Slytherins said a word when their Head of House led them out of the Great Hall in the middle of the headmaster's speech. Once they were through the doors, however, some of the older years began to quietly snicker about the "barmy old codger" that was Albus Dumbledore. Despite it feeling disrespectful, as Hermione had always been taught to respect her elders, this event paired with her conversation with her Gryffindor friends on the train did not paint a very good picture of the old wizard.

"What do you think is on the third floor?" Hermione quietly asked her new friends as they followed
the rest of their House out of the Great Hall.

"Dead bodies," Tracey said immediately, giggling. "Or a really impressive collection of missing left socks. Ones with holes in where the big toe should be. All colours. Great big fuzzy ones as well."

Chuckling, Hermione rolled her eyes as they walked past the staircase. She looked back to see the Gryffindors had split off from the rest of the students to ascend to the floors above. When she turned back to ask Millie and Tracey another question, she stumbled when two older girls were on either side of her instead, having moved Hermione's friends out of the way.

"Mudbloods don't belong in Slytherin," one of them hissed at her before hip checking her into the other. The girls laughed as Hermione fell to the ground. A few other students laughed, but even more glared up ahead in shock as the older girls blended back into the crowd.

Despite feeling Tracey already on one side of her, Hermione could not help but wonder if she had made a mistake in her choice of House. Then again, it had not really been a choice. Instead, a conversation with the Sorting Hat before she had essentially acquiesced to being put wherever it deemed appropriate. In that moment, she could not decide if she would have preferred Harry to come with her to Slytherin, or if she would be embarrassed for him—and everyone else—to see her be bullied so easily. Lifting her chin angrily, she fought away bitter tears, resolutely determined not to let the older students see her weak.

"Come on," an older boy said as he reached down to quickly help Hermione back to her feet. "Don't let them think they actually hurt you."

Once inside the Slytherin common room, Hermione did her best not to cry over the rapidly developing bruise on her knee. Tracey sat on a sofa beside her as a sixth year prefect cast a Numbing Charm on her.

"You'll have to learn to be more careful," the girl said to Hermione even as she glared sideways at the twin sisters who were smirking in the corner of the room. "Best to stay out of the Carrows' way from now on. See if one of your new half-blood friends can explain how things work around here."

Tracey took Hermione's hand as though they were lifelong friends. Both girls smiled as the boy from earlier approached them. "Gemma get you all set?"

Hermione nodded. "Thank you for helping me back there."

"Slytherins look after their own." When both girls turned and glared at the Carrows who were laughing in a corner at something a stupidly tall blond boy was saying, the boy in front of them sighed. "Well, we're supposed to look after our own. Unfortunately, some people are stubbornly stuck with how things used to be. Or how their parents want things to be, I guess."

"Warrington!"

The boy looked up. "Yeah?"

The prefect that had helped Hermione—Gemma Fawley—looked exasperated as she sternly examined a list in her hand. "You seen Malfoy?"

He glanced around the common room in search of the white-blond hair. "I'll go take a look outside and see if he got left behind." He patted Hermione on the shoulder. "Anyone gives you trouble, you let me know, yeah? I'm Cassius. You lot get to your dorms. Big first day tomorrow."

The girls made their way to the dorms, which were down another stretch of hallway and around a
corner, turning left, whereas the boys in their year turned right. Hermione smiled, reaching out to run her fingers over the dark green marble of the walls. Tiny flecks of silver in the stone flickered in the torchlight. Having heard that the Slytherins lived in the dungeons, Hermione had assumed the place would be cold and damp, but it was surprisingly warm and beautiful. When they passed by the window that looked out into the Black Lake, she squinted in an attempt to see into the water, but it was too dark.

Gregory Goyle did not pay attention to where he was going, looking down at his feet instead of up as he walked. When he made a sharp left turn, accidentally following the girls, he bounced off an invisible barrier that flung him backward several feet and knocked him on his arse.

All the witches turned, and when Pansy and Daphne began to laugh, Hermione scowled at them and rushed to help the boy to his feet. "Ignore them," she whispered to him. "Slytherins are supposed to look after their own, I'm told."

He smiled, cheeks red with embarrassment. "Thanks. I'm Greg."

"Hermione."

"Where were you?" Theo Nott asked from over Greg's shoulder. Hermione turned to see Draco Malfoy sauntering up the hallway with a smug grin on his face and his hands in the pockets of his trousers as though he had not a care in the world.

"Making an acquisition," the blond replied. He turned his focus on Hermione and smiled politely. "Are you all right, Hermione? Making friends? No one treating you boorishly?"

She lifted an eyebrow at him. "I'm adjusting."

"Good news," Draco declared. "Well, my job is done for the night."

Greg and Theo followed after him with peculiar expressions. Hermione turned back toward the girls' dormitory to find Tracey waiting for her. "The hell was Malfoy on about?"

Hermione shook her head. "I've no idea."

Pansy and Daphne had been the first in, so they had chosen the beds farthest to one side of the room. It became clear that Hermione would be on the opposite end, with the half-blood witches in the middle. Tracey took the bed between Hermione's and Millie's.

As most of the students brought owls for communication, Hermione was surprised when a furry tail brushed up against her leg as she unpacked her trunk. She looked down and smiled at the long-haired black cat that was rubbing against her ankle. "Hello. Who are you?"

"Brutus," Millie answered, sitting in the middle of her bed, reorganising her bookbag. "I'll teach you a charm that my mum uses to get his hair off of your robes. Little bugger sheds."

Despite being the last through the portrait hole—after saying goodnight to his Aunt Minnie and giving the Fat Lady a proper hello, complete with Sirius Black-style grin and an awkward bow—Harry was the first into the dorm room, having sped past Ron, Neville, Dean, and Seamus. By the time the other boys made it to their shared room, Harry was sticking out from under one of the beds, and the blankets were tangled on another.

"All right, Harry?" Ron asked with a chuckle.
Neville smiled. "He's looking for his dad's bed," he explained. "No one get settled anywhere, because Harry will fight you. His godfather told him that he and his friends carved their names into the posts." Neville's eyes crinkled in amusement as his cousin crawled out from under one four-poster and straight beneath the next. As though trying to help, Max dragged her claws down the low-hanging red curtains of another bed until Neville shooed her away.

Dean approached the bed where his trunk had been deposited. His fingers ran over a scratched name on the back of the post, noting the strangely good penmanship, considering it looked like it had been carved in with a pocket knife. "I found something," he said. "Harry, is your dad named Sirius?"

"Yes!" Harry said, poking his head out from under a bed. "Er . . . I mean, yes and no. I'm looking for one that says James."

Dean and Seamus shared a confused look, but both Ron and Neville shook their heads indicating that now was not the time to get into the family history of Harry Potter. Instead, the other four boys decided to help by looking for the previous four-poster of one James Potter.

"Got it!" Seamus said, high-fiving Harry when he practically collided with him at the foot of the bed nearest the window right beside the one that Dean had claimed. Seamus gladly dragged his trunk across the room so that he and Harry could swap.

"What're you looking for, mate?" Seamus asked Ron as he passed by the bed that the redhead had chosen. "Your dad carve his initials in as well?"

"No," Ron replied, looking concerned as he examined the posts. "Just . . . looking for something else."

"It's the one nearest the loo," Harry said, unpacking his trunk in search of his pyjamas. Looking up, Harry gestured to the bed that Seamus arrived at.

Ron let out a sigh of relief, and Neville awkwardly cleared his throat. Seamus, however, was staring at his new bed as though it might suddenly spring to life and try to eat him. "The hell's wrong with it?" he eventually demanded, aiming his wand at the mattress.

"Nothing," Ron assured him. "I just . . . I don't want to sleep in it."

"It belonged to someone else," Harry answered curtly. Hearing his own words, he sighed and glanced up, making eye contact with Seamus. "It's fine. Not cursed or anything. And we won't hold it against you."

"If you're worried, I'll trade you," Neville offered kindly. "I don't care much where I sleep."

"Nah," Seamus said with a shrug. "I'm good here."

"Hey Nev," Harry said, "are you sending a letter to your gran tonight? You think your owl would be willing to make an extra stop?"

Glancing up from over his trunk, where he was digging out his brand new Remembrall, Neville shrugged. "Don't see why not. If you want, we could just put our letters together seeing that your grandmother and my gran are probably going to be meeting with the aunts. They're likely placing bets on where we all end up." He snorted a bit under his breath and added, "My sorting is going to surprise the hell out of some of them."

Harry finished digging through his trunk to find a roll of parchment that his grandmother had given him specifically for letters, saying that there was no reason to avoid writing home, since the
monogrammed stationery would not be allowed for school work. "Actually, I need to write to Sirius."

Neville furrowed his brow. "Won't your grandmother just tell him?"

Sighing, Harry ran a hand through his hair. "I doubt he'll be at home. You know my dad, Nev. He's been dreading me going to Hogwarts. My guess is that he'll end up at the Leaky."

"He might've followed you up here," Neville suggested with a laugh. "He could be just down the way in Hogsmeade staying at the Three Broomsticks."

"Didn't he date Rosmerta for a bit last year?" Ron asked, looking up. "Fred and George wrote home whinging about it."

"Who's Rosmerta?" Seamus asked.

"She runs an inn down in the local village," Harry said. "She's nice. Makes a wicked cottage pie. They weren't exclusive, and he started seeing his current boyfriend six months back or so. He thinks he's been keeping it quiet." He chuckled, rolling his eyes. "Parents are idiots."

"Still don't know how your godfather went from Rosmerta to another bloke," Ron said, shaking his head. "Fred and George say she's fit."

Shrugging, Harry closed his trunk, paper and quill in hand. "Maybe he thinks his new boyfriend is fit. I'd rather not think about my dad snogging anyone, thanks."

Seamus smirked, looking over his shoulder from where he was hanging up a Falmouth Falcons poster next to his bed. "I doubt they're just snogging, mate."

Harry cringed, yanked off one of his socks, and hurled it across the room at Seamus. "Shut your gob, Finnegan," he said with a laugh. "And get that poster down unless you want to embarrass yourself. Falcons are almost dead last this year."

Seamus cast a glance toward Ron, who was tugging a faded Chudley Cannons t-shirt over his head. "Not dead last, though, are they?"

Neville and Dean settled into bed first, though Ron was the first asleep. Seamus stayed up, flipping through a copy of *Quidditch Monthly*, and Harry did his best to write out two letters as quickly as possible. Once the one to his grandmother was finished, he folded it neatly and set it aside before pulling out a new piece of paper.

*Dad,*

*It's brilliant. Hogwarts is huge! I'm not sure if you'll be at home when you get this, or if Grandmother will have already told you, but I'm in Gryffindor. I know you're happy about that, but don't rub it in anyone's face too much. I honestly didn't know where I wanted to go, but there was this girl on the train. One of Uncle Ted's Muggle-borns. We got to talking about where we would all go, and I know you and Grandmother wanted me to help look after the Muggle-borns. I told Hermione (that's her name, by the way) that if she was really worried, I would go with her to whatever House, even if she got into Slytherin.*

*She got in. Can you believe it? I don't think Slytherin's ever had a Muggle-born, have they? Anyway, I got to the Sorting Hat and I told it to put me in Slytherin, but it didn't listen. Not sure why. I'm a little worried about Hermione, but I asked Draco to keep an eye on her. Oh, can you do me a favour? I left behind a bunch of my chocolate cards, and I want to keep the collection together.*
Could you send it to me?

Me and Neville are in Gryffindor Tower now. I found Dad's old bed. It's mine. It feels kind of weird, even though I've technically had his old room back home since forever. Being at Hogwarts though, it's different. Did it feel different to you?

Ron made a fuss about maybe ending up with Pettigrew's bed, but my new friend Seamus took it. Nev's got Remus's, I think. One of the Muggle-borns (his name is Dean) got your old bed.

Please reassure Grandmother that I'm fine. There weren't any problems with Dumbledore, and Hagrid didn't say anything to me, but I did kind of go out of my way to avoid him, just in case. Dumbledore did notice me, though, and I think he was talking about me to one of the teachers. Not Snape. Another one. Aunt Minnie wasn't pleased with Dumbledore for some reason. She and Professor Snape pretty much walked us all out before Dumbledore dismissed us.

I better go. Lots to do tomorrow. I miss you already.

Harry.

PS. Max says hi.

Chapter End Notes

I hope everyone had a wonderful holiday. This is the last chapter that is finished for the rest of 2016. I really hope you enjoy it. I'll see you all in 2017!
The first of September had always been emotional for Dorea. Long ago, when she was the one going to Hogwarts, it was a sudden rush of adventure and freedom the likes of which she knew she could never find at home, locked in a manor with Pollux and even Cassie lurking around. When it was time to send James away, it was a tug at her heartstrings that she had been told to anticipate, though she could not have imagined the depth of sadness that came with missing a child. It only increased as the years went on, and she began sending not one but two sons off to school. Doubling the number of children, for better or worse, doubled the ache in her heart at being parted from them for so long. Reunions were bittersweet; James and Sirius always returned with wonderful stories, brilliant smiles, and an eagerness to return to school that she refused to take personally.

Harry leaving, however, was a type of pain that was both new and familiar all at once. Nostalgia of excitement that comes from watching a child grow right before your eyes, but there was also a lingering fear that she would not let him see. Typical fears that he would get hurt playing Quidditch, that he would get into trouble with classmates and professors, that he would grow to love school and new friends more than he loved home and family. And a fear that she had only grown familiar with since waking several years ago. Fear that came from losing a child—from losing everything.

Most of the staff, she knew, could be trusted to look after him. Minerva was always there, which eased Dorea's anxious heart. Snape, too, had proven loyal to the coven. Though Sirius still hated the man, and Dorea also understood the role he played in James's death, she also was logical enough to know that his remorse was useful to her. It helped that, over the years, she had Minerva dutifully remind the man of Harry's striking resemblance to Lily—even if it was only her eyes. Dorea was not above using the man's own guilt to shape him into a willing protector of her grandson. Manipulative, yes, but at least she had given the man a genuine choice, unlike what Dumbledore had done.

Still, while Dumbledore was no longer a pressing threat, Dorea disliked the way that the school was managed. Most of the staff was competent, but Hagrid's blind loyalty to Dumbledore had prevented the poor man from being exonerated from the crimes of his youth. With memories from the witches in the coven, Dorea was quite certain that they could prove Hagrid's innocence in the associated murder of a classmate, but when approached, the gamekeeper of Hogwarts insisted that if Dumbledore could not have helped him, no one could. Questioning the old wizard's capabilities was apparently an affront to the kindness that he had extended to Hagrid, and so the man would not hear of the witches meddling. It was that type of attitude that worried her. Too many people in the Wizarding world had such faith in Dumbledore. Similarly, she knew that others had the same type of faith in Tom Riddle and his eventual return.

A return she knew was very possible considering the daft fool had created a bloody *Horcrux*.

"A Gryffindor," Augusta said proudly as she looked over the letter that arrived that morning. "Can you believe it? Gryffindor is very lucky to have a wizard like my Neville. His memory can be a bit behind—the dear left an entire set of robes sitting on his bed, do you know?—but he has his father's good heart."

Dorea smiled at her friend. Harry had sent a letter along with Neville's. She spotted an additional envelope in the bird's clutches as it flew off into the distance, very likely in search of Sirius. While Dorea had, of course, been hoping for Slytherin, she could not deny that Harry was a Gryffindor at
heart and, try as she might, there was too much of his parents and Sirius in him to ever be a proper little snake. Gryffindor was perfect for her boy.

Draco, on the other hand, had predictably ended up in Slytherin, and Narcissa was wearing robes with a silk emerald lining—her own personal way of showing how proud she was of her son. Her son who, by the sound of Harry's letter, had somehow tricked his cousin out of his Chocolate Frog cards. Though Harry did not say such things, all the witches knew how the boy's coveted their little collections and argued over who had the best ones. She recalled Sirius asking Harry if he needed a special case to pack his set, only to be vehemently denied. Harry did not trust his cards to not be stolen from his dormitory at Hogwarts. That he had asked her to see about sending them along to the school spoke volumes.

"Thank you, Dobby," Dorea said when the elf refilled her tea. "How did the Muggle-borns do this year?"

Nymphadora grinned, her hair shifting from light blue to pink as she licked scone crumbs from her bottom lip before swallowing. "Adorable lot of firsties."

"Very bright," Andromeda added. "The Granger girl, and both the Thomas and Malone boy in particular. Most of the boys are often overly excited about Quidditch, some girls as well, but those two seemed particularly interested in charms. The witch has already read through the entire first year curriculum, and shows an interest in almost everything with the exception of Quidditch, actually."

"Did you say Granger?" Jacintha Warrington asked, looking up from several parchments in her hand. Most were notes that she needed to go over with Dorea in regards to St. Mungo's funding, as well as the sponsorship of a newly graduated Hogwarts student interested in a Charms Mastery. However, at the top of her stack of neatly assembled papers was a letter. "Cassius mentioned an altercation with a girl named Granger. He says that Slytherins are still having issues with blood purity. The Carrow girls, both the Pucey and Flint boys, and—"


Lucretia frowned. "I would expect nothing better from a Rowle, if he's anything like his father. I went to school with Guntar. Quite shocked that the man wasn't a Death Eater."

"The Rowles are known for having reckless tempers. I doubt Tom Riddle would have wanted to risk such a follower," Narcissa chimed in. "Then again . . ." she trailed off with a heavy sigh, sharing a look with her sister.

Jacintha nodded gravely. "According to Cassius, the Carrow girls were particularly cruel and even went so far as to assault the Granger girl."

Cedrella looked up from her needlepoint, pulling her brows together in confusion. "They attacked a first year in the Great Hall? Why didn't Minerva tell us any of this?"

Andromeda looked down at a list in her hand. "Because Minerva did not see it. Hermione Granger was sorted into Slytherin."

Several heads shot up in curiosity. A Muggle-born sorted into Slytherin? Several of the older witches grinned at the implications. The girl must have been incredibly powerful, bright, or cunning. Ambitious, certainly, to have ended up in Slytherin.

Lucretia was positively beaming with excitement. "Tell me everything about this girl," she demanded
of Andromeda and Mary Cattermole. "Do you have any idea the reception we would garner if we brought in not only a Muggle-born as we'd said to do, but one that happened to end up in Slytherin? If she's a good fit, all the better."

"I'll speak with Ted and Remus," Andromeda assured them all.

"Perhaps we could arrange a dinner with her parents when the children all come home for Christmas," Mary suggested.

"A Yule celebration involving the Muggle-borns in the programme could fit with our schedule," Callidora said, looking to Dorea. "You were wanting to get more involved with the holidays. And since the Board of Governors is not yet willing to fully implement a Wizarding culture curriculum at Hogwarts, this could be a good chance to give the Muggle-borns an opportunity to learn more of our history and traditions."

Dorea nodded thoughtfully. "Mary, would you and Andromeda work out communicating with the parents of the children? I don't want to overstep and ruin holiday plans they might have already had arranged. In the meantime, do we all agree on this?"

Unanimously, hands were raised. Dorea glanced down at her checklist. "I'll send a letter to those who couldn't come today. I'm sure Minerva would love to hear that we've plans to undermine the Board's decision to postpone the cultures class."

"Dumbledore's decision, you mean," Lucretia said haughtily. "I put a great deal of work into that presentation, and he spun it all around, trying to imply that I was doing the opposite of integrating Muggle-borns by teaching them our traditions. He all but said that I was using our culture to indoctrinate Muggle-borns, make them believe their own history unworthy of ours."

Callidora shook her head. "His strings have been cut, and all the power he has in the world now lies in that castle since he's no longer being called upon by the Wizengamot. He's doing it out of spite. To prove that he still has a say in how the school is run. Augusta is on the Board as of next term, and then we'll have enough leverage to sway the votes to our side."

Dobby came in to clear the plates, and all the witches stood to have a walk around the garden. Various areas had been properly landscaped over the years to provide ritual practice spaces, though the majority of the garden behind Potter Manor remained as it always was, a lush orchard and enough of a cleared area for children to play Quidditch when the weather was permitting. Pomona Sprout had visited a few times with Camilla to help Enid plant herbs and flora that would be beneficial for the coven, both for rituals and brewing. Lilacs and lilies encircled a private area in the orchard that had been cleared away for a purposeful ritual space. Cassie had been more than willing to help landscape the area for the purpose of sex magic. Even a year after the last ritual, the grass was greener, the flowers brighter, and the trees around the circle bore more fruit than all the others. Dorea did not envy the witches that had the obligation of informing the Muggle-born parents about this aspect of their culture.

Her amusement faded as the women silently made their way across the grounds to an old fire pit. Dark rocks encircled an area that was empty of all growth. Grass, flowers, and even weeds refused to grow near the pit. It was just as well. The destitute space helped to keep the children away from it. Not that wards hadn't been securely placed around the area. It helped that the parents had all firmly educated the children on the sanctity of ritual spaces and how they were not to be wandered into under any circumstances. While the fire pit was not an active ritual space, it held a piece of magic that needed to be secured.

Once through the wards surrounding the pit, Dorea waved her wand over the dirt in complicated
movements, watching as the ground broke, unearthing a deeply buried box. Everyone stood quiet as Camilla stepped forward, beckoning Nymphadora to her. The recent graduate was now a proper Curse-Breaking apprentice mentoring under Camilla. She was already showing promise in the creation of curses, though her breaking had quite a bit of work to do. It took a series of complicated spells for Camilla and Nymphadora to unlock the box, and once it was open, Dorea turned away in disgust.

While the coven worked tirelessly to build a good reputation in the Wizarding world, integrate Muggle-borns, and reconstruct much of the destruction that had come about due to war, their primary goal was always to be one step ahead of Tom Riddle. Unfortunately, that proved more difficult than they had imagined. When Cassie showed up years earlier with a locket and a story from a house-elf, the coven was floored. They did not know what the locket was, but the Dark Magic within it was positively sickening. It took a full year of research on Belina's part to realise that the locket had once belonged to Salazar Slytherin.

And it was also a Horcrux.

Its destruction was priority number one, but basilisk venom was all but impossible to find, and asking questions about such an ingredient could get a person arrested. Even though the coven had certain immunities in their world, they did not want people to know their business. Fiendfyre seemed the only other option, and it took another full year of practice for Dorea to be able to properly control it. The locket had stirred violently on the ground until the other witches used their magic to press it into the earth as a flame the size of a small dragon devoured it whole. The images that burst out of the Horcrux had been devastating but thankfully short-lived.

"Still nothing," Camilla said with a sigh of relief. "Completely empty, though the residual magic sticks to it like a cancerous growth."

"As long as it's not actually growing," Dorea commented.

Discovering what the locket had been was a stroke of luck; researching how to destroy it was more taxing. Unfortunately, the only other person they could find that had created a Horcrux was Herpo the Foul. There was no information on what became of the man, and therefore, zero information on what happened to a Horcrux once it was destroyed. The bit of soul was long gone, but as Camilla said, the locket was stained forever. It was not as though they could just toss it in the bin with the rubbish.

"Cover it back up and bury it once more. We'll check again in another year. What's the latest on locating Tom Riddle?"

Mary frowned. "It's not as easy as it is in the Wizarding world. Family names are trackable. Muggles don't always . . . There are millions of people in London alone. What few censuses I was able to get my hands on didn't have much information. There are hundreds of families called Riddle that I've found. We're narrowing them down one by one, but . . ."

"Could we ask Thoros for more information?" Camilla wondered.

Jacintha shook her head. "He knows nothing more. Tom Riddle kept his family situation close to his chest. He rarely left Hogwarts, he never spoke of his parents, and Thoros believes he might have even masked his natural accent." When a few of the witches looked at her, she lifted her brows. "What? Thoros has taken me to dinner twice. He is a very good conversationalist."

Dorea smiled pleasantly. "I wish you both the best."
"Dumbledore would know," Cedrella said. "He would know something."

"He will not tell us," Callidora responded. "It's time to reach out to others who knew Riddle. Belina mentioned that her uncle might be able to find a list of clients that Tom Riddle interacted with while he worked there. And we do have a small list of his followers."

Narcissa scoffed. "Those who would tell us anything know nothing. The ones in Azkaban would spit in our faces."

"Did he interact with anyone else at Hogwarts that we could speak with?" Cedrella asked. "I know we've been over this a thousand times, but he had to have had other friends or—"

"Horace!"

Dorea jumped, spinning around to see her sister approaching the circle. "Wear a bell!"

Cassie grinned. "Oh, did I miss the annual Let's All Look at the Horcrux? Shame. There's nothing prettier than the melted bits of a washed up Dark Lord's soul."

"Where have you been?" Dorea asked, narrowing her eyes.

Cassie blinked innocently. "Not Hogsmeade."

Groaning, Dorea pinched the bridge of her nose. "I don't want to know." Before Cassie could offer details against her wishes, Dorea asked, "What did you say? Horace?"

"Slughorn," Cassie said with a smile. "If Tom Riddle was as bright as everyone recalls . . ."

At Cassie's prompting, Lucretia gasped. "Of course. He was in the Slug Club! I remember. I'd not been in myself, but I dated a fellow who complained about Slughorn not offering equal time and introductions to Ministry officials at his little parties. Tom Riddle must have been his little darling."

"I'll reach out to him," Cassie offered. "We'll invite him to tea one evening. Dinner with the Black Coven. He might just wet himself from excitement."

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**Leaky Cauldron**

"You're a bit pathetic," Theia affectionately pushed hair away from Sirius's face. His cheek was pressed against the counter and was very likely stuck to it by now as she had not had a chance to clean up in the past hour. Who knew what kind of spills Sirius had put his face in?

"This should cheer you up, love," she said, waving an envelope in front of his face. "It's from Hogwarts."

Sirius sat up quickly, peeling his cheek from the counter like a plaster that ripped. He let out a brief yelp of pain before snatching the letter from her hands and tearing it open. A grin lit up his entire face. "Gryffindor!" Standing up, Sirius turned around and shouted. "Drinks on me! My son got into Gryffindor!"

The patrons of the bar all cheered along, lifting their soon-to-be-refilled mugs in toast to Harry Potter, the Boy Who Bought Them Beer. Sitting back down, Sirius read over each and every word multiple times, snorting when he got to the end. "Max says hi, indeed." Looking up as Theia pressed a glass in his hand, he sighed. "I miss him."
"You're a good dad," she said. "At least for one who drinks at half eleven."

"Thought you'd be here."

Sirius turned around at the familiar voice, smiling as Nymphadora took the seat beside him. Passing his glass over to her, he teasingly asked, "Old enough to drink yet?"

Laughing, Tonks swallowed the rest of the firewhisky. She made a face and coughed, her hair briefly turning a brighter shade of purple than the lilac colour she walked in with. "Merlin, I thought it would be something a bit tamer this early. Hell, I still have to go to work after this."

Theia smiled, pulling the glass away and returning with a refill for Sirius and a cup of coffee for Nymphadora. "How was the meeting?"

"All is well. I'm sure you'll get a list of things that need doing soon enough. With all the little ones off to Hogwarts, time has opened up." Nymphadora smiled sadly when Sirius made a pathetic whining noise. "Poor thing. Did you get a letter?" He lifted it up. "Aren't you the saddest happiest Gryffindor papa the world has ever seen?"

He grinned at that, but then asked, "Any idea why he'd want me to send him his Chocolate Frog cards?" When she shrugged, he sat up. "Why're you wearing perfume? Hot date?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Finishing the coffee, she set the cup back on the counter, directing a grateful look at Theia. "A certain fellow Curse-Breaker is in town for a delivery at the bank, and he says he'll squeeze me into his tight schedule." She waggled her eyebrows, causing Sirius to groan in disgust. Theia laughed at his reaction. "Grow up. Or get a shag of your own. And don't say a word to my mother. She'll start meddling."

"Cheeky thing," Sirius said as he and Theia watched Nymphadora exit through the back, likely on her way to Gringotts to meet up with her not-so-secret-secret boyfriend.

"You should take her advice, if you ask me."

Narrowing his eyes at his cousin, Sirius scoffed. "And how would I go about doing that? Honestly, I'm not the slag that you all seem to think I am. I may be drinking my breakfast, but I don't have plans to wander around Knockturn in search of company."

"Home?" Sirius asked. "*Home* home? For good?"

Hammond nodded. "Experimental trials are officially approved through St. Mungo's. I can finally start improving the Dragon Pox cure and work on a better version of the vaccination for children. I"
have a meeting with the Head of Hospital tomorrow morning, but I thought I could check in with your mother and—mph!"

A few patrons laughed, some whistled, but most rolled their eyes when Sirius pinned the poor man up against the door, shutting it in the process, and kissed him. The couple ignored everyone else, right up until Theia threw a key at the back of Sirius's head and shouted, "Get a room!"

"Don't mind if I do," Sirius said, picking the key up from the floor and practically dragging Hammond up the stairs.

It had been a chance reunion several years earlier when Sirius Black met Hammond Dillonsby for the first time since Hogwarts. Sirius and Harry had planned on taking a trip up to Hogsmeade but were delayed due to Harry catching a cold. Hammond met with Dorea on the one year anniversary of her recovery to look over her health. Finding that her blood supply was actually replenishing itself with equal parts dragon blood and human, she agreed to help him with his research into his usage of dragon blood for vaccination purposes. Sirius, ever the worrisome parent, had overheard that his mother's Healer would be in the house, and so he decided to interrupt their meeting to ask the man to look over Harry. A quick dose of Pepper-Up was, of course, all that was needed, but Sirius appreciated his anxiety being calmed regardless.

Hammond, emboldened by a recent breakup, asked Sirius to dinner only to discover that the other man was in a relationship with a witch in Hogsmeade. Still, the two remained friendly, and Sirius was more than happy to help invest in Hammond's research. The man had saved Dorea's life, after all. A month after Sirius's relationship with Rosmerta met an amicable end, he took a chance and owled Hammond.

"Seen my mother yet?" Sirius asked, plucking a cigarette from Hammond's lips and bringing it to his own. The room had been too hot upon entering, so they had cracked a window, letting the chill of the autumn air move in. Sirius exhaled, watching as the smoke and the heat from his breath mingled against the light.

Hammond stretched his arms overhead, smiling when Sirius moved closer to snuggle. Reaching for his wand on the nightstand, Hammond closed the window, not in the mood to freeze once the heat of their reunion faded, leaving the pair naked and cold. "Came straight here," he mumbled tiredly. "Once I dropped my things off at the new flat, that is. I sent a few owls as well. One to my mother, letting her know that I arrived safely, one to the Romanian Dragon Reserve, thanking them for their assistance since my ex decided to be a vengeful sod and cut off access to their dragons—"

"Romania's closer," Sirius interrupted, handing the cigarette back.

"And I owled your mother. I'm meeting her for dinner, and I promised that I would return her son at a timely hour."

Chuckling, Sirius ran a hand through his hair as he sat up. "I hope you didn't make any promises regarding the state of my return. I'm quite dishevelled." Standing up, Sirius shivered in the lingering cold, cursing himself for having left the window open for too long. "You could have done a Warming Charm when you closed the window." Hammond chuckled in amusement, and Sirius smirked. "Lazy arse." Once his trousers were on, he began attempting to untangle the mess of robes on the floor.

When a letter fell out of Sirius's pocket, Hammond smiled, assuming who the sender was. "How was the Sorting?"
Sirius beamed excitedly. "Gryffindor. As though he'd have gone anywhere else. 'Course, Theia told him that he could ask the hat to place him wherever he wanted. I know he was thinking about Slytherin because of Mum. He tried not to let me know about it, but I know he'd been thinking."

Hammond chuckled, catching his trousers when Sirius tossed them at him. "I heard a rumour like that when I was in school. I think the Sorting Hat does whatever it pleases."

"Well, it can keep doing that because it put my kid in Gryffindor. I ought to send the hat a bottle of Ogden's finest." Sirius realised then that he was smiling. He let out a soft laugh. When Hammond gave him a curious glance, he explained, "I think I just realised the benefits of having a child who's not going to be underfoot all the time. You sure you don't want to move in?"

"With you?" Hammond laughed. "Merlin, no. You don't have a proper job other than fixing those Muggle things. I'd never get any work done because you're a pest."

"I'm glad you're here," Sirius said, walking to the other side of the bed where Hammond was lacing up his trainers. The man smiled, looking up just as Sirius leant down to kiss him. "Now I don't have to bother going all the way to St. Mungo's when I need a Healer. You're awfully convenient, you know."

Snorting, Hammond rolled his eyes. "And you're just awful."
Chapter Summary

Thank you to everyone who is still reading this. I did not expect to be gone from the story for so long. For those who aren't aware, I've been dealing with family things and a new job that is taking up a lot of my time. I wanted to get a few chapters written before I started posting again, but it's been a year since my last update, and I honestly think that I needed to post it just as much as maybe some of you needed to read it. Hopefully, it lives up to the wait. Thanks for being patient with me ♥

September 2nd, 1991
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

The first years were caught in a whirlwind of excitement during their first few days at Hogwarts, though it was also an overload of information at the same time. Hermione, however, readily absorbed every word that was given and each moment like a sponge.

She rigorously took notes in every class, fumbling only briefly over the use of a quill since they had been allowed to use pens during her summer classes in the Muggle-born Overview Programme. Thankfully, both Tracey and Millie were fast becoming loyal friends—Millie offering to trade for one of Hermione's Pheasant quills in exchange for a spare Raven one she had in her bag. Hermione found a better ease of use with the short, black quill, it fitting nicely in her hand compared to the one she had brought with her. When she watched her new friend throw the Pheasant feather in the bin, Hermione smiled.

Astronomy was lovely, and Millie was insistent of the importance of paying attention because the Black Coven had a special relationship with the stars. History of Magic was a bit of a disappointment. Hermione adored the historic tales she had read about in her books, but Professor Binns monotone voice had even her struggling to stay awake during the lessons—but she did. Defence Against the Dark Arts did not live up to the expectations either. Mr Lupin had offered her and the other Muggle-borns more information in casual conversation over their classes during the summer than Professor Quirrell provided during actual lessons. The smell of the classroom, too, was atrocious.

Herbology, thankfully, was entertaining and much more hands-on right from the beginning than most of the other classes, and Professor Sprout was a kind and energetic woman. Hermione accompanied Millie to greet the woman personally after class. Apparently, she was a close friend of one of the Black Coven witches, and Millie was determined to cultivate as many potential connections as possible. Hermione gladly went with her, eager to make connections in the Wizarding world as well, especially since she had been unable to rid herself of the worry that people might assume she would use Harry's friendship as a stepping stone on her own path.

Harry, however, was rarely seen since the Gryffindors and Slytherins did not have many shared classes. They attended Transfiguration together, but Hermione and her friends had arrived early, ready to begin the day. Harry, on the other hand, showed up with a handful of misfits in red and gold ties, complaining that Peeves the Poltergeist had locked them in an empty classroom on the second floor.
Professor McGonagall immediately dissuaded any rumours that she gave her own House preference by looking at the boys disappointedly and taking five points for tardiness from the entire group. With a tight schedule, plenty of homework, and being separated by their Houses, Hermione only ever saw Harry, Neville, and her friends from the Muggle-born Overview Programme in passing or by making awkward eye contact across the tables during meals.

In Slytherin House, Hermione had few female friends. Most of the girls in her house were either snide because of her status as a Muggleborn or just had little interest in befriending her. Still, Millie and Tracey made up for all of that. Other than Millie and Tracey, few girls were openly friendly. Daphne and Pansy remained attached at the hip, and any older witches had little interest in befriending first years.

The boys in her own year, however, were mostly kind.

Draco Malfoy loved attention and praise, but he rarely stepped out to assist anyone other than himself. Hermione had proven to be the exception on several occasions when some of their older classmates had hissed that people like her were unwanted and did not belong. Draco's words had been scathing. He clearly had little care for handing out insults, even to older students, protected as he was by his wealth and family privilege.

Theo Nott was quiet, polite, and held the door open for witch and wizard alike. He was also exceedingly smart, and Hermione had already begun probing him as to what elective classes he was interested in taking beginning their third year.

Blaise Zabini had all of Draco's ego with about twice as much pomp and circumstance. Despite being only eleven, he was a born and bred flirt and was one of very few Slytherins that mingled openly outside of their own house.

Greg Goyle was timid and sweet, and when he was not with Draco and Theo, he seemed to prefer the company of Hermione and Millie—though he quietly admitted that Tracey scared the shit out of him. Most were content to ignore Greg with the exception of Vincent Crabbe, a boy that Hermione had yet to see smile since arriving at Hogwarts. While he would only give Draco and Theo dirty looks when their backs were turned, he began openly threatening Greg—and Hermione could not help but wonder if being friends with her made it worse.

"I heard him say my name," she whispered to Greg on Friday as they took their seats in Potions. There were only two seats to each table, so Hermione opted to sit with Greg since Millie and Tracey had one another, and Greg's only other friends—Draco and Theo—had already sat together. "Is he bullying you for being friends with me?"

Greg sighed as he sat down, opening up his Potions book and setting it out on the table. Hermione's nose twitched at the doodles he had drawn in the margins, but she said nothing. "He hates me. We were friends a really long time ago. Then my dad and his dad had a falling out. I hadn't even seen him in years, not until King's Cross."

"What did your fathers fight about?" Hermione asked tentatively as she removed her own books, stacking them to the side and arranging her Raven quill and parchment.

Greg looked down. "We don't talk about it."

Blaise Zabini was stuck sitting beside Crabbe, but the Italian boy ignored him, preferring to engage in conversation with Pansy and Daphne at the table behind him. Crabbe, however, was glaring hatefully at Draco from behind. Hermione narrowed her own eyes, shocked as she caught sight of a wand in his hand beneath the table. Her mouth fell open as she wondered if Crabbe would dare to
hex another student—another Slytherin—unprovoked and in a classroom. She was about to say something, hearing Cassius's voice in her head saying: *Slytherins protect their own*, when Professor Snape entered the room, black robes swirling around him as though he had appeared in a puff of dark smoke. Blinking, Hermione chanced a glance back at Crabbe and noticed that he had stowed his wand away.

Professor Snape went through a very quick roll call, his tone taking on a note of irritation when he landed on Neville's and then Harry's names, both absent. Dean wasn't in class either.

Turning around in her seat when Professor Snape went to the blackboard at the front of the room to write instructions, Hermione looked at Ron, who was sitting next to another Gryffindor she had yet to meet, and mouthed "Where are they?"

Ron gave her a blank stare, shrugged his shoulders before turning his focus back to his friend, and promptly ignored any potential follow-up questions she might have had.

Honestly, if Harry, Neville, and Dean were still having trouble with Peeves, Hermione was going to see if she could have the Bloody Baron intervene on their behalf. While the Slytherin Ghost was not one to mingle with the students of other Houses, he was known to help out Slytherins here and there, and had, in fact, demanded that Peeves leave Hermione and Tracey alone when the Poltergeist had pelted them with bits of chalk.

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Hogwarts, while the most amazing place Harry had ever seen, was not exactly what he had expected. He had been prepared for the attention due to his fame—because of both his connection to the Black Coven and his own personal history—so when people stared in the corridors and during the first few days of classes, he promptly ignored them, knowing that it would eventually blow over. However, what he was not prepared for was his inability to begin his life at Hogwarts smoothly. Growing up on stories told to him by Sirius, Remus, and Ted, Harry fully expected to walk into Hogwarts and have the most amazing adventures on day one. What he got on day one instead, was tricked by Peeves, five points taken for tardiness—by his own beloved Aunt Minnie, no less—and he was already on Filch's bad side because the caretaker's horrible cat had decided to threateningly hiss in Harry's direction, prompting Max to attack. Harry's familiar was twice the size of the little red-eyed feline, and Mrs Norris had ended up being shoved over the edge of one of the staircases by Max. Thankfully, they had only been half a flight up from the ground floor—and cats did always land on their feet, right?—but Filch had taken the assault very personally, and Harry was certain the man was out to destroy him.

At least classes were mostly fun.

History of Magic was, of course, a terrible bore. Harry had fallen asleep during the first lesson, but thankfully Ron's snoring had woken him before he had been caught dosing by Professor Binns. Ron, however, had been caught, which earned the entire class a lecture that, twenty minutes in, had even Neville dozing off. Thankfully, Charms and Transfiguration were both exciting—even if Harry was just a little sore about losing those five points. All of the students, purebloods who had grown up around magic included, were all thrilled to begin really using magic with their new wands since they had not been allowed to before going to Hogwarts.

Harry was thrilled to see that his wand worked so well for him; he had worried whether his wand would be inferior, not having been made by Ollivander. However, just as his Aunt Belina had predicted, the wand channelled Harry's magic fluidly, like a river cut through a canyon. The only time the wand misbehaved, was in Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Professor Quirrell was an odd sort. He stuttered and stammered and giggled when he was nervous—
which was often. His classroom smelled like garlic, and Fred and George told Harry that they were
sure he stuffed his turban with garlic, as well, to ward of vampires. Harry refused to get close enough
for a proper sniff. The classroom alone was pungent enough for him. He had been eager on day one
to rush into Defence with his wand brandished, ready to learn how to fight Dark wizards as his
parents had done during the first war. Instead, he and the others were given tales about how
Professor Quirrell once helped an African prince rid himself of a troublesome zombie. Harry doubted
very much that such an event had ever happened, especially since the man began sweating halfway
through the story.

Despite being in his pocket, useless during lectures, Harry's wand had begun emitting a strange noise
during Defence that he had never heard before. What was even stranger was that it seemed only
Harry could hear it. The first time it had happened, he had quietly asked Dean, who had been sitting
next to him, whether he had heard anything. His friend had looked at him oddly and suggested that
Harry have his ears checked by the school mediwitch. After that, Harry had gone about his business,
ignoring the noise and Dean's advice, until Friday morning when one of the staircases decided to get
huffy with them and shift on their way to class.

"Oh come on!" Harry complained loudly.

Neville sighed and leant against the railing. "Looks like we're out more points. Professor Snape will
take more than Aunt Minnie, I'd wager."

"Lads," Dean said, nudging Harry in the shoulder. "Look where the staircase is taking us."

Turning his attention just as the staircase locked in place, Harry took a breath. "Dumbledore said
we're not supposed to be here." He could hear his grandmother's stern voice, warning him away
from potential danger, but he had also been raised by Sirius Black, and mischief ran in Harry's blood
just as strongly as magic. "Let's check it out."

"If you get us killed, Harry, my gran will murder us," Neville said as Harry gripped his wand, ready
for danger even though the only defensive spells he knew had been ones he'd read in his textbooks,
and he was pretty sure he wasn't pronouncing some of them correctly.

"Come on, Nev, where's your sense of adven—Ah!" Harry yelped, dropping his wand when the
thing began whistling so loudly that he was sure his eardrum had been pierced.

Dean, likely in an attempt to help, smacked Harry's arm, knocking the wand from his hand. Still, the
noise persisted. Grabbing the wand from the floor, Harry took several steps back toward the
staircase, and the noise went away.

"What is it?" Neville asked, looking slightly panicked.

"My wand keeps making noise."

"I didn't hear anything," Neville looked to Dean for confirmation.

"It happened in Defence," Dean said. "I didn't hear it then either."

"Well, I heard it," Harry said defensively.

"We didn't say that you didn't." Neville patted him on the shoulder consolingly.

Dean snorted. "Yeah, we're just maybe thinking it a bit."

"Piss off," Harry muttered, looking angrily at his wand like it had betrayed him. Not for the first time,
he wondered if maybe Sirius—or more likely one of the Weasley twins—had done something to it for a prank.

Looking suddenly anxious, Neville whispered, "Harry, do you think it might have something to do with . . . you know . . . the thing?"

"What thing?" Dean asked.

Pinning Neville with a look, Harry said, "The thing we don't talk about. I don't know, Nev, because my life isn't complicated enough, now I have to worry about my wand bloody chirping at me, and maybe it has something to do with—Ah!"

Dean jumped, brandishing his own wand as he spun around, likely looking for an attacker. "What happened?"

"It chirped!" Harry said, glaring at his wand in offence. "Or . . . I don't know how to describe it. It's just loud."

Neville raised his brows with an expression of concern. "I didn't—"

"I know you didn't," Harry snapped, annoyed that he seemed to be the only one that could hear it. "But it's happening."

"Everything all-all-all right up here?"

Neville let out a sharp yelp of startled fright.

Awkwardly, stowing his wand behind his back as though it were some illegal thing he had smuggled into the school, Harry spun around to face Professor Quirrell. He was beginning to think that he might have some latent allergy to the smell of garlic. Anytime the man was anywhere near him, Harry got a headache. He tried not to wonder why the pain was localised in his scar, and he did his best not to flinch because Neville had begun paying more attention whenever Harry touched the bloody thing. He loved his cousin and best friend, but was absolutely certain that he would be having a full diagnostic run by the coven when he got home for Christmas hols—that is, if Neville hadn't already written to his grandmother about it.

"We're fine, Professor," Harry said, forcing a polite smile. It was one he usually reserved for his grandmother whenever he got caught doing something he knew he shouldn't have. It never worked on her—or his Aunt Minnie—but he was trying it out on every other authority figure in the castle. So far, Professor Sprout and Flitwick were perfectly charmed, as was the Fat Lady and the Head Girl. Filch, however, was decidedly not a fan.

Professor Quirrell did not look impressed either. Rather, he looked perplexed. And maybe a little bit nauseated. "Lost, are we? Y-You're not supposed to be up-up-up here, boys."

Pointing over the professor's shoulder, Neville defended them by saying, "The staircase shifted on us and we got stuck, sir."

"Yeah," Dean agreed, finally lowering his wand. Harry noticed that Professor Quirrell's shoulders seemed to relax at that. "There's no other way back down, and we didn't want to go further, seeing as Dumbledore said it was forbidden."

Harry did his best not to roll his eyes. He wanted to know what the hell Dumbledore was hiding up here, but wasn't about to admit that in front of a professor.
"Best be off then," Quirrell said, stepping aside to reveal that the staircase behind them had adjusted enough to connect to another below, allowing them passage down. "You'll n-not want to be late for P-Potions."

The boys all grumbled as they walked toward the staircase. Harry kept his eyes on the ground as he passed by Quirrell, determined not to breathe in the hopes of forcing the pain in his head to go away. Just as he was about to ask Quirrell if he would be willing to write them an excuse for being late, Harry's wand gave another loud chirp, startling him into speeding up his steps.

When the boys reached the ground floor, they ran quickly down through the dungeons, panting by the time they reached the Potions classroom. Harry tried to open the door quietly in the hopes of slipping in unnoticed, but once inside, the entire classroom turned and pinned them with a stare.

"Well, well, well," Snape said, his lip curling in disgust as though they had brought the smell of Professor Quirrell into the classroom with them. Harry supposed that, if anything, the Potions room did at least smell nicer than the one in Defence. "I suppose the three of you think you know enough about Potions to not bother attending the first class? Potter, Longbottom, Thomas. Sit. Down.

Neville and Dean dropped into the nearest bench, and Harry scowled at them both as he realised there were only two seats set for each table. He glanced at Ron and Seamus, and then across the room where he made eye contact with Hermione, who was already sitting beside Goyle. Predictably, Draco was with Nott, and both were smirking at Harry, clearly entertained by his current predicament. Forcing himself to turn to the side, he watched as Fay Dunbar pushed a chair out toward him with a bright and cheerful smile. Sighing in resignation, Harry sat down, belatedly realising that the girl had doodled his name on the cover of her book with little hearts around it.

"Since you three dunderheads know so much already," Snape began, "why don't you tell the rest of the class what I would get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Harry watched as Hermione's hand shot so quickly into the air he worried she might have dislocated her shoulder. He tried to remember reading about those ingredients, but he had always been more interested in Transfiguration and Defence than in Potions.

Thankfully, Dean slowly raised his hand, biting his lip. "Cure for boils?" he tentatively asked, reading the list on the blackboard.

Obviously the wrong answer, Snape glared at Dean. "Let's try again. Potter," he said, turning his attention on Harry, "where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

Annoyed with the man, Harry pinched his lips together and thought: up your arse and to the left.

Then he snickered as he imagined Sirius hearing him say that to Snape—which he would never actually do, but the image it conjured was pretty funny. Snape, however, did not look so amused.

"Three points from Gryffindor for cheek," he said, and then added, "That's twelve so far Potter, considering you lost ten for being late."

"Ten?!" Harry blurted out in rage and horror. "Professor McGonagall only took five from us when Peeves made us late for her class."

"Each."

Neville and Dean paled as the other Gryffindors in the room turned and levelled them with murderous stares.

"It wasn't even our fault," Dean snapped. "The staircases—"
"A bezoar, Potter?" Snape asked, ignoring Dean's objections.

Folding his arms across his chest angrily, Harry glared at Snape, wondering if this was enough to write home to Sirius about. He expected not, but maybe he would still bitch a little about the unfairness of it all. Doing his best to rein in the sarcastic comment that still lingered on the tip of his tongue, Harry grit out, "Goat. Stomach. Sir."

"Well," Snape said, looking a bit less irritated with him, "perhaps not all is lost."

The three boys shared a sigh of relief. That is, until Snape turned on Neville demanding, "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Hermione's hand shot up in the air on the other side of the room.

Neville looked like he was going to be sick.

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**September 12th, 1991**

Hogwarts continued to be a mixture of extremes for Harry. While he stopped being late for most of his classes—having learnt to sweet-talk a few of the staircases into doing what he wanted—he had yet to earn back the points he'd lost Gryffindor during their first week at school. That was mostly because, while not the complete and utter arse that Sirius and Remus might have predicted, Professor Snape was quick to take away points from any student that was not following explicit directions. Or if they talked out of turn. Or if they looked like they might talk out of turn. Or if, like Harry, they just happened to wear their tie around their head one day.

"At least it hides that atrocious scar," Professor Snape had said with a sneer before taking two points for idiocy.

Harry happened to agree with the man, at least on that point. Unfortunately, collecting scars was something Harry was good at. He disliked the feel of Dittany, which was why he was currently sitting in the hospital wing, nursing a split lip with a pack of ice rather than a potion or a salve—or Merlin forbid Skele-gro, which Madam Pomfrey was presently using to regrow the tooth that Harry had knocked out of Crabbe's mouth.

Hearing the boy spout expletives and cry a little boosted Harry's ego just a smidge. The punishment would be well worth it.

He licked at his lip, both hating and kind of liking the itchy pain that prodding at the wound with his tongue caused. While he and his cousins had gotten into scraps before, none of them had ever inflicted injuries like this. Punch each other and wrestle all you like, but the grandmothers and aunts made a point to teach respect for blood, seeing as their coven was built around the magic of it. Even Ginny, who was known to bite when they were younger, learnt quickly to never actually break skin.

Harry briefly wondered if his blood was still down on the Quidditch pitch, soaking the grass, or if Neville or Draco had vanished it. He hoped one of them had. He hated the idea of his blood mingling with the likes of Crabbe's, which had, Harry would admit, soaked the ground a bit more than his own. It was the only thing he actually felt bad about. Well, that, and the look on Hermione's face as both he and Crabbe had been led away from their first flying lesson by Madam Hooch tugging on their ears.

"Up!" Harry shouted, grinning when his broom hit his palm just a split second faster than Draco caught his own. Neville and Ron came up shortly behind them—though Neville's broom wobbled a
bit, even once he'd caught it—followed by Theo Nott, Tracey Davis, and Seamus. Everyone else
caught their brooms with a bit more effort, though Hermione struggled more than all the others.

When Madam Hooch moved to assist Hermione, Draco and Harry began shouting playful jabs back
and forth: threats for future Quidditch matches. The others joined in, laughing as the cousins traded
practised insults. Soon, Hermione had a good grip of her broom, but a gust of wind made Neville
scramble to hold onto his. Madam Hooch sighed irritably and moved from one end of the line to the
other to help him.

Another gust of wind blew Harry's hair into his face so wildly, that he almost knocked his glasses
from his face when trying to fix it.

Draco sighed happily. "Ah, there's nothing funnier than watching a Potter try to battle a breeze."

Harry snorted, eventually fixing his hair to a point that he could at least see. "I dunno, you thinking
you're faster than me on a broom is a bit funnier than that."

"You know what I think is funnier than both of those things?" Crabbe whispered, side-eyeing
Madam Hooch as she and Neville both took off after his broom, which looked like it was trying to fly
on its own. Crabbe's nasty gaze levelled on Hermione, causing a flicker of anger to spark in Harry's
chest. Before Harry could tell Crabbe that he didn't give a shit what the arsehole thought was funny,
the boy said, "A Mudblood thinking she can actually fly."

Harry looked down at his knuckles, feeling both proud and guilty at the way they ached. Sirius
would, no doubt, be over the moon when he heard how Harry had punched the Slytherin. But his
grandmother . . . surely she would be disappointed that he had acted rashly.

Bored, Harry reached for the nearest thing to read, a copy of a Daily Prophet from the week before.
He had skimmed over it briefly during breakfast, but a break-in at Gringotts was hardly his business.
His father and grandmother managed his vaults, and if something had happened, surely they would
have owled him about it. He took pity on the thief who might ever be fool enough to get caught
stealing from goblins—Harry had met the managers of Gringotts a time or two. They looked at him
as though he were a mixture between an intriguing specimen and something too stupid to function
without their aid. They looked at a lot of wizards and witches that way, Harry noticed. His
grandmother, however, might as well have been a deity to the angry-looking creatures, because
when she walked, they followed her with their gazes as though she were made of pure gold.

The door to the hospital wing opened, and Harry was snapped from his thoughts. He tossed
the Daily Prophet aside and looked up to see Hermione walk in, looking a little shy. When their
gazes connected, she pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes in a stern look of disapproval that
reminded him just a bit of his aunt Cedrella, who was the sweetest person in the world until she was
scary. Swallowing his nerves, Harry steeled himself for a lecture as Hermione approached the bed
where he sat.

"I wish you hadn't done that."

"Done what?"

Cringing under her stare a little, Harry tried his best to smirk, but the ache in his lip prevented it.

"I don't need you to fight my battles. I know what he said about me."

Though he was certain she was trying to hide it, Harry saw the sadness in her expression. "Do you
know what it means? That word he said?"
Hermione gave a curt nod, folding her arms in front of herself defensively. "Millie and Tracey explained. It's just a word, and I won't let it . . . It doesn't mean anything to me."

"Well, it means something to me," Harry said, his voice rising just a touch. "I didn't do it for . . . I mean, Dean's Muggle-born too, and . . . Okay, so maybe a little bit was for you, because you shouldn't be made to feel like you don't belong here. You do."

Hermione uncrossed her arms, looking as though she were letting down her defences. "I know that."

"I did it . . . You know my mum was a Muggle-born?"

She nodded. "It was mentioned when I first got my letter. They said that was one of the reasons that the Black Coven put effort into helping out first generation wizards and witches. Your mother, I mean."

Harry thought about the stories that he had been told about his mother. Remus told him how clever she was, how brilliant and powerful. Sirius told him about how brave and beautiful she was. Sometimes, when the coven was busy talking amongst themselves, Harry would eavesdrop and overhear his mother's name spoken in between broken whispers of awe and mentions of blood magic. He briefly wondered if he should tell Hermione all of this, but then quickly worried that she might think he assumed all Muggle-borns were the same—even if his thought process was complimentary.

Instead, Harry focused on her.

"It's okay to be afraid, you know."

As though she were an insulted Gryffindor, Hermione's spine straightened and she narrowed her eyes. "I have no idea to what you're—"

"Flying," Harry interrupted. "I saw how your hand shook when you were trying to command the broom."

Her brow furrowed just a little bit in what he assumed was annoyance. "It was stubborn is all."

Smiling, Harry leant back against the pillows behind him. "You're the stubborn one. But . . . it's okay. Everyone's afraid of something." At her look of hesitation, Harry forcefully pushed past the tightness in his chest, breaking through his own self-imposed barriers as he said, "Small spaces. I-I'm afraid . . . I mean I don't really like, y'know, being in small spaces. I mean . . . sometimes."

At his confession, Hermione's brow softened and she bit her lower lip before whispering, "It's just so . . . high up. And It's only a stick. A stick, Harry. What if it just snaps in half when I'm up there?"

Before Harry could tell her that there were Safety Spells he could show her—or maybe that Madam Hooch could help her with—an imposing figure stood suddenly at the foot of his bed. He hadn't even heard the doors open, and quickly began wondering if his Aunt Minnie had been there the whole time, hiding beneath the bed or up high on a shelf in her Animagus form, listening to their conversation. She sure looked like she had claws now.

"Hi, Aunt Minnie."

Her eyes narrowed. "Fighting?"

Hermione cringed. "I should go."
"Yes, Miss Granger," Minerva said, never taking her glare off of Harry. "Do return to your class while I deal with Mr Potter here."

Offering him a look of sympathy, Hermione darted away from his bed quickly, her shoes making clipping sounds on the floor as she left the infirmary. Harry watched her leave, feeling just a bit scared to be left alone with his aunt. When his gaze finally reconnected with Minerva's, he blurted out, "Crabbe said—"

"I'm aware of what the boy said, Harry," Minerva uttered with a sigh. "But I am also aware, now more than ever," she added with a little groan of impatience, "of how very much like your father you are."

Hoping that this was a good thing, Harry grinned and asked, "Which one?"

Minerva sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Morgana help me. Both."

"So . . . I'm in trouble? Even though I was defending—"

"Even though," Minerva said, cutting him off. "Violence is not the answer."

He kept his mouth shut about how most of Gryffindor suspected that she was the one who had given Dumbledore the scars on his face. "I'm sorry, Aunt Mi—Professor. I'll . . . try to do better."

Looking back at him with an expression of suspicion, Minerva said, "You still have a week's worth of detention, and I've taken ten points each from Gryffindor and Slytherin for fighting." Before Harry had a chance to say that the punishment was probably fair, she added, "And I've already sent a letter home about this little incident."

He bit his lip in an effort not to swear in front of her. Nipping at his injury, however, made him wince, drawing Minerva's attention to the site.

"Do you plan on having that healed?"

Harry shrugged, not wanting to admit that it hurt just a little.

The doors to the hospital wing opened again, cutting off whatever it was that Minerva was about to say. Madam Hooch walked in, looking windswept and furiously annoyed as she shouted, "Next year, I'm requesting to teach the Houses separately!" Despite her irritated expression, she was gently cradling Neville's arm as he walked beside her.

Harry jumped from his bed, seeing the tear streaks down his cousin's face. "What happened?" he demanded, eager to go and punch Crabbe again, even though it was impossible that the boy had had anything to do with, what looked to be, Neville's possibly broken wrist.

"Bloody broom," Neville said in between sniffs, looking angry that he had been caught crying. Harry didn't pay the tears any mind, other than to note how they fuelled his protective anger over the fact that his cousin had been hurt. "Finally got on the thing and it went mental."

Madam Pomfrey rushed to Neville's side, and Harry began to follow as they headed off toward the potion cabinet—likely for a pain reliever. He turned back to watch Madam Hooch and his Aunt Minerva confer with one another.

"Slytherin?" Minerva asked.

Madam Hooch shook her head. "I would have said yes if it were sixth or seventh years, maybe. But
the way that broom was twitching? No first year could cast a hex that powerful."

"Hexed? Are you certain?"

"No, unfortunately. The wretched thing was smashed to bits when it threw itself, and Mr Longbottom against the side of the castle."

Float Like a Feather

October 6th, 1991
Hollyhock Gardens

Dorea reminded herself that supping with Horace Slughorn was a necessity if the man had any knowledge about Tom Riddle and the bloody Horcrux he made. It was, however, a true trial to put up with him as he switched back and forth between trying to flirt with her coven sisters and doing what looked like his level best to imply that he could somehow be their "in" when it came to the highs of society.

As he admired their amulets—insisting that he had seen some just like it forty or so years ago, worn by some Empress in some country Dorea had never heard of—she made a point to remember the look on his face when he entered Hollyhock Gardens. She was certain that he had never been invited before. Arcturus had never liked Slughorn and had often called him a nouveau riche sycophant.

Tracking him down had been only slightly difficult as he made it known that he had been travelling abroad. The Coven spent only a week trying to suss out which country he had darted off to before word reached them that he was actually holed up in an old family house, doing what he claimed was "enjoying the bliss of silence and the company of oneself."

Lucretia extended an invitation to tea at Hollyhock Gardens—which she had inherited from Arcturus upon his death two years earlier—and Slughorn replied to the owl within minutes. They postponed the first two dates, insisting that Coven business came about unexpectedly. By the time the third date set came around, the former professor was chomping at the bit to get a sit down with the Coven.

Not everyone could make it, of course; the women were rarely ever all together in one place at the same time—for safety if nothing else. Dorea wanted those there who Slughorn would likely find the most appealing to meet and cultivate relationships with. Lucretia had a table set for herself, Dorea, and Cassie. Narcissa and Andromeda were there for the Legilimency plan, and Belina had insisted on coming as backup just in case Slughorn had tricks up his sleeves. Camila and Theia wanted to come because they had apparently made a bet with one another that the man wouldn't leave the table without injury. It was a toss-up over who might injure him.

Most treated him cordially, leaving the flirtations and buttering up to Cassie. Slughorn was a leech, but he was also a Slytherin and had been head of their House at Hogwarts for some of the younger witches. Most remembered that he was the one who nurtured their ambition from a young age, and also the ability to see when one was being played. Thankfully, Cassie had brought crystallised pineapple as a gift, and Slughorn was putty in her hands as she eventually began playfully feeding it to him in between stories.

Belina looked like she was going to either be sick or stick a fork in her leg.

Dorea was just glad that Minerva had stayed behind at Hogwarts. There was no way they would get through this with her hissing irritably from behind her napkin when Slughorn went into detail about how many Slytherin House Cups and Quidditch trophies he kept under lock and key back at his home, shined twice a week, according to him, by a house-elf that supposedly left Hogwarts to serve him because he inspired such devotion.

"Such a good friend, he was, your father," Horace said in between bites of pineapple, smiling at Lucretia. She had the grace to play along with the lie, leaning forward with bright eyes as though interested in his stories. "We were together at Hogwarts, you know. The very merriest of friends. I
do believe that I was the one who introduced him to your mother."

Offering a sweet smile, Lucretia tilted her head. "I'm certain you knew many people at Hogwarts. Both as a student and a professor."

Horace grinned impishly. "You remember my little events, do you? The grandest of soirees that Hogwarts could ever offer!"

Looking across the table, Dorea noticed Narcissa tapping lightly on the stem of her glass, indicating that she'd made eye contact and was already rifling through Slughorn's memories. A brief glance in Slughorn's direction told her that he had not even noticed.

"Do you know Celestina Warbeck?" Cassie asked, touching Horace's arm.

Dorea cringed as she watched him lean into the gesture.

"Know them? Why, my dearest, I have dinner with her twice a month at the very least!"

"You know everyone, don't you? My, what secrets must fill that head of yours," Cassie said, her eyes twinkling. It was honestly shocking that her Animagus form turned out to be an owl since she looked just like a cat toying with a mouse. "Did you know Dumbledore? Before the great duel with Grindelwald, I mean?"

Horace chuckled. "Who do you think taught him? Oh, Albus and I go way back."

Camila coughed "For fuck's sake" into her napkin, cleared her throat, and offered an apologetic glance before taking a long drink of wine from her glass.

"Taught Dumbledore, you mean?" Dorea calmly asked. "Or do you mean Grindelwald?"

His smile faltered for just a moment before he laughed quietly. "Come now, Dorea, everyone knows that Grindelwald attended Durmstrang. Even if he had gone to Hogwarts, I make it a point—"

"Not to mingle with Dark Lords?"

Horace fell silent, eyes blinking rapidly. His left one twitched, and he scratched his head. Dorea kept eye contact but noticed from her peripheral gaze that Andromeda had taken Narcissa's hand in support.

"I . . ." Horace cleared his throat and laughed. "Do you know, I've heard rumour that you're all planning a little celebration for Yule."

"It's been changed," Camila supplied, casually stabbing her fork into a small pile of dressed greens on her plate. "We'd wanted to introduce ourselves to some of the new Muggle-borns in the programme, but it seems that we planned too late and many of the families already have plans. Perhaps next year."

"We'll be having a more private gathering," Dorea said stiffly. "Family only. You understand."

"Of course, of course," Slughorn nodded. His hand slipped beneath the table for a moment, and Dorea was certain—especially by the look on her sister's face—that it was now on Cassie's thigh. "Such a good and charitable thing, taking in those less fortunate."

Licking her lips after taking a drink from her glass, Dorea nodded. "Yes. It's such a shame that not so long ago, Voldemort was intent on murdering them all."
She thought he might try to play off her comment like he had with the one about Dark Lords, but saying the name that shall-not-be-spoken must have triggered the exact memory that Narcissa was searching for, because Slughorn pitched forward, gripping his head in agony.

Sycophant, for certain, but it was foolish for anyone to believe the man weak. He broke away from Narcissa's spell and kept his eyes firmly shut, even as he tried to stand and leave the table. The moment that he did, Lucretia swept her fingers along the edge of the table and runes carved into the wood glowed a soft blue. A visible leash of magic whipped around Slughorn's middle and pulled him back to the chair like a magnet.

Theia let out a little laugh and held her hand out to Camila, who dropped several coins into her palm.

"Did you get anything?" Dorea asked her niece.

Narcissa took a breath and slowly blinked, eyes watering from concentrating so hard. "I wanted information about Tom Riddle's origins . . . but instead, I've found . . . It's been altered. He's done something to the memory. But it's there. He doesn't know where Voldemort came from, but this is more important. Tom Riddle asked him specifically about Horcruxes."

"I told him nothing!" Slughorn cried, shaking his head. "I don't know what you're saying!"

"You knew about his Horcrux?" Dorea demanded angrily, watching as the man paled dramatically.

"I don't know what you're—"

She stood from her seat, making her way to his side. "Was the locket the only one?" When he flinched, Dorea's eyes widened. "How many?" Her voice was barely a whisper, but her breath was hot like dragon fire, and it sizzled in the air as a threat near the man's ear.

"Don't do it, Aunt Dorea," Andromeda warned. "There are other ways."

"We could, for instance," Narcissa began, "inform the Ministry that he rigged the last Quidditch World Cup to make a few Galleons. Or perhaps that he brewed Felix Felicis for Ludovic Bagman."

"That's not illegal!" Slughorn argued, his eyes snapping open. He turned his gaze away from Narcissa, only to be caught in Andromeda's stare.

"It actually is considering the man was still playing professional Quidditch," Andromeda said. "The two of them have also been embezzling money from the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

"Perhaps," Narcissa added, "the goblins would like to know about the artefacts he stole from the London Museum of Magical History. They went missing more than forty years ago, so I assume the search has long ended. But it did cause quite a stir considering they were goblin-forged and there had been an agreement for them to be returned to Gringotts."

"I never—"

"No, not you specifically," Narcissa waved her hand at him flippantly, "but you did hire several from the Slug Club to assist, did you not? Don't bother lying. I saw it all in your head."

"Mmm . . . We'll ruin you," Cassie said in a sing-song voice, sitting so close to Slughorn she might as well have been in his lap. Minutes earlier, the man would have been over the moon for the attention. Now he looked as though he could burst into tears at any moment.

"How many Horcruxes do you believe Tom Riddle made for himself?" Dorea asked.
Released from the magical leash, Slughorn fell forward, head in his hands and tears dripping down his cheeks. "Forgive me . . . I didn't . . . I didn't know what he was. What he would do. I didn't know."

No longer laughing at the man, Theia's brow furrowed in worry. "It can't be . . . It can't be that many. How many times can a person split their soul? It can't be—"

Dorea felt a knot in her stomach tighten and bile rise as Slughorn looked up at her. She could see the number in his eyes, feel it echoing in the tense air around them long before he finally said the horrifying word:

"Seven."

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October 31st, 1991
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry woke Halloween morning expecting to feel terrible.

After leaving Privet Drive, it had taken Sirius and his grandmother a year or so to explain the significance of Halloween to their family. The holiday was always observed, and there was usually some sort of Coven event happening, but he noticed a significant change in his family on the anniversary of his parents' deaths. When he reflected on it too much, especially on the day, he found himself getting sad and angry, but there had always been someone to help with those feelings. His grandmother would pull him into a hug, kissing the top of his head. Sirius would take him out into the garden and they would fly on whatever new broom Sirius had purchased. Harry deeply regretted that he was not allowed to have a broom as a first year.

Spending Halloween in Hogwarts without his grandmother and godfather left Harry feeling very alone.

Waking up to the sounds of screams reminded him that he was definitely not alone.

"What the bloody hell?" Harry snapped, brandishing his wand—which was thankfully not chirping or whistling or screaming at him.

"Merlin, Seamus . . . McGonagall's going to kill me if she thinks I set my own bed curtains on fire," Ron grumbled, touching the edges of charred fabric.

Seamus stood nearby with a small jack-o-lantern in one hand, wand in the other. "Not my fault. I just wanted to light the pumpkin. You were the one who said I wasn't saying the spell loud enough."

Falling back down on his mattress, Harry let out a loud exhale that came out sounding like a laugh. Next to him, Dean muttered, "I think the first spell Flitwick should've taught us was conjuring water."

"I think someone should knick Seamus's wand," Neville added.

Harry laughed harder, covering his face even as Seamus and Ron's argument turned into a full-blown scuffle. By the time he and Dean had them separated, Seamus's bed curtains had caught fire as well, and the jack-o-lantern had gone missing only to turn up twenty minutes later in chewed up bits on Harry's bed, where Max was lazily sleeping—belly engorged.

Flitwick taught them all how to levitate feathers that day. Harry knew the spell from home, where Sirius charmed his toy dragons to fly. Doing it himself, however, was a bit trickier. Still, by the end
of class, half the Gryffindors had managed to get the feather at least off the desk. Their egos took a
small hit when they were told that all but three Slytherins had managed it. He was half tempted to
cause a stir when he caught Hermione helping a few of her classmates in the hall with the charm,
correcting their pronunciation.

"Wotcher, Hermione," Harry said with a smirk, mimicking Tonks as he jumped around the corner.

All at once, four floating feathers dropped to the ground. The Slytherins looked up from the floor
where they were all sitting. Only Hermione and Goyle looked a bit guilty at being caught.

"Potter," Millicent said, picking up her feather and shoving it into her book bag. "Shouldn't you be
off with the other Gryffindors? Or are we running late? Again?"

Snorting at the attempted insult, Harry shrugged and sauntered over to the group. He almost tripped a
few times as Max wove in between his legs before the little beast darted over to Hermione, butting
her head into the witch's open palm.

"Just taking a stroll," he said, rolling his eyes when he caught Hermione slipping Max a treat.

Tracey looked up from where Harry had come from and shook her head. "You're asking to be
expelled," she said. "Been up on the third floor much?"

"Not much," Harry said casually, sighing when Max left Hermione alone in order to try and paw at
Goyle's robe pockets. "Just ignore her. Why are you all out here? Shouldn't you be on your way to
dinner? My godfather said that the Halloween feasts at Hogwarts are amazing."

"How is your godfather, Potter?" Tracey asked with a crooked grin, batting her eyelashes.

"Ew, stop," Millicent said, lightly slapping Tracey on the shoulder.

Harry arched a brow and looked at Hermione, who shook her head and muttered, "Don't ask."

"We were just practising," Goyle said. "That, and it's easier to go in once all the older Slytherins are
already sat down. Especially if it's the Carrows or Row—"

Hermione pinned Goyle with a look, and he shut right up, clearing his throat loudly as though he
could retroactively hide the words he had already said.

"They bothering you lot?" Harry asked, knowing already that Hermione had problems with the
Carrow twins. His Chocolate Frog cards had arrived by owl one morning in September with a note
from his grandmother hinting that she knew why Harry had asked for them. He gave them to Draco
in passing before lunch one Friday before Potions and asked how Hermione was fitting in. Draco
was subtle, but let a few names slip out even as he insisted that Harry had no reason to worry.

"Sod them all," Tracey said as she stood up. "I'm not afraid of some pureblood bitch who sticks her
nose up at me. And neither should anyone else."

Harry grinned. "Well, looks like you've got all the friends you need here, Hermione. Only two
months in, and I've been replaced."

She rolled her eyes and laughed, taking Goyle's hand as he helped her stand up. "I have enough
room in my life for a few Gryffindor friends as well, Harry. I might even save you a seat in class one
day. You'd know that if you ever showed up on time," she said teasingly.

Harry clutched at his chest, feigning heartbreak. "Low blow, Granger."
"Go to dinner, Potter," she said, throwing her bag over her shoulder.

"I have earned back those points, for the record," Harry called down the corridor as the Slytherins began walking away.

"I'll be sure to remind you of that when we win the House Cup," Millicent shouted back.

Looking down at Max, Harry sighed. "I'm not letting you into the Great Hall for the feast. People have been complaining that you're stealing their pumpkin pasties and bacon. Come on, back to the tower with you."

The cat made a low growling noise before it turned into a purr as she rubbed her head against Harry's knee and followed him back toward the staircase. Halfway up, he ran into Dean and Neville, both rushing down. "See? I'm not the only one who's late to everything."

Dean laughed. "We're only late because we were up in the common room looking for you."

"Where've you been?" Neville asked, pulling a liquorice wand from his pocket and handing it to Max when she pawed at the bottom of his robes.

"Bothering some Slytherins," Harry said, leaving out the part that he had gone snooping around the third floor on his own out of curiosity, only to be reprimanded by both his cat and his wand when he got too close to a locked door at the end of the corridor. "Stay out of the Great Hall," he warned Max before turning around and following Neville and Dean back down the stairs.

Before they reached the bottom, Harry's wand gave a loud chirp, stopping him in his steps. He held a hand out, grabbing Neville's shoulder. "Did you hear that?"

Dean sighed. "Is it your wand again?"

"Yes, er . . . yes and no. Listen."

They stood quiet for a moment before an echoing roar was heard, followed by a panicked scream and the sound of running. A moment later, Professor Quirrell bolted out of the entrance to the dungeons, panting heavily as he darted toward the Great Hall.

The boys ran after him, reaching the open doors just in time to hear Quirrell gasp, "Troll—in the dungeon—thought you ought to know," and then collapse into a dead faint.

The three boys tucked themselves into an alcove behind a statue, watching as prefects led their Houses swiftly back to their common rooms per Dumbledore's orders. Harry noticed, however, that the teachers were not following after the students. Just as he was about to step out from behind the statue to see where the staff were, Snape barrelled through the doors of the Great Hall and swiftly made his way for the stairs.

"Where d'you suppose he's going?" Harry suspiciously wondered aloud.

He watched carefully as the staircases shifted almost as though they were obeying Snape's silent orders. Harry's mouth fell open as one staircase shifted, lining up with another until . . . "He's heading for the third floor."

"You don't think that Snape's up to something, do you?" Dean whispered.

"My grandmother seems to trust him, but Sirius doesn't," Harry said, feeling torn.
Snape was a tosser, that was certain, and if were more approachable like some of the other professors, Harry might be so bold as to suggest he look for another profession since he didn’t seem to actually enjoy any bit of his job—other than taking points from Gryffindor and trading insults and wagers with Aunt Minnie about upcoming Quidditch games.

Before Harry could think to do anything about Snape, the other professors left the Great Hall, seemingly with a plan as they all headed toward the dungeons. Professors Sinistra and Sprout went off in the direction that the Hufflepuffs had gone, Professor Flitwick darted for the front doors, mumbling about creating a perimeter in case of escape. He was flanked by several other staff members that Harry had not yet met because they taught elective classes. Hagrid also went with them. Dumbledore and Aunt Minnie went for the dungeons, Minerva shifting into Animagus form once she'd passed the staircase.

"Let's follow Snape and see what he's up to," Harry said, stepping out from behind the statue.

"Professor McGonagall will kill us if we're caught out of the common room," Dean protested.

Neville sighed loudly, running a nervous hand through his hair. "Never mind Aunt Minerva, what do you think Snape will do if he catches us following him?"

"For all we know, Snape let a troll into the castle in order to get at whatever Dumbledore's hiding up there," Harry argued quietly, peeking into the Great Hall to see that there was no one left behind to hear them. Even Professor Quirrell was gone, likely having been moved to the hospital wing.

"Do you think the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs will be all right?" Dean asked. "Didn't Quirrell say the troll was in the dungeon? Bit weird that Dumbledore sent everyone back to their common rooms."

Harry recalled the proud look on Hermione's face as she floated her feather with her friends just before dinner. He had a brief moment of worry when he thought that some of the older Slytherins that Tracey spoke of might do something to trap Hermione and her friends with the troll. Maybe block them from the common room or something.

Torn over what to do—and not even thinking that he had no idea of how to battle a mountain troll himself—Harry contemplated going to the dungeons. The shifting staircases drew his attention once more. Making up his mind, he darted toward the staircase, determined to catch up with Snape. Max, however, was coming down the stairs and paused at the foot, taking a look in Harry's direction before glancing down the dungeons. A roar followed by a crash echoed down the long corridor, and Harry's eyes widened.

"Don't. You. Dare."

Max narrowed her eyes and swiftly ran into the shadows of the dungeons.

"Shit!" Harry snapped, changing course and chasing after his reckless familiar who, no doubt, had it in her mind to see what mountain troll tasted like.

"Harry!" Dean and Neville shouted behind him, and he could hear the sound of their quick footsteps following in his wake.

"Where'd she go?" Harry asked, coming to a stop right where the corridor split. He knew that the Hufflepuffs normally went off in one direction, and the Slytherins deeper beneath the castle, but there was no sign of Max.

"Maybe she went to to the kitchens?" Neville suggested, looking in the directions that the Hufflepuffs normally went.
Sure enough, Harry spotted his cat at the end of the long stretch of hallway sitting beneath a painting of a pear. A small group of little house-elves were handing over treats to Max, who was at the front of a line of several other cats, including the big fluffy one that Harry had seen following Hermione's friend Millicent around.

Sighing in relief that his familiar hadn't tried to track down a mountain troll, Harry turned around only to hear a crash coming from back toward the Great Hall, and footsteps coming from the other side of the corridor. Cringing, he and Neville both grabbed Dean by the back of his robes and tucked themselves into the shadows just as Dumbledore and Aunt Minnie ran back the other way, likely following the sound of the crash.

Mountain troll presumably in the hands of those who could handle it, Harry stepped out from the shadows, determined to head back toward the staircases. His wand gave the tiniest of little chirps a mere second before someone behind him shouted, "Locomotor Mortis!"

Dean's legs snapped together and he tumbled forward, taking Harry and Neville with him.

Angrily, Harry aimed his wand up, his emotions somehow funnelling through the bit of wood and igniting a light on the other end. It wasn't a proper Lumos, flickering wildly like a fire instead of a glow, but it was enough to illuminate the faces of two older Slytherins in front of him.

"What do we have here, Flint?" Adrian Pucey asked.

"Couple of ickle firsties," Marcus Flint said with a sneer that did not do his already hideous face any favours. "And their pet Mudblood."

"Take that back, Flint!" Harry shouted as he stood, holding his wand out at the boy menacingly as he tried to remember the names, let along movements, of any hex he might be able to throw.

"You best get it through your head quick, Potter," Flint snarled as he moved forward, brushing Harry's wand aside with no thought. "Not everyone in the bloody world thinks you and your family are as great as you like to think of yourselves."

"Seems like maybe he ought to be shown his place," Pucey said with a grin.

Harry felt Neville stand up behind him. Dean, unfortunately, was still dealing with the Leg-Locker Curse he had been hit with.

"Seems like you ought to go find that mountain troll, Flint," Harry said, unafraid of the larger boy even as he towered over him. His wand was silent, and Harry actually took that as a good sign. When Flint gave him a look of curiosity, Harry smirked. "Not often you get a chance at such a family reunion, after all."

Pucey actually laughed, which seemed to only infuriate Flint more.

No spells coming to mind, Harry panicked and punched Flint in the mouth.

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**Potter Manor**

Holidays outside of Azkaban were tremendously better than inside, Sirius thought.

Except Halloween. Halloween, while warmer than his cell in Azkaban, was still just as bitter and painful. Taking care of Harry and Dorea—or letting others take care of him—was a good distraction, of course, but nothing would ever really make the holiday bright again. The memory of finding
James and Lily that night was still fresh, even years later. Sirius had even thought about Obliviation once or twice, but he settled on the idea that it would somehow dishonour them both to remove even that horrible memory from his mind.

The anniversary of that night was normally spent in a mixture of family obligations and getting pissed with Remus. With Harry at Hogwarts, Sirius's schedule for drinking had opened up, letting them start around noon. Normally, he was single when Halloween rolled around, so it was an uncomfortable conversation to have with Hammond, who seemed a bit put out to not be invited to the pub or to the annual "let's go look at the wreckage" trip, where Remus and Padfoot stumbled into Godric's Hollow. It might have had something to do with the fact that Hammond knew about their past, but Theia had no problems stepping aside for the night, which Sirius had made a mistake in pointing out.

Boyfriendless, at least for the night, Sirius and Remus had made their way to the little cottage, stepping over the magic that hid its true form from Muggles. They quietly raged and not so quietly cried, and had then made their way to the statue of James, Lily, and Harry to "pay their respects" by making fun of James's likeness.

"He'd do the same if it were either of us," Sirius had reasoned, placing his hand reverently on the statue.

He had yet to make it into the actual cemetery. That, for some reason, felt like it was too much.

Sirius woke late into the night—it had to be half midnight, at least—to the feel of gentle fingers carding through his hair. Without a word, he leant into the touch, allowing Dorea to provide him this comfort. He knew she needed it just as much as he did: the reminder that she could still be a mother to someone.

Remus quietly snored in a large armchair in the corner by the fireplace. The arm had been ravaged by Harry's bloody cat, and anytime it was fixed, the beast would ruin it all over again. Harry had convinced them to just leave it, but when company came over, Dorea always tossed a blanket over it.

"You should be sleeping, Mum," Sirius managed to say, groaning at the sticky feel of his mouth, which still tasted a bit like beer, and not in a good way.

"Owls showed up about an hour after you two stumbled in."

Sirius tried to sit up, wincing when his body fought him. He was sober enough, despite having been drinking just a few hours ago. He ached for the days when he could go all night, rather than sigh and decide to go home just after nine. His body reminded him of his age, but thankfully his head wasn't hurting—yet.

"Anything worthwhile?"

"Hammond sent a small note reminding you of a lunch date on Monday," she said lightly, using a tone that she had perfected long ago when he and James were still teenagers. It was that implying tone. The one that she used when she used to ask James about Lily, or Sirius about Remus. It was a tone that somehow interjected her motherly concern without ever using actual words to express what she was thinking. Sirius knew that Dorea had concerns about his relationship with her Healer, but he could never tell if it was because she knew him too well or if she knew Hammond too well. Likely both.

"I'll owl him in the morning."
She handed him an opened letter that had a broken Hogwarts seal on it.

Sirius sighed, taking the letter. "What did he do?"

"Punched another boy in the face," Dorea said. "I'm sure Harry believes he had his reasons, but they were caught fighting during an unfortunate time, or so Minerva tells me." Sirius noticed that she had another letter with the same handwriting tucked beneath a glass of water. They had long ago stopped using coasters when Harry's cat began chewing on them.

"How many points?"

"Detention, actually," Dorea said, leaning back on the sofa. "I have a meeting with Minerva tomorrow. She tells me that she and Severus Snape discovered something that Dumbledore has been hiding. Snape was apparently injured, and was already in a foul mood when he happened upon the boys fighting in the dungeons."

Rubbing his hands down his face and sighing, Sirius thought about belatedly apologising for all the fights he and James got into whilst at Hogwarts. The early years, Minerva had sent letters home to Walburga, but she very quickly figured out that it was more effective to send them to Dorea and Charlus.

"Is this what parenting is going to be?" he asked her. "Worrying about letters coming home from Hogwarts?"

Dorea snorted, rolling her eyes at him, likely enjoying his parental misery. "Just wait until he starts playing Quidditch. The first letter home about a broken arm will have you back in your cups."

Sirius didn't want to think about it. He pictured future Quidditch matches where he could cheer Harry on from the stands, not sit nervously by his godson's bedside watching him drink Skele-gro. He tried very hard not to recall the multitude of broken bones that James had back at Hogwarts due to the game—and other, possibly prank-related, events.

"I'll go to Hogwarts this weekend, see if I can have a chat with him about the fighting." He glanced across the room at Remus and smiled. "Maybe I'll take Moony with. Old boy could use a trip north."

Making a pleased noise, Dorea reached out and resumed combing her fingers through Sirius's hair. Relaxing into the touch once more, he yawned and laid back down, resting his head in her lap like he had when he was just a child. He refused to mention James by name, never knowing exactly how she processed her own grief on the anniversary. Not wanting to cause her any pain, Sirius never mentioned it. From experience, Slytherins—and Blacks especially—did not like having their vulnerability pointed out, even if it was obvious.

"What do you think Dumbledore is up to?" he asked after several minutes of silence. "What's he hiding?"

He began to get nervous the longer she took to answer.

Eventually, though, she let out an irritable sigh and said, "A very large guard dog."
Creatures

November 1st, 1991
Hogsmeade — The Hog's Head

"Is there a way to get through to Hagrid?"

Dorea made eye contact with Enid and sighed softly, knowing that the woman had a soft spot for the man since they had gone to school together. "We've already tried that route, and it didn't work. He's Dumbledore's man, through and through."

"But we know he's responsible for this, at least to some degree. How else would Dumbledore have even—?"

Callidora rested a hand on Enid's arm, quieting her. "What she means to say is—"

"Don't tell me what I mean to say," Enid snapped, yanking her arm away from her mother. "I know what I'm talking about."

"I don't remember Hogwarts being so . . ." Jacintha Warrington gestured openly with her hand, pursing her lips as if she were trying to find the right word. Ultimately, she sighed loudly and shook her head. "When I was a student, it was just a school."

"Hogwarts has never been just a school," Belina said, rolling her eyes. "Even Grandfather Phineas had an illegal dragonhide business working out of the dungeons."

"That was never proven," Cedrella and Callidora said simultaneously.

"Do the Gryffindors still brew firewhisky in the tower?" Jacintha curiously asked.

The loud clank of a glass hitting the tabletop drew everyone's attention to the end where Minerva sat beside Dorea, visibly seething. "Absolutely not!"

"Pretty sure that's actually the Hufflepuffs," Theia muttered in an attempt to break the tension in the room.

Everyone looked at her and then drew their eyes to Mary Cattermole and Nymphadora. Mary's mouth dropped open, a scandalised expression painted on her face as she squeaked an incoherent response.

Nymphadora looked skyward. "I will not confirm a thing."

"We're getting side-tracked," Dorea said, ignoring the high-five shared by Theia and Nymphadora. Pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration, she wandlessly summoned the decanter from the centre of the table with her free hand, not looking as she refilled her wine glass.

"Look," Jacintha said as she took the decanter from Dorea, refilling her own glass before passing it down the line, "I'm not Albus's greatest fan either, but this isn't exactly the worst thing that's ever happened at Hogwarts. For Merlin's sake, students actually died during Headmaster Dippet's time there."

Cedrella crossed her arms over her chest and huffed loudly. "That's hardly a good enough reason to just let Dumbledore—"
Minerva stood, slamming her palms on the table. "He's keeping a bloody cerberus in the school!"

Everyone fell quiet, even the younger witches at the end of the table who often used the moments of silence to whisper to one another. The Hog's Head was empty save for the coven, having been closed down with gratitude to Aberforth, who was using the free time to tend to his garden and goats. Beatrice, long since dead, had left behind two kids: a female beauty named Persephone, and a one-eyed demon-looking creature named Dante. Both notoriously loathed Cassie.

Cassie, however, was more concerned with larger beasts. "Just . . . how big is it?" Her eyes sparkled in the light as she ran the tip of her index finger around the rim of her glass.

Minerva narrowed her eyes slightly, and Dorea willed away her growing headache. "I did not see it myself," Minerva began, "but Severus gave me details. It's massive. I've honestly no idea how the beast was transported without using a Shrinking Charm."

"He used a Shrinking Charm on a poor puppy?"

"Poor puppy?" Minerva's head jerked up so quickly that the pins securing her bun popped out on one side, causing tendrils of black hair to unfurl and brush against the top of her shoulder. "Have you lost your mind? Puppy?!"

"Well, it's not as though it's the beast's fault, is it?" Cassie said, shrugging her shoulder. "He's just doing his job. Guarding . . . whatever it is."

Trying to regain control of the meeting—since controlling the situation itself seemed impossible—Dorea cleared her throat. "Do we have any ideas what it could be?"

"No," Minerva said coolly as she began to repin her hair, looking as irritable as ever. "I don't think Albus would purposely bring anything Dark into the school. That's the platform on which he stands against us, is it not? He doesn't trust that some witches in the coven aren't Dark. He requested the help of the other professors to protect whatever it is, but without Severus and me standing with him, the others backed out. Except Quirrell."

Dorea made note of that. She did her best to look into the backgrounds of the professors at the school, but there was only so much she could do without drawing attention. Quirrell did not seem qualified to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts, but it seemed a bit pointless to fight every decision Dumbledore made, especially when the list of candidates—from what she knew—was slim and unappealing. That, and Dumbledore would no doubt make a fuss about her complaints, making it appear as though she were critiquing Quirrell's background as a Muggle Studies professor. It would have been detrimental to the coven's goal of bridging the gap between old families and those who grew up in Muggle homes.

"He might have helped, load of good that would do," Minerva went on. "I think if he knew there were a cerberus in the castle, Quirrell would move to another continent over the weekend. Still, whatever Albus is hiding, it's worth something. Precious, possibly."

"Personal?" Dorea asked, wondering if Aberforth would be of any help to them.

"I don't think so. It might be related to the robbery at the bank."

"But they didn't get anything, did they?" Mary asked, leaning forward. "The papers said that the vault had previously been emptied."

Belina nodded. "Yes. Earlier that day, by Hagrid."
"So we're fucked, are we?" Nymphadora groaned loudly. "No idea what Dumbledore's keeping, no idea who's helping him, and he's got a bloody guard dog with three heads the size of a small dragon."

"Cassie, are you even paying attention?" Dorea asked, noticing that as the other witches speculated, discussed, and plotted, her sister was jotting down notes on a small bit of parchment.

"As a matter of fact, while you hens continue clucking about, I'm actually doing what I can to remedy the situation," she said, signing her name to the bottom of what clearly was a letter. "Even if we do gain access to the castle without Dumbledore getting in our way, we're stuck with a very large problem, aren't we?"

"How to deal with the creature," Dorea said.

Cassie smiled and touched Dorea's nose with the tip of her finger. "I'm good with animals, so I'll do what I can, but even I've never seen a three-headed dog up close. I'm sending a letter to an acquaintance. He's a bit of an expert in magical creatures; once helped me safely rid my chateau of a jarvey infestation."

Minerva rolled her eyes. "Another lover?"

"Hardly," Cassie said with a laugh before sticking the letter into a conjured envelope and sealing it with a flare of magic that Dorea recognised was a hex set to do bodily harm to anyone other than the recipient should they try to open it. "He's happily married to wife and hobby."

Having a mild flashback to her youth and a war she had been too young at the time to truly be involved in other than reading the papers, Dorea cringed. "Is it who I think it is? You know he's an old friend of Dumbledore's."

Cassie ignored her, rolling her eyes. "Everyone who ever associated with Dumbledore is considered an old friend unless they've had the man at wandpoint. Untwist your knickers, would you?" she said, causing Dorea to huff indignantly under her breath. "I might be able to fix our cerberus and Hagrid problem all in one go, if I play my cards right."

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**Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry**

When Harry opened his eyes and found himself in the hospital wing, he kicked himself repeatedly. Or he would have, had his left foot not been set in some sort of Stasis Spell. Recollecting how he had gotten there wasn't difficult, but reliving it through his memories was just as embarrassing.

Having been caught red-handed—or fisted, as it were—punching Slytherins in the dungeon by Professor Snape himself, Harry had been assigned detention, and not even his Aunt Minnie would listen to reason when he had said he'd only been defending Dean. Not only that, his detention was to be supervised by Professor Quirrell, since Aunt Minnie had more important things to do than watch him reorganise detention slips from previous decades or shine candelabras in the Great Hall. Worse, Harry had been relocated to the Defence classroom to dust Professor Quirrell's shelves.

Having already been annoyed with a headache likely brought on by the dust, Harry had stowed his wand in the back of the room to keep it from shrieking at him. He was supposed to have been dusting the Muggle way anyhow, and wasn't to have used magic during detention. He had been half-tempted to ask Professor Quirrell about his weird wand, but then the man had tripped over a fallen broomstick in the corner, and nearly killed himself trying to cling to this turban as it almost slipped from his head.
No. Professor Quirrell could barely help himself.

Hell, the man had been basically responsible for Harry's predicament.

Harry had not been dusting for more than an hour before Professor Quirrell had sneaked up behind him, causing Harry to start, stumble on the ladder where he stood—his screaming wand in the back of the room had not helped—and fall. The ladder had tipped back and then forward and then right into the shelf, sending a marble statue of Herpo the Foul down onto Harry's leg, breaking both bust and bone.

The pain had been excruciating, and Harry had apparently yelled so loudly that someone else had come running to help. Lucky for him that Professor Sprout had been in the halls and heard the noise, because Professor Quirrell had been no help at all. Harry had almost thought he looked pleased, but he had reasoned that it was the pain talking. By the time Professor Sprout had reached Harry's side, he had heard the muttering of a Sleeping Spell and then nothing more.

That was, not until he had woken up and seen first his location, second his leg, and third . . . Professor Dumbledore at the foot of his bed.

"Hello, Mr Potter."

Harry swallowed nervously. Half of him was worried that he would be in trouble for breaking an ancient artefact, but the other half of him knew that the headmaster was not to be left alone with him or any of his cousins. Glancing quickly around the room, Harry could not spot anyone else. "Sir."

"How are you feeling, my boy?" Dumbledore asked. "I heard you took quite the tumble from a ladder."

"Is Professor Quirrell upset about his statue?"

Smiling, the headmaster shook his head. "Hardly. He's much more concerned about you. Downright hysterical, I would say. He feels terrible that he was unable to cast anything in time to prevent your accident."

Looking down at his injury, Harry sighed, automatically thinking of Quidditch—even though he was too young to try out for the team. "Will my leg be okay?"

"It was quite the fracture, but we've seen much worse before," Dumbledore said as he took a seat at the foot of the bed. "A small dose of Skele-Gro did the trick, and you very luckily slept through most of it. I do believe you'll be running through the halls once more by breakfast. Walking by supper, even."

Relieved, Harry slowly exhaled. "Good. That's . . . That's good."

"I've been wanting to speak with you for some time now, Harry."

Maybe it was because they were alone, and he knew they were not supposed to be. Maybe it was because Harry was tired and could still taste the bitterness of Skele-Gro on the back of his tongue, causing his stomach to churn a little. Or maybe it was because Dumbledore used his first name, as though they were friends. Either way, Harry began to say something, but he bit his tongue when the older wizard pulled out what looked like a wrapped present from his robes, setting it down on the bed in front of him.

"I had thought to wait for Christmas, but I wanted to be here when you opened it."
Anxious over the sudden silence that filled the room after Dumbledore's statement, Harry wondered, for the first time since waking, where his wand was. He glanced to the bedside, grateful to see it there—grateful even more that it was being quiet. Without a word of his own, Harry pulled at the ribbon and watched as the gift practically unwrapped itself. The moment Harry's fingers brushed the fabric, he knew what it was.

"This is my dad's—"

"Cloak. Yes, yes it is."

He recalled hearing stories from both Sirius and Remus about how they and his father would use this very cloak to sneak about the halls of Hogwarts. How this very cloak had helped save their lives during certain moments in the war. His grandmother had even told him a tale or two about how his grandfather would hide beneath the cloak during their seventh year at Hogwarts, and wait in the dungeons for her to finish her rounds so they could spend time together unencumbered by hundreds of other students, or jealous suitors.

Harry knew that this cloak was his as much as he knew his wand had chosen him.

Harry also knew that Sirius had searched for this cloak for years, thinking it lost in the rubble of Godric's Hollow. Pulling the cloak close to him, clutching it as though it were a security blanket and he was still a small boy, Harry breathed in the scent of it, finding himself bitter over not recognising the scent of it. A part of him had wondered if, even after all these years, it might still smell a bit like his dad, and whether maybe—just maybe—he would recognise it. But no. The cloak, oddly, smelled of nothing. The longing faded, but the bitterness remained.

"I've been keeping it safe, all these years. Your father entrusted it to me before he . . . well, before. I knew he would want it to be passed down to his son. Use it well, my boy."

Torn between anger and gratitude, Harry clutched the cloak so tightly that his fingers hurt. "Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes?"

Swallowing down his anger and trying to hide the fact that tears were beginning to burn in the corners of his eyes, Harry cleared his throat and said, "I'll . . . I'll be telling my grandmother. She told me you're not supposed to be alone with me."

For a small second, Harry saw the twinkle snuff out of the old man's eyes, and not for the first time, Harry wondered if his grandmother was the one who had put those scars on Albus Dumbledore's face.

Harry watched, not a little nervous, as Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak. Before a word was uttered, however, someone cleared their throat loudly from the doors of the hospital wing. Dumbledore turned his head, allowing Harry a view of the intruder. The sight of his godfather brought relief to him: like having ointment rubbed onto a fresh sunburn.

"Sirius," said Dumbledore, his tone light, "what a wonderful surprise. I don't believe we were expecting you."

Sirius glared at Dumbledore as he approached the bed, his posture imposing and his eyes dark.

It hadn't been until years after having gone to live with his grandmother that Harry had found out—thanks to Draco—that Sirius had spent five years in Azkaban, framed for the murder of his parents. It was moments like this, when the light in Sirius's eyes was smothered out—leaving behind only
burning embers of anger—that Harry could see the fragments that prison must have left behind in his
godfather. Photographs of his life before that time always had light in his gaze.

Harry was unsure of what exactly Sirius was doing there, but considering the hateful expression
aimed at Dumbledore, he would not have been surprised to find out that it was an assassination
attempt. Not wanting his only parent thrown back into prison, Harry decided to distract.

"Dad!"

Embers caught flame, burning back into a brilliant light as Sirius's grey eyes focused on Harry. He
even let out a little smile. "Hey, you. Someone mentioned that you'd had a fall?"

Harry sighed, embarrassed. "More like something fell on me," he said, gesturing to his foot as his
cheeks warmed over. "The headmaster was just checking on me."

"And leaving, no doubt," Sirius said darkly, casting a stern glance as Dumbledore stood. "I'm sure he
is a very busy man."

Watching as Sirius's gaze turned back to him, Harry shifted in the bed and then cringed when the
cloak moved from his lap to the floor, creating a visual obscuration that actually drew attention. He
watched as Sirius's lips parted in recognition.

"Is that . . .?"

"I'll leave you two to visit," Dumbledore said with a smile.

Sirius, eyes still locked on the bit of the cloak that could be seen, gripped Dumbledore by the
shoulder before he left. Without looking at the man, he gritted through his teeth, "Don't think I'll let
this go."

"The past can be a haunting thing, Sirius," Dumbledore said, not looking even slightly intimidated by
the obvious threat, "I find it best to forgive and . . . well . . . forgive."

The moment Dumbledore was through the doors, Harry fumbled in the bed to collect the cloak. "He
said it was a gift."

"One that James should have been able to give you, and if it weren't for that meddling . . ." Sirius
stopped mid sentence, pinching the bridge of his nose and taking in several deep breaths. When he
finally looked back at Harry, he sighed. "Don't look like that, please. I'm not angry with you, son.
I'm sorry."

Feeling embarrassed all over again, Harry furrowed his brow. "I know that."

"It's so good to see you," Sirius said with a smile, sitting on the bed and wrapping his arms around
Harry's shoulders, pulling him up against his chest. "You've no idea how much I've missed you."

"Can you visit more often?" Harry asked, hopeful.

Sirius sighed and shook his head. "Not how it works. Hell, I wouldn't even be here now if it wasn't .
. . Frankly, you shouldn't be thinking of this as a happy visit. I'm here to give you a stern talking to,
Harry. As happy as I am to see you, I was looking forward to you coming home for Christmas, and
I've honestly half a mind to make you stay at Hogwarts over the holiday. Maybe use that time to
wipe clean your growing debt of detention?"

Harry cringed and looked down. He knew Sirius was bluffing about Christmas. Hell, Sirius loved
holidays more than Harry did. There was no way he'd leave Harry at Hogwarts, especially alone in
the castle without Neville and Draco, but the threat being spoken aloud told Harry all he needed to
know about the severity of the issue.

"I didn't mean to—"

"Punch your classmates in the face?" Sirius asked with a raised brow.

"They started it," Harry said with a huff.

"They usually do. Doesn't mean you have to finish it."

Angry, Harry felt his heart begin to race a little. "It's not my fault! They said the bad word, Sirius!
The one that we're never supposed to say! One of them called Hermione it, and the other said so
about Dean. They're not filthy, they're my friends, and I'm gonna punch anyone who says it!"

Sirius sat back, both brows raised in obvious shock. Harry felt his entire face flush as he realised he
had never once raised his voice like that to his godfather. Before Sirius had a chance to say anything
in reaction—or retaliation—Harry blurted out, "You would've done the same for Mum, right?"

Looking very much unamused, Sirius shook his head. "First of all, I said stupid shit like that when I
was your age. Remember that I didn't know any better until I came to Hogwarts and met your dad. I
stopped saying it real quick, because it's not like it gets said much in Gryffindor Tower, but I can't
say what happens in the dungeons. There are still a lot of old families with small minds. You can't
just punch people in the face for saying words you don't like."

Harry folded his arms across his chest. "You got in fights all the time when you were here."

"As much as I'd like to say I wish you'd take after me, I don't. Not how I was back then." Sirius ran a
hand through his hair. Harry noticed a few strands of grey and did his level best not to stare—or,
Morgana forbid, mention them. "Don't misunderstand me, son, if someone attacks you and there's no
adult around to intervene, I'm glad you're capable of standing up for yourself and your friends. But
Minerva's been sending home reports. You've been breaking other rules, showing up to class late,
and being where you shouldn't be. Did you really go looking for a mountain troll?"

Harry sighed. "Not . . . exactly."

Sirius pulled him close again and pressed his lips to Harry's forehead. "I need you safe. Please, for
the love of Merlin, can you just stay safe for me?"

Feeling guilty over his actions and Sirius's grey hair—likely put there by his actions—Harry hugged
his godfather back tightly. "I'll do better. I'm sorry."


Looking back down at the injured appendage, Sirius's brows knit together once more. "Care to tell
me what happened?"

Rolling his eyes, Harry sighed. "Not really. Detention related."

Frowning, Sirius asked, "Was it with Snape?"

Harry snorted. "No. Snape's not really a problem. He's a git, and I don't think he likes me. But
maybe that's because I'm a Gryffindor. And I keep punching Slytherins. Detention was with Quirrell. He's kind of a mess. He was too flustered to cast anything to stop the statue that fell on it."

Sirius's eyes darkened slightly. "Flustered isn't a great thing for a defence professor to be. What about you? I thought you were getting really good with the Levitation Charm."

Harry bit his lip and slowly sucked in a breath through his nose. "I... didn't have my... wand." He didn't bother to look up to see his godfather's expression. He could feel it radiating off of him.

"Harry—"

"I know, I know, I swear, I know, but there's... there's something wrong with it."

="We're going to get detention, just like the Gryffindors."

"Hush, Millie, we are not," Hermione said, aiming a poorly lit wand in one direction and then another. The Wand-Lighting Charm had been exceptional at first, but she noticed it fading the more anxious she became about getting out of... wherever they had gotten lost. "Goodness, you'd think that they'd offer students a map of the school or something to help navigation."

Tracey, who was skipping down the corridor without a care in the world, laughed. "Map wouldn't really help considering how things change. Doors sometimes don't want to open, and the staircases move whenever they feel like it."

"Do we even know what floor we're on?" Greg asked, sticking close to Hermione's side when her wand began to flicker.

Hermione, Tracey, and Millicent all spoke at once.

"Third."

"Fourth."

"Seventh."

Greg sighed, looking utterly defeated. "Great. We're going to die up here. Down here. Wherever we are."

"I miss the dungeons," Tracey groaned, leaning against a statue. It might have been helpful—pinpointing their location—but its head was conveniently missing. "It's hot, wherever we are. Do you think we're near the furnace?"

Millie shook her head and sighed irritably. "You're imagining it. The temperature is fine."

Hermione's wand flickered once more and a cold shiver went up her spine as the light extinguished entirely, plunging them into darkness save for the few sconces on the wall that were set much too far apart to properly light an entire corridor. "I'm actually a little cold."

"I'm a little scared," Greg admitted. "Professor Snape is going to kill us if we're caught out past curfew. It's not even my fault. I trusted you girls to watch the time. And why aren't there any clocks in the library?"

"He makes a good point," Tracey said as they stepped into the light of a dim torch. "I say Greg is now the leader of our little gang. He's clearly the smartest."
"Can you two be quiet?" Hermione said, peeking around a corner only to find another dead end. "We're already out past curfew, and if we're too loud, we're going to attract attention."

"Maybe we should. A professor could at least help us get back to our common room," Greg offered.

"What if Mrs Norris is the one to find us?" Millie said, and they all stopped in their tracks.

Everyone knew the stories of mean old Mrs Norris, who Hermione had deemed the Demon Cat of Fleet Street. She had made the joke once when she had seen the little beast eating a meat pie right off of a Hufflepuff's plate at dinner one evening. It had been funny at first, but they had all begun to secretly wonder if students ever went missing, and if Filch wasn't feeding them to his cat when they were caught out of bed past curfew.

Greg shuddered. "Fair enough. That cat doesn't even like Hermione. And even Potter's ugly monster cat likes Hermione."

"Don't be mean to Max," Hermione said.

"It looks like a werewolf."

Millie shoved her way between Greg and Hermione, her own lit wand raised high, providing them all with ample light to walk by. "How would you know what a werewolf looks like?"

"I've seen pictures in books!"

"Shh!" Hermione scolded.

"I think those photographs are faked," Tracey said, back to skipping. "Do you really think anyone would have a chance in hell of taking a photograph of a transformed werewolf before they were eaten alive?"

"I really want to get back to the dungeons," Greg whimpered.

"Quiet. Do you hear that?" Hermione said, grabbing Millie's hand and lowering the wand, which had the effect of stopping them all in their tracks. There was not a sound, but at the far end of the corridor, two red orbs glowed in the darkness.

Millie extinguished her wand and darted for the nearest door. "Mrs Norris. Quick, run!"

One by one, they quickly squeezed through a door that had been left ajar. Hermione and Millie shoved Tracey and Greg up against a wall, breathing heavily as they listened to footsteps approach and then retreat.

"That was close," Hermione whispered, peeking out the door to watch the distinct shadows of Filch and Mrs Norris vanish in the distance. When she turned back to look at her friends, she got a good look at the room they had hidden in.

Dark shapes of desks and chairs were pushed and stacked to the side, and there was an upturned bin propped against the wall. Next to it was something that didn't look as if it belonged there, something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way.

"Whoa," Greg said as he approached what Hermione could now see was a tall mirror.

High as the ceiling, the mirror was surrounded by an ornate gold frame. At the bottom were two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on*
"What language is that?"

When no one answered her, Tracey asked again. "Guys, what language is—? Guys?"

Hermione, caught in the reflection of the mirror, could barely hear her friend. She looked older, but not by more than a few years. Her hair was longer, less of a mess, and her teeth were straighter as well. She was taller, and her robes fit more to her body, much like her older classmates. One other difference was a shiny Prefect badge gleaming off of her robe. Hermione, overcome with the sight, tried to touch the badge on her robes only to realise that it existed only in the reflection.

"What do you see?" she finally asked.

"My robes are different," Millie said, her voice nearly a whisper. "They're ritual robes. I think they might be from . . . for . . . I think they're for the Black Coven."

"Well, now I see what you lot are looking at," Tracey said with a grin. "Myron Wagtail's worshipping at my feet."

"Who's Myron Wagtail?" Hermione asked, even as she tried to touch the non-existent prefect badge once more.

"Lead singer of the Weird Sisters," Tracey replied.

Finally dragging her gaze away from her own reflection, Hermione looked back up to the inscription. "It's not another language. It's written backward. 'I show not your face, but your heart's desire.'"

"This is the Mirror of Erised," Millie said with a gasp, stepping away from it with her hands outheld as though suddenly nervous to touch it or get too close. "It's ancient. No one touch it. Imagine the bad luck you'll get if you break it."

The girls all took a step back, but Greg stayed where he was, nose practically pressed against the glass.

"Greg," Hermione said, urging him away from the mirror. "Get away from it. It's not real."

"I . . . I know," he whispered.

Frowning, Hermione shared a look with the others before stepping forward and putting a hand on Greg's shoulder. "What do you see?"

"My dad," he answered, his voice tight. "He looks happy. He doesn't look like that very . . . He's smiling a lot. I think he works at the Ministry. His robes are real fancy, and everyone's smiling at him, even the witches. I think he's got lots of friends."

Not knowing all of the details of her friend's life, Hermione felt she had learnt enough to know that Greg's father was a bit of an outcast from society. One side thought him a traitor to their cause—whatever it was—while the rest viewed him as a practitioner of Dark magic, even though Greg swore his father was innocent. Either way, it was a sad existence, she imagined, to live without the support of true friends. Not wanting Greg to feel that way himself, she laced her fingers with his and tried to slowly pry him away from the mirror.

"Come on," she said once she got Greg close to the door of the classroom where Millie and Tracey were waiting. "I don't think we should come back here."
"I agree," Millie said. "It's a distraction. It won't come true unless we take action. They're goals."

Hermione looked at Greg, who had lowered his head as he walked at her side. "I think it's just a magical mirror. And if you ask me, coming from a Muggle upbringing, magical mirrors aren't ever a good thing."

"How do Muggles even know about magical mirrors?" Millie asked.

"A more important question is," Tracey began, looking very serious as she faced Hermione, walking backward down the corridor, "if you know about magical mirrors, how the hell don't you know who the bloody Weird Sisters are?"
Qualified

November 1st, 1991
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Exhausted and stressed from dealing with a majority of Slytherin witches and chatty Hufflepuffs—really, Minerva thought not for the first time, the coven needed to expand to include a few more like-minded Gryffindors; she'd even tolerate some Ravenclaws—the door to Minerva's office opened for her automatically, keyed to her magical signature. It was that fact that caused her a moment of brief distress since she walked into her private quarters to find a brooding Sirius Black using her desk as a sofa, lying across it as he perused a copy of Transfiguration Monthly.

Before she had a chance to even bother asking him how he had entered her room, he said, "Known the password since I was thirteen."

Nose twitching in irritation, Minerva found herself annoyed that she had actually forgotten that a password had been set in the first place. "Remind me to change it," she said coolly before removing her gloves and depositing them roughly onto Sirius's chest. "I did not think you would still be here when I returned. Is Harry all right?"

Sirius tossed the magazine on top of a large pile of old issues that was growing dangerously tall. "His foot's fine, but I caught Dumbledore in the hospital wing talking to him when I arrived. Don't make that face," he said, smiling—though still looking tired as he did so, "I've already sent word back to Mum. She's likely setting things on fire back home as we speak."

"Is that why you've decided to break into my quarters? Scared of retreating to your own domicile?" Minerva quipped, amused at his expression of stubborn pride. He had had the same one when he was eleven, she recalled. A Gryffindor trait.

"Felt nostalgic for the castle, I suppose," Sirius eventually replied. "Can't go walking about the halls, though, so I relocated here."

"Perhaps you can relocate your backside from my desk? I have papers to grade," she said, giving him a good shove until he stood, dusting off a parchment that was stuck to his robes. "You should know that we're taking steps against Dumbledore. Cassiopeia is reaching out to an expert she knows, and in a week's time, there's a meeting of the Board of Governors for the school."

"Good, good," Sirius nodded, sticking his hands in his pockets. He never bothered much with coven details unless he was directly asked to be involved, always deferring to the witches. Minerva knew they always acted in everyone's best interest, most of all Harry, and it was obvious Sirius knew that as well. Still, he was not leaving her office, and his expression had turned pensive, so she rose to the bait. "What's troubling you?"

Frowning, Sirius plumped down on her sofa, causing a bit of dust to puff up out of the cushions. "Am I a good father?"

Brows raised in genuine surprise, Minerva sat back in her chair. "You are not the most conventional parent, but I believe that no one else in the living world could or should raise Harry into the man he'll become." It was no secret that everyone would have preferred James and Lily had survived to bring up their own child, but Sirius had been named godfather for a reason; even Minerva knew that.

"He wasn't ever violent," Sirius said softly. "The boy I just talked to in the hospital wing is different
than the one I put on the train."

Understanding, Minerva nodded and relaxed. "Sirius, I have been teaching children at this school for
many years, and something I have learnt during that time is that each child is never the same the
moment they step onto the train. Nor are they the same child when they return the following year. I
would dare say that Orion and Walburga were quite surprised when you returned home for that first
Christmas away from Hogwarts."

Sirius snorted, clearly amused by whatever memory popped into his mind.

"Harry spent the first few formative years of his life with people who were unkind to him to an
unforgivable degree. The years that followed were spent surrounded by people who loved him
unconditionally and provided for his every need. He's stretching his legs, making choices on his own
for the first time in his life, and he's going to make many mistakes." She thought back to the many
detentions she had personally issued the boy, which paled in comparison to the ones that his father—
both of them—had racked up during their time at Hogwarts. "What's happening to you in regards to
Harry is nothing unusual. You're just like every other parent, Sirius."

The smile he gave her did not quite meet his eyes. "He's not just like every other kid."

"No, he is not."

"Something's wrong with his wand," Sirius said. "He told me that it makes noise. Whistles, chirps,
even screams, he says."

Brow creasing in concern, Minerva leant forward, elbows to her desk. "Constantly?"

Sirius shook his head. "Mostly when he's not where he's supposed to be, but also other times. During
classes."

"Which classes?"

"Didn't think to ask," Sirius replied, suddenly looking much more concerned. "Any idea what that's
about?"

"Wands don't make noise unless we spell them to," Minerva said.

Sighing, Sirius ran a hand through his hair. "Which means that it's Harry."

"Or it's the wand," she whispered. "Belina had it personally constructed by Gregorovich due to
Harry's . . . talents. " It was an unspoken rule not to mention Harry's Parselmouth abilities outside of
coven meetings or in the privacy of Potter Manor, certainly not inside Hogwarts where Dumbledore
could eavesdrop. "I'll send her a letter and let her know. Maybe she can speak with the wandmaker
about it. In the meantime, this brings up another upsetting fact."

"Which is?"

"This has been happening since he arrived at school?" Minerva asked.

Sirius nodded.

"Then this means that Harry is keeping secrets from us."

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November 9th, 1991
Anytime Dumbledore looked in her direction, Dorea narrowed her eyes. He did nothing more than smile at her, the very picture of a polite host. However, as cunning as the man could be, he was still a Gryffindor, and so Dorea caught the little way he would glance in a different direction and scratch at the scars on his face she had given him.

"There's been enough delay," Lucretia said from her seat between Dorea and Augusta. "My plan for the course regarding Wizarding culture is sound, and you all know it. I've done the requested revisions, and considering nothing else has changed from my original outline, I would find it very suspect to bring up more concerns now that were not voiced in prior meetings."

Amused by the challenge issued, Dorea looked around the table at the gathered board of governors, watching as those against the planned class—or the coven—squirmed in irritation. She, of course, was not a member herself, but had been invited—after insisting—with a handful of other concerned family members of students to attend the meeting to voice their worries about what had occurred on Halloween. Dumbledore could hide a three-headed dog all he liked in the castle, but one of his staff members had announced to the entire school that a mountain troll had somehow entered the supposedly well-protected castle. Dumbledore had to answer for that.

In doing so, the man had invited the board to meet at Hogwarts itself to prove its safety, in his office, no less. The room was large due to it's construction, but had been expanded to accommodate the board and invited guests. Much like the occupants of the room, the portraits of former Hogwarts' Headmasters moved themselves to either side of the room, essentially making their own political and social stand. Phineus Nigellus Black moved like a serpent between the paintings, going back and forth between flirting with several of the older pureblood witches to lavishing praise upon Dorea and Lucretia for their efforts in bringing glory to the Black name—regardless of their methods.

Dorea, of course, knew that Dumbledore was hosting the meeting to avoid having to leave the school. Severus Snape had found his pet cerberus, and Dumbledore's distracting wards would only keep the dog hidden for so long, especially if he was not present at the school to prevent Minerva from snooping about.

"Well, I, for one, am for the class," Augusta said, head high.

"Why wouldn't you be?" snapped Mignonette Parkinson, a witch that was old compared to Dumbledore. She pointed a crooked finger down the table at Augusta, and when she raised her brows in obvious anger, her glass eye fell out, splashing in her cup of tea. "The whole thing's been concocted by the Black Coven, clear as day!"

Unaffected by the witch's tone—or floating eyeball—Augusta sneered in Mignonettes direction. "I don't recall asking your opinion on the matter, Madam Parkinson."

"Ladies, ladies," Lucius said from his seat beside the old woman, patting her hand affectionately, "let us keep things civil, shall we?"

For all that the board knew Lucius Malfoy was essentially in the pocket of the coven thanks to his wife being a founding member, Mignonette shut right up, batting her one good eye at him. He gave her a trademark Malfoy grin that turned Dorea's stomach a bit. She had grown quite used to the man over the years and found Draco to be both intelligent and polite, but it was hard to not see Abraxas in them both sometimes.

Clearing his throat, Dumbledore took control of the meeting and let out a soft sigh. "Those in favour of implementing Mrs Prewett's new course into next year's curriculum?"
All but three hands were raised, and the motion passed.

Lucretia visibly shook with excitement and triumph. "You won't be disappointed. I strongly believe that this course will help integrate the Muggle-raised children into our culture, bring about a new era of tolerance and acceptance, while also reinvigorating the celebratory parts of our own history and traditions."

"Yes, by all means, let's teach the savage little beasts blood magic," Charles Pucey hissed under his breath, despite being one of the hands that had risen in favour of the motion.

Dorea did not even need to glance up from her nails, which she examined with seemingly great interest. Augusta Longbottom slapped her palm on the table, her voice shrill as she snapped, "Those who have a problem with worthy witches being taught sacred magic, are very likely those who are unworthy of it themselves."

"It's nonsense, that the government let you all just . . . go about cursing whoever you please."

"If we cursed whoever we pleased, believe me, the population of Wizarding Britain would be a great deal decreased," Augusta said. "Never mind other countries I've bones to pick with."

"Other countries?" Lucretia asked curiously.

Augusta waved her off. "I have a lifelong grudge with a witch from Poland that broke my brother's heart when he was a boy."

" Didn't you curse your own brother with pustules?" Mignonette asked, sharing a smug look with Euphemia Rowle, who promptly began snorting.

"Boils," Dorea, Lucretia, and Augusta said all at once.

Lucius cleared his throat. "Ladies, I do believe we've gone a bit off topic."

"Well then perhaps we shouldn't waste the boards time any longer than we must," Dorea said as she folded her hands in her lap, pinning Dumbledore with a neutral expression. "I'm sure all the family members present here today are just as concerned for their children and grandchildren as I am, considering a Mountain Troll somehow broke into the castle on Halloween."

"Troubling, to be certain, yes," Dumbledore agreed, effectively shushing whispers of concern from around the table and in the seats behind Dorea. She half regretted insisting that the rest of the coven not make an appearance. Considering Cedrella had four grandsons in the castle, she was ready to make war on Hogwarts single-handedly. "But I can assure everyone that the threat has passed, the troll was dealt with most effectively, and the entrance through which we believe he found his way in, has been warded off."

"Good to know," Lucius said, looking somewhat uninspired by Dumbledore's assurance. "I dare to wonder what other entrances might be left unattended for other beasts to get in through. Especially with the Forbidden Forest just outside your door."

"Indeed," Parkinson said, nodding their head. "What other creatures might get in and harm the children? Centaurs hate humans; everyone knows that. And I heard there are werewolves in that forest as well."

"Nonsense," Augusta objected. "Stories that the children tell at night to scare one another."

"As though your lot would object," Euphemia sneered. "It's a wonder the Muggle-borns are even
allowed to come to Hogwarts. Perhaps their parents aren't aware that the first instruction there children receive is from a beastly creature."

"What do you mean?" someone from behind Dorea timidly asked.

"Oh, don't you know? The Black Coven's little programme for the Muggle children is taught by a werewolf."

"Surely not!"

"I would invite any naysayers to come to a lesson," Dorea said softly, her gaze burning the witch at the end of the table for daring to mention Remus in such a way, even if it wasn't by name. Augusta was right; people were lucky that the coven didn't have free reign to go about cursing every person that crossed their path. They were specific and careful when they called their enemies out publicly. It was a shock to half of the members that they'd yet to actually kill anyone.

"But speaking of evaluating the credentials of teachers," Dorea said, turning her attention back to Dumbledore. "I received word from no less than ten different parents stating they had owls home from Hogwarts about the incident. Is it true that your defence professor was the one who found the troll, announced its presence in the middle of the Great Hall, thus causing the entire student body to panic, and then ran off?"

"No," Augusta interrupted. "I heard he fainted."

Lucius scoffed and adjusting his sleeves. "Doesn't quite inspire, does it?"

"Is this the fellow that once taught that silly Muggle class?" Pucey asked. "Well, I would hardly call that qualified."

"It's not his previous experience that makes me have issues," Lucretia voiced calmly. "It's the fact that we depend on our defence professors to be the foundation of level-headedness for the children. How are they supposed to react calmly when the man employed to teach them how to protect themselves panics in the face of danger?"

"How was the creature handled?" Dorea asked Dumbledore. "I assume humanely?"

"Of course," Dumbledore said. "A troll without his weapon is not much of a threat. He was quite easily disarmed and then bound. We had Hagrid and the assistance of other staff members help get him relocated back to the mountains where he belongs."

"So then does your Professor Quirrell not know how to disarm an opponent? It's the most basic of defence magic," Dorea said, her temper finally beginning to show, something she let slip through on purpose. "Do not misunderstand me, Albus," she said, using the man's first name as though they were friendly acquaintances. "We put trust in the staff of Hogwarts because of their vast experience. Minerva McGonagall is a well-known Transfiguration expert and an Animagus. There is no better to teach the students this craft. Filius Flitwick," she began to say, holding up a hand to Mignonette Parkinson—who looked eager to interrupt—"whilst part-goblin, something not entirely comfortable for a few older generation to handle, is known for his charm work throughout many countries. The same can be said of most of the rest of your staff. Even the younger teachers, like Professor Snape, have been published for their contributions in their varying fields."

"Severus has actually been published in a few defence publications as well," Lucretia pointed out.

"And so we have to wonder . . . Albus," Dorea said, leaning forward in her seat, "how can we trust this man to keep our children safe?"
Dumbledore sighed softly, rubbing his head for a split second before changing course and using the movement to make it look like he was contemplatively running his fingers through his beard. "Madam . . . Everyone, I understand your concerns, but I have faith that—"

"Perhaps a demonstration?" Lucius asked with a small smirk. "I'm certain if we can see that the man knows even the most basic of spells, it will subdue the nerves of we anxious parents. Forgive me, Dumbledore, but my only son lives in the dungeons that a mountain troll wandered through. I've only the one heir, and don't have any backups like several . . . other families."

"Oh for the love of . . ." Lucretia rolled her eyes.

Dorea quieted, letting the other voices in the room speak for her. Lucius egged on the blood purists at the end of the table, and Mignonette grew so heated that her eye popped out once more and rolled across the table. The other parents behind Dorea became deafeningly loud with their concerns, and eventually, Dumbledore held up his hands in supplication.

"Very well," he said, writing a note on a piece of parchment that magically folded itself into the shape of a bird, flapped its little paper wings and flew directly into the open fireplace, leaving behind a trail of green sparks. "Now, Professor Quirrell has worked very hard here at Hogwarts for several years. I do not believe he had any intention for the children to come to harm, and I hardly think it humane to verbally assault the man the moment he steps through the doors. Even if he were not very skilled at combative spells, he is well-learned in theory and introduction. The first years alone have learnt—"

"First years nothing," a parent from behind Dorea snapped angrily. She turned and looked into the scowling face of Aurelius Flint. "My boy has his bloody N.E.W.T.s to prepare for!"

Several other parents chimed in with worries about their children who were approaching years of important exams, or even planning on entering dangerous fields like Auror work and Curse-Breaking, which required near perfect scores in Defence Against Dark Arts.

The crowd descended into—well, Dorea would hardly call it chaos, but it did not exactly look like a pleasant experience by the way Dumbledore had stopped smiling entirely. She did not know him well enough to know exactly how he thought, but over the years she had spent a decent amount of time with Aberforth Dumbledore, who had no qualms about letting you know exactly—and in great detail—how displeased he was about any little thing on any given day. The brothers were not very similar, from what Dorea had experienced, but they did look quite a bit alike when very obviously perturbed by something.

Leaning to the side, Dorea gestured for Lucretia to listen. "Congratulations on the curriculum approval. I know you already have your course planned out in detail, but if I can make a suggestion?"

"Of course," Lucretia said with a smile as though angry parents hadn't begun swearing at the board of governors around them. Lucius and Augusta, at least, looked entirely unbothered by the scene.

"I would meet with Remus and Ted. Mary and Andromeda too, in fact. We'll have little concern with the magically raised children depending on what they've already learnt at home, but there may be some things to worry about when it comes to the Muggle-borns."

"I already know some of the parents have religious objections to magic and Hogwarts," Lucretia said, nodding thoughtfully. "And from few Muggles that I've met, there are other problems that could arise in time."
Dorea silently agreed. While it wasn't exactly on the outlined course, the fact was that magic existed in every single aspect of their lives from the simple ways they used it to make things like work, cooking, cleaning, and travelling easier, all the way to the more complex issues like how magic developed inside of a person, and how that magic was affected by the introduction of changes in a body, or outside influences like families, rituals, bondings, and even sex.

Just as she was trying vehemently not to think about how terribly awkward the talk with Harry would be—and both terrified and grateful that it was Sirius's job to give it—the door to Dumbledore's office opened, and the room fell quiet.

"Ah," Dumbledore smiled up at the frail-looking man in a turban that stepped into the office, "Quirinius, I thank you very much for taking the time to come and visit with us. I don't believe you've had the pleasure of meeting the board of governors?"

The man wrung his hands together as he turned to face the crowd. His knuckles were as white as his face. "I haven't had the p-p-pleasure. No, th-th-thank you, Headmaster."

"And we also have a few family members of the students here to—"

"Lapsus," Dorea said loudly and clearly, aiming her wand in a grand fashion at the professor. A bolt of red light burst from her wand striking him in the chest. He made a loud squeaking noise before falling backward, knocking the back of his head against the ground with a thud.

"He can't even avoid a Tripping Jinx?" Augusta asked with a voice that belayed disgust. "Mother of Morgana, my grandson can probably avoid that."

Dorea did not stop to wonder if that were true. Neville was a sweet and trusting boy, but none of the children had yet learnt any defensive measures other than dodging, and that was thanks to growing up with one another playing in the gardens and orchards of various homes. Rather than focusing on whether or not the children could avoid a Tripping Jinx, she was too intrigued by the way that Professor Quirrell grabbed at his turban and began crying in anguish. He did not look pained, however loud the thud was when he hit his head. He looked . . . Dorea was not certain how to explain it. Embarrassed, perhaps? Maybe guilty. Perhaps if one could combine the two emotions and add a good measure of fear.

Whatever it was, Dorea could say one thing for certain: "This man is not fit to teach our children how to protect themselves."

Once Professor Quirrell had been escorted from the room, the families were dismissed with apologies and forthcoming changes that would be implemented to help keep the students at the school safe. The board left, one by one, until all that remained behind were members of the coven and Lucius Malfoy, who looked positively tickled that his company was the least offending presence in Dumbledore's office.

"I understand your concerns," Dumbledore said, his tone changed from that of gracious host to burdened man. "But my hands are tied in certain areas."

"If you would only allow yourself to help us in this fight, Dumbledore. We do not always have to be at odds with one another. I am well aware that you do not intentionally bring chaos and danger into the lives of your students . . . at least not all the time," Dorea said with a twitch of the nose. Five years ago, she would have said it through grit teeth, but she had grown since then after watching both Harry and Sirius flourish outside of their respective prisons. "But in isolating yourself and keeping secrets, you are making enemies instead of allies."
"Madam Potter, we have been over this many times—"

"Yes, yes, you trust a Black coven witch about as much as a Goblin with a pet Niffler," she snapped, waving her hand dismissively at him. "But putting aside your idiocy regarding Voldemort for the moment, this is about the children. Their education, Dumbledore. That man might be fine—I suppose—to teach Muggle Studies, but I am half positive that Filch could somehow wrestle his wand away from him. Defence instructors need to be able to defend themselves."

"They are also in short supply," Dumbledore replied, looking exhausted. "It's not as though I don't want the best for the children. I do."

"I believe that," Dorea said. Whatever motives he had, they were always with the best intentions, paving his road to hell and all that. "So maybe you could let the coven assist in a search for an expert. I know you trust us very little, but you cannot deny that there are several of us witches who are actually qualified to teach."

"And when something, ultimately bad, happens after a year of working at Hogwarts?" Dumbledore asked.

Lucretia, newly appointed to teach at the school, held up both hands. "Wait. Repeat that, please?" When Dumbledore just sighed in response, Lucretia shook her head. "Don't tell me that you buy into the rumours of that supposed curse?"

"What curse?" Dorea asked.

"Don't you know?" Lucius questioned as he stood, dusting off his robes as he headed toward the Floo. "I suppose it did not begin until well after you had left. The defence position is cursed. No teacher ever lasts more than a full year. I went through seven years with seven—no, eight—different defence professors."

"Eight?" Dorea echoed in shock.

"Yes, two were fired for misconduct, one was offered a position elsewhere, four gravely injured, and the last, if I recall, went missing."

"Is this true?" Augusta asked Lucretia. "I don't . . . I mean, I recall hearing rumours and such from when Frank attended, but I didn't give it much thought."

Dorea blinked, remembering when James and Sirius were young boys. They talked mostly about their friends and pranks they pulled, their undying affection for Minerva, their impulsive adoration for members of the opposite—and in Sirius's case sometimes, the same—gender, and of course complaints about detention and exams. Other than Minerva and the instructors that Dorea knew from her own time at Hogwarts and the few who remained at the school now, she'd not given much thought to the others who came and went. Cursing herself for not having that foresight, she turned a heated glare at Dumbledore. "So why is the position cursed, and how can it be undone?"

"I have tried for many years," he said. "Nothing helps. Professor Quirrell will likely be gone by the end of the year as well. Hopefully not maimed in the process." By the look on his face, Dumbledore doubted that very much.

"Perhaps he'll be gobbled up by a three-headed dog," Augusta said under her breath, and Dumbledore sighed.

"Not now," Dorea said. "Why is the position cursed?"
Dumbledore said nothing.

"For the sake of all that is . . . Dumbledore! These are our children!"

When he remained silent on the matter, Dorea had half a mind to claw his face once again, but doubted that she would reach him in time. She noted, rather pleasantly, that his wand was in his hand, albeit sitting idly as though he were not preparing for an attack. She knew better. "Ignore us then, we'll do it ourselves. I'll get Camilla and Nymphadora to look in on it. You will let them into the school," she demanded, just now noticing that during the commotion, Lucius had departed. "Or I'll get the board and the Wizengamot involved."

"Is it the room?" Augusta asked curiously. "Is it the room or the position? Perhaps the employment contract?"

"The position, as far as I've been able to figure out," Dumbledore said. "Why?"

Augusta grinned, an expression that both intrigued Dorea and made her feel uneasy all at once. "Keep your silly little Quirrell," she said, looking suddenly triumphant. "I have an idea."

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**December 1st, 1991**

Foot fully healed and feeling fine, Harry walked into the Great Hall for breakfast with Neville and Dean, stopping to spare a look of sympathy to Ron and Seamus, who were presently defending their turf at the Gryffindor table from Lavender Brown, Parvati Patil, and Sally Smith. Harry hoped that his friends won, because he was worried that the girls were trying to get closer to the other end in order to pester him.

"You guys get seats and don't hog all the marmalade," he said, waving off Neville and Dean before making his way across the room to stop by the Slytherin table.

"And what brings you by this morning to grace us with your presence, cousin?" Draco asked, grinning as he spun around to face Harry, leaning his elbows on the table behind him. "Come to give me an early Christmas gift? More Chocolate Frog Cards, I hope."

"Shut up," Harry said with no heat, rolling his eyes. "I got a letter from Sirius last night saying that the family thing for Yule is scheduled, and we can invite our friends if we want. I came to see if you'd already told the girls about it."

At that, both Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass sat up straight.

"Er . . . I meant . . ." He casually gestured down to the end of the table where Hermione was buried nose-deep in a textbook between Millicent and Tracey. Not wanting to see the looks of either disappointment or disgust on the pureblood girls' faces, Harry swiftly turned back to Draco. "Well?"

"I have not, as of yet, invited anyone. How many of your Gryffindor idiots will be showing up?" Draco asked, looking over at the Gryffindor table as Ron and Seamus both screamed in pain when the charmed butterfly clips in Lavender's braids turned and bit them.

"Uh . . ." Harry said, slightly concerned that he now had to worry about hair accessories attacking him in his sleep. "I don't know about Ron, considering his mum only lets him come every so often. It's a family event, though. Not coven."

"Won't matter," Draco said. "Those words are synonymous with one another ninety percent of the time. They double, double toil and trouble over ritual cauldrons or cake moulds and bakewell tarts."
It's all the same thing. Regardless, we're just there to look good and reap the benefits."

"Anyway," Harry said, ignoring his cousin. "I don't know if Ron's coming. Seamus has a family thing, and Dean's grandfather is sick, so he's got to go home for the holiday. Which was why I thought I'd make sure to invite Hermione and Millicent."

"Not the pretty one?" Nott asked with a teasing smirk.

Harry's brows furrowed. "Which one would that be?"

Nott rolled his eyes and then gestured to the end of the table. Hermione was still blissfully reading, taking a bite of toast as her eyes scanned the words on the page with ferocity. Millicent was busy with a quill in hand, looking like she was editing an essay. Tracey, on the other hand, was concentrating on a Levitating Charm on a mirror with one hand, while she applied lip gloss with the other.

"Tracey can't come. Something about her dad and my dad . . . I wasn't really listening," Harry lied, trying not to talk too loudly in the hopes that Tracey didn't hear him mention his godfather, or else she'd bat her eyelashes and ask how Sirius was doing. He was pretty sure that she did it just to bother him, but it was weird enough that he didn't want to outright provoke her. "But Millicent and Hermione should come. I would say Goyle too, but—"

"Don't invite him," Draco said quietly, and Nott nodded in agreement. "And he'll know better than to accept even if you did. Which you shouldn't."

Harry sighed in agreement. He didn't quite know everything that happened with all of the parents however long ago, but he knew that while he was allowed to be friendly with the younger Goyle, the coven did not openly associate with the father. When he asked Sirius about it in a letter once after meeting the boy, Sirius had replied that it was coven business and not to worry about it. Despite the knowing looks on Draco and Nott's faces, he was pretty sure that neither of them really knew what was going on either.

"Are we done here?" Draco asked impatiently, grinning when Harry shoved him in the shoulder. "Go on and bother the witches with your coven recruiting."

"I'm not recruiting," Harry replied as he turned to walk away.

He refused to turn back when Draco said, "You think you're not."

"Wotcher, Hermione," he said as he plopped down across the table from the girls. "Millicent. Tracey."

"Morning, Potter," Tracey said, smacking her lips together as she stared in the mirror.

"Good morning, Harry," Hermione said pleasantly, looking up from her book. Silently, she pushed the communal plate of toast in front of him in offering.

Harry took a look at the plate before glancing back down the length of the table to see some of the older Slytherins glaring at him. It wasn't customary that you ate at another House's table. Spitefully, he snatched up a piece of toast and bite into it, chewing with dramatic, defiant flare. He was half tempted to reach for his wand, but was self-aware enough to know that he didn't know enough spells to counteract whatever the older students might throw at him. That, and he had promised his godfather he would stop getting into trouble. That, and his wand had been behaving as of late. Harry wondered if it had anything to do with the fact that his Aunt Lucretia had sent him a book on wandlore with promises that Aunt Belina was looking into the issue for him.
When the Slytherins looked away, most rolling their eyes at him, he grinned and turned back to his friend. "So listen, I don't know what you're doing for Yule, but my family is having a party and I wanted to invite you. All of you, actually. Well, er, not you Tracey. Sorry?"

"No offence taken," she said. "I know you're worried that if we ever meet face-to-face, your godfather will realise that he's my soulmate and—"

"Oh my god, stop," Hermione said, looking like she was trying not to laugh.

"Please." Harry mimicked gagging, and chuckled when Hermione laughed at him. "But it'll be fun, and you should come by. My grandmother has lots of old books that you'd love."

Hermione lifted a brow. "Would she actually let me read them?"

Thinking about it, Harry bit his lower lip before amending, "I'm sure she'd tell you about them?"

Shaking her head with a smile, Hermione said, "I'd really love to, but unfortunately I'm already going to a Yule party. Millie was invited to one by the Black Coven, and I'm going as her guest."

She looked fit to burst with laughter, and Harry narrowed his eyes as he realised that the party she was already going to was one in the same. Feeling his cheeks warm over with slight embarrassment, especially since he could see Millicent finally smirk from beneath dark fringe, her eyes still set on her essay. He took another bite of the toast and tried to look nonchalant about the whole thing.

"Well, I suppose I'll just see you both there."

Harry stood, piece of toast hanging out of his mouth as he dusted the crumbs off on his trousers. The moment he was fully upright, the entire room went silent. It took him several long seconds of people staring at him to realise that Dumbledore had risen from his seat at the front of the room.

"Oops," he muttered and quickly dashed across the room, almost barrelling into a Ravenclaw on the way to the Gryffindor table, uttering apologies as he went. Once sat beside Dean and across from Neville, Harry noticed that Ron and Seamus were still nursing tiny bite wounds on their arms. It was hard not to laugh, but he kept silent.

"Good morning, students," Dumbledore began. "I hope you are all enjoying this fine breakfast. I suppose some of you are wondering about the new face amongst the staff members."

"New face?" Harry asked, blinking as he tilted his head to notice that, indeed, there was a new person sitting with the rest of the teachers.

The man was enormous, hard to miss as he sat squished into a chair between Professors Flitwick and Snape. He wore what looked like an antique velvet suit with shiny buttons, and his walrus-like moustache twitched a little. Had he more hair, Harry would have been reminded of his Uncle Vernon, which was never a pleasant comparison for anyone. The new addition to the Hogwarts staff seemed to smile, if a little nervously, so he quickly pegged him as nothing like Vernon Dursley, who Harry could not recall smiling once.

"Horace Slughorn was once a professor here at Hogwarts, and one of the finest Potions Masters that Britain has to offer. He has graciously accepted to resume his old position here."

"No more Snape?" Neville whispered hopefully even as the Slytherins began to whisper amongst themselves.

"There will be a change to the curriculum when coming back from Christmas holiday," Dumbledore
continued. "To further your education, the defence course has been split into two classes. Professor Quirrell will continue on as your teacher for Defence Against the Dark Arts, however, he will focus more on theory and the history of defence. A more practical approach will, henceforth, be instructed by Professor Snape."

"We have to have two defence classes now?" Dean complained. "Are they both allowed to assign essays, do you think?"

"Do you think Snape will be allowed to hex us?" Neville wondered aloud.

Harry, watching the Slytherin table cheering triumphantly, smiled a little when he saw Hermione and Millicent exchange happy words. Despite his own issues with the surly professor, it was obvious that his own House adored him . . . for some reason.

"Everyone knows Snape wanted that position. He's all about the Dark arts," Ron commented, earning nods of approval from Fred and George who were eavesdropping. "Look how bloody happy he is."

"Quirrell doesn't look too happy, though," George commented.

"Well, who wants to take defence theory?" Fred asked with a chuckle.

Harry watched the normally fidgety professor with his arms across his chest, looking almost petulant. Feeling slightly victorious at the man's discomfort over the situation, Harry wondered if this was because of his grandmother. He wouldn't put it past her to get a man fired—or at the very least demoted—over his injury.

Just when he began to push those thoughts out of his head, Professor Quirrell glanced in his direction.

For the first time in over a month, Harry's wand chirped.
"Good to see you, boy," Aberforth said with a smile as he poured whisky into a glass. The pleased look on his face was not something that happened very often, considering the way that his skin stretched a bit oddly over his cheeks.

Cassie decided not to be irritated with the fact that she rarely saw Aberforth smile. He had other facial expressions reserved for her. Her attention, instead, was drawn to the man—certainly not a boy—at the bar. His hair was white as snow, not a single strand of red she recalled from their youth. Of course, she had seen him several times as a grown man, but it was hard not to remember who he had been so very long ago. Especially since his photograph awkwardly smiled back at her from several books she owned.

He had been out of Hogwarts by the time she was born, a world traveller and a soldier of war by the time she herself was in Hogwarts. She remembered looking up from her seat in the Great Hall as a student the day that he had shown up at Hogwarts to visit Dumbledore. He had smiled timidly at the gathered students during a very brief introduction before he was whisked away. Cassie had been one of several students who caught him at a good moment in order to get his autograph. Being an avid lover of beasts and creatures herself, her signed copy of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* was on a shelf back at the chateau with a strong Preservation Charm on it.

There were few people who could make Cassie starstruck, and even fewer that she considered a friend, but Newt Scamander was both. "I didn't know you drank whisky," she said, stepping out of the shadows.

Aberforth let out a put-upon sigh and poured her a drink as she sidled up next to Newt. "Leave the lad alone, woman."

"Ignore him, darling. He's so terribly jealous when I flirt with other men." She placed a hand on Newt's arm, cringing internally at the feel of the rough fabric that made up his coat. "And you're not at all a lad. Still handsome as ever, though."

"Still married too," Newt said sheepishly, looking down at the whisky that he'd not yet touched.

"Daggers to my heart," Cassie said affectionately. "Truthfully, how is your dear wife? Enjoying the travelling? Last I heard, you were somewhere in . . . Morocco?"

"Brazil," Newt corrected, his eyes suddenly alight. "I was studying a very rare Fire Slug. Tina stayed home during that trip with the grandchildren. Well, our old home. Pulled up roots and came back to Dorset recently. Haven't quite finished moving in, though."

"How old are they now?"

Remaining just as enthusiastic as he was about Fire Slugs, Newt replied, "Rolf's just gone off to Ilvermorny this year."

"Shame," she said. "The Scamander family went to Hogwarts for centuries. I can't believe you allowed your progeny to be schooled in America."

"It has its charms," Newt said. "And Tina's family all went there. So did our children. Sometimes it's
good to begin new traditions. Or, perhaps, resurrect old ones?" He eyed her speculatively. "Your coven is making headlines."

"Always," she said with a grin, sipping from her whisky. "I'm sure you'd love to see some of the things we're working on."

"Of course," Newt agreed. "I hear you've got a man afflicted with Lycanthropy working for your foundation? I'd love to meet him."

"Study him?" Cassie corrected playfully.

"Meet," Newt insisted. "Your sister, on the other hand . . ."

Grinning, Cassie finished her drink and then reached for his. "You of all people should know that dragons can't be tamed. I'll give your Floo to her Healer, if you'd like. He's the one with all the research. Is that why you came back to England? Dragons? I heard about the raid on the breeding reserve in—"

"California," Newt finished, suddenly looking very sad. "It was illegal breeding, don't get me wrong—and the States have laws against creatures still—but that breed was endangered, and they had them all destroyed rather than relocated."

"Those Americans should listen to you more often," Cassie said, a twinge of anger twisting within her.

"To be fair, I've not had much success with people in England listening to me either," he said. "Which is why I'm concerned you think I'll have any affect on your problem. Albus won't take my word for anything if he's made up his mind. I can give you my research on the cerberus, but if you think me talking to him will do much good, then—"

"I know the history, and not just the parts people put in fancy books," Cassie said quickly. "I'm not here to use you as a tool against Albus Dumbledore, I promise. Just the advice of someone who knows more than me about a subject dear to my heart. I'll be very sore if something were to happen to that poor dog."

"Always thought you more of a cat person." He smirked, giving Aberforth a grateful smile when the barkeep poured him a glass of pumpkin juice. "Speaking of which, Mauler had a litter about six months back. We normally don't breed, but she got out one night and took up with a stray. Can't give them to Muggles, of course, because they're half Kneazle and already enormous. Plus, these ones are just as ornery as their mum."

Grinning at the thought of sticking an angry Kneazle kitten in Aberforth's bed, Cassie said, "Oh, honey, I'd take them all off your hands, if you want."

Newt laughed and then sighed, looking up at Cassie. He reached up and gave a friendly tug on one of her blond curls, watching as it bounced right back in place. "It's good to see a friend, Cassiopeia."

"It's good to have you back home, Newton," she said, poking at his shoulder and wondering why his eyes suddenly went a little misty. She never cried, as Newt had always been a bit funny about his private life, and getting the man to open up about anything other than his research or his pets was like prying something shiny out of the grip of a Niffler. "I'm glad you came home. I know Britain took a lot away from you."

Nodding solemnly, Newt whispered, "America took more."
"I'm glad your coven is doing more to integrate Muggle-borns and create relationships with their non-magical families. In that, I think we've always been ahead of other countries. It's good to see the old ways die out with the birth of new generations."

It was a clear deflection, so Cassie decided not to push. "Now that you're back, you should teach. You're too young to retire, but there's a rumour that old Kettleburn might be looking to do so."

Newt snorted in amusement. "Well, he's younger than me, but I've at least got both my legs. And eyes. And arms. I appreciate the thought, but as much as I love Hogwarts, my time there wasn't always the best of my life. If they're seriously looking for a replacement for Kettleburn, though, I'll let my son know. He'd be good for the job, and he's a little fed up with the Department of Magical Beasts at MACUSA."

"It's settled then," she said matter of factly, causing the man to smile. "You're giving me research and a new litter of Kneazle beasts, and I've given you my never-ending adoration, access to my dragon sister's Healer, and a cherry on top, little Jimmy gets a new job."

Newt chuckled and then softly said, "Your hospitality is almost as good as Aberforth's pumpkin juice." As he stood, he grimaced and rubbed his left knee. "Come to dinner soon. I'll give you the research then, and you can pick up the kittens."

"Better yet," Cassie began, finishing off the rest of his whisky and ignoring the way that one of Aberforth's stupid little goats began affectionately chewing on the end of Newt's scarf, "why don't you come to my sister's for Yule? We're having a little family get together. Just the coven and close friends."

"The kids might be coming to visit," he said thoughtfully.

"There you are then," Cassie raised the empty glass in toast. "We'll have a grand time. Bring that sweet wife of yours and little Jimmy and his brood."

"I'll think about it, thank you. Oh, and it's Jacob."

"Come again?" Cassie asked.

Newt smiled and said, "My son. His name is Jacob."

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December 22nd, 1991
Potter Manor

"I feel underdressed," Hermione said anxiously as she and Millie stepped out of the large Floo and into what she assumed was Potter Manor.

It was her first time using that method of travel, but Millie's mother had given her a Stomach Ease Potion to help with the potential nausea of a first trip. Gripping Millie's hand the moment her feet hit solid ground, Hermione quickly caught her balance and hoped that no one noticed her stumbled entrance. The room, which looked like a foyer, was empty save for a large cat pacing back and forth in the corner. The only thing it had in common with Harry's cat was its size. With jet black fur save for a white spot on the end of its tufted tail, it had a face that reminded Hermione of a lion.

"Is that a Kneazle?" After meeting Max on the train, Hermione had devoured her copy of Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them in order to learn all the little details she might have missed during
her first read through. Having loved cats since she was small, she became fascinated with Kneazles.

"Half, I'd say," Millie muttered as she nervously adjusted her robes.

"Stop," Hermione said, admonishing her friend with a gentle elbow to the arm. "You look fine."

"What if they don't like me?" Millie huffed, running her hands through her hair, which was turning an almost fluorescent green. "Oh, bloody hell."

"Are you doing that on purpose?" Hermione asked, eyes wide.

Millie shook her head. "I'm not a Metamorphmagus, if that's what your asking," she said coolly. "I'm just anxious is all. How terribly does it look?"

"I like it," Hermione said with an affectionate smile as she reached out and touched Millie's hair. "And we do look good in green," she added with a little laugh.

Her own mother had wanted to put her in a yellow dress; having not known whether or not the Wizarding world celebrated Christmas the same way, she had not wanted to default to red or green. Hermione, however, asked for a simple grey dress with a green sash, not wanting to lean heavily on colours attributed to other Hogwarts Houses. Her hair was pulled back into some semblance of a plait, though random curls had fought their way loose like springs out of a broken mattress.

"Why are you so worried?" she asked Millie, stopping to pet the black Kneazle on their way toward the sound of the party. The large cat butted its head against her hand before spinning in a circle, its tail briefly wrapping around her arm. "I thought you were related to the Blacks."

"Distantly. Just enough to maybe, potentially qualify me for eventual acceptance to their coven."

Millie took a deep breath and let out a slow exhale, running her hand through her dark hair once more, the ends of which were still green.

"Well, that makes sense, I suppose. I only have one cousin on my dad's side. Mum only has the one brother, and I've never met him since he lives in Canada. No cousins there."

"The Black Coven isn't just family. It's more than family," Millie said, still fidgeting. Hermione briefly wondered what the older Slytherins, or worse, Professor Snape would say about her obviousness.

"I guess I still don't understand the coven much," she said, her attention focused on the cat that was now rubbing against her tights, creating static in its fur as it moved. "I get the practice in theory, but from what little I've read, it sounds a bit like church. Is it religious? Do they actually worship Morgana?"

Millie blinked, looking as though she had been focusing on something else while Hermione was talking. "What? No. More like a coven uses an idol as their status. Someone to say 'This is who we model ourselves after.' Witches and wizards aren't deified," she said and then scoffed loudly before adding, "Though you'd be hard-pressed to notice the difference between respect and worship with some people and Merlin."

"So strange." Hermione grinned, watching as the cat finally darted off to chase after some random sound in the distance. "Just a year ago, Merlin and Morgana were little more than stories to me."

"All legends are built from stories," Millie said with a smile that looked like armour trying to hide her anxiety. "One day, hundreds of years from now, people could be using any of us as an idol."
Grinning, Hermione looped her arm through her friend's and said, "All praise Millie."

The hallway they walked down opened up into a massive area the size of the Great Hall. It was obviously charmed to expand, as the structure of the walls was warped in a way that looked stylish yet not entirely functional. Hermione doubted very much that it was built in such a way. The stone floors were shined, looking like black marble with little flecks of diamonds scattered across it like stars in the night sky. She let out an astonished gasp when one such diamond moved, brushing past her foot with great speed like a shooting star.

"Millie, it's almost like the ceiling at Hogwarts," she said in an excited whisper.

"Stop being such a mop," Millie pleaded through gritted teeth. "You've done actual magic before, remember?"

"Don't be a grump." Hermione said, letting go of Millie's arm so she could twirl around and catch another shooting star moving behind her.

"You must be Millicent."

Almost tripping over her feet, Hermione bolted back around to watch as Millie politely curtseyed in front of an older witch with dark red hair. The woman, like many in the room now that Hermione paid attention to the people instead of the walls and flooring, was wearing a long black dress lined in sparkly green, much like the sash around her waist—or, if she could say honestly, the streaks in Millie's hair.

"Yes, Madam Weasley. It's an honour. Thank you so much for inviting me," Millie said, cheeks turning pink as the older witch smiled and affectionately brushed a strand of hair behind her ear as though they had met before.

"You're family, are you not?" Madam Weasley said. "And I see you've brought a friend."

Smile dropping into her stomach—with what she assumed was a splash—Hermione swallowed nervously, having previously thought that she would hide in the background of the room. "Is that all right, Madam Weasley? Millie's invitation said that . . . and Harry also invited, I mean to say—"

"Calm down, dear," Madam Weasley said with a grin, looking mischievous as she placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Take a breath."

Doing so, Hermione briefly wondered if she should wait for an order to exhale. She felt silly now, standing in the presence of one of the Black witches. Professor McGonagall was one thing—and Hermione often found herself nervous around the woman as well—but there was something about suddenly having the attention of a witch, and knowing the power behind her, that made Hermione both excited and intimidated at being addressed, and touched, by one.

"You must be Miss Granger," Madam Weasley said. "We've heard very good things about you."

Remembering her initial worries about befriending Harry and the impact it would make, she quickly blurted out, "I didn't mean to imply anything about my friendship with Harry. He's very nice, but I would've been his friend even if he wasn't who he was. Is. Who he is. Or Millie. I'm sorry."

Letting out an amused laugh, Madam Weasley raised a brow. "Whatever for?"

"Umm?" Hermione panicked and looked at Millie whose mouth was hanging open in abject horror at the scene she was making. "I meant only that if Harry's said something about me—"
"Oh, dear," Madam Weasley began, "if we relied on all of our information from eleven-year-old boys, I'd believe our future coven prospects would be limited to Quidditch players and those on the backs of Chocolate Frog Cards."

"Future . . . What?"

"Relax, the both of you," Madam Weasley reached out, squeezing first Millie's and then Hermione's hand. "We have eyes and ears in Hogwarts, and we pay special attention to those who demonstrate skill, talent, and a good respect of magic. You both come highly recommended, and you're only a handful of months into your first year. Now go and enjoy the party. I do believe some children your age are over by the pudding."

When the woman made her way past them to greet another newcomer, Hermione and Millie made eye contact. "Did that—?"

"Yeah," Millie said on an exhale. "Now we just have to keep it up, I guess."

"I need something filled or covered in chocolate," Hermione blurted out.

Millie grabbed her hand and started for the table where the pudding was. "Me too."

After an hour at the party, Hermione still hadn't seen Harry. The children by the pudding table that Madam Weasley directed them to, had been Draco and Theo, who promptly vacated the house in favour of sneaking outside for a quick game of Quidditch. Hermione assumed Harry was likely outside with them, but she thought it would be rude to leave without introducing herself to each member of the Black Coven, and thank them for their hospitality.

She had already been introduced to Madam Crouch by Professor Sprout, who attended as her date. Hermione also met Madam Prewett, Madam Burke, and Mr Lupin's girlfriend, Theia Blishwick, who had made a face when Hermione called her "Ma'am." She lost Millie, who was being extra polite to the Longbottom witches, including—she was told—Neville's grandmother, great-grandmother, and aunt. Alone, Hermione navigated toward Mrs Tonks and her daughter, where she had the pleasure of being introduced to Draco's parents.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Hermione said with a subtle curtsy. "Draco speaks very highly of you both. And he's, of course, the envy of the whole dungeon when your care packages arrive."

"Aren't you a darling?" Narcissa Malfoy said with a smile. "Hermione Granger?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Lucius, dear, this is Draco and Harry's little friend. The Muggle-born."

Hermione noticed that Narcissa's tone did not hold the stiff coldness that some of her own classmates had when they said the word, but Mrs Tonks did not look pleased by the word either way. Hermione appreciated her narrowed eyes, as she was not one to identify herself by her magical circumstances.

Mr Malfoy looked her over, not smiling, but eventually, he let out a breath and said, "You're Slytherin. Well done."

Despite feeling that there was an insult somewhere in the hidden layers of his words, Hermione lifted her chin and smiled. "And very proud."

"As you should be," Mrs Tonks said. "Slytherin is the greatest—"
"Oh please," Nymphadora Tonks said, rolling her eyes. "Spare her the speech. She's already in your little snake club."

"You're just jealous, dear," Mrs Tonks said affectionately, reaching out and tucking a strand of purple hair behind her daughter's ear.

Nymphadora snorted, her nose morphing into that of a pig's snout as she laughed. "Why would I be? I still got to live in the dungeons, but closer to the kitchen."

Hermione laughed, noticing the way that Mr Malfoy cringed at the pig snout. She did her best not to roll her eyes, evidently seeing where Draco got most of his mannerisms. "It was very nice to meet you all. I was wondering . . . I'd meant to say hello to Madam Potter and thank her for her generosity." She glanced around the room. "I've seen her picture before, but—"

"Oh, she's being a fuddy old thing."

Hermione turned and looked up, eyes wide into the face of the blonde standing behind her. The woman was wearing a black dress that was cut low. She looked like she was dressed for a cocktail party . . . or a funeral. Her lipstick was blood red, which matched her nail polish perfectly. At her feet, as though escorting her, sat the black Kneazle Hermione had seen earlier, and another one with brown fur and a white face.

"You'll find her in the kitchens," the woman said to Hermione as though they had already met. "She's being very antisocial considering this is her party."

"It's the family's party," Mrs Tonks corrected.

"Well," the blonde huffed, "it's her house. And she's left the rest of us to play hostess."

Leaning down to pet the brown Kneazle, Hermione's hand was stopped by the woman. "Careful, pet. He'll bite your . . . Oh, never you mind. I thought it was the other one. This sweet girl is good for a cuddle, if you like."

"Thank you, ma'am," Hermione said happily as she leant down and scratched the Kneazle behind its ears, grinning when it began to purr loudly. Something else small across the room moved, catching her attention. Blinking, Hermione stood upright. "It was a pleasure meeting you all." Without another word, she darted across the room, gasping when she saw two little house-elves arguing in a corner.

"Dobby needs to puts on the uniform," a little female elf said—pleaded really—with the taller male elf.

Compared to the female, who was dressed in a clean, white tea towel, the male stood out drastically. He wore a long t-shirt with a band logo printed on the front. It was so large, the shirt looked like a dress on him. Beneath, Hermione could see that he wore bright red wellies on his feet. They looked sized for a child, and likely wouldn't even fit her, but they were massive on the elf's feet.

"Winky needs to mind her—Oh!" The male elf squeaked. "Hello, Missy."

The female elf turned and made eye contact with Hermione, looking absolutely horrified, as though she'd been caught stealing something. "You needing something, Missy? Winky can fetches you some butterbeer."

"Dobby gets it," the male elf said with determination. "Winky steals sips."

Hermione bit her tongue, stopping herself from laughing, when the female elf turned, mouth hanging
The idea of house-elves had perplexed Hermione at first. Reading about them, they seemed like simple creatures, little more than pets. But when some began appearing around the Slytherin common room to clean and to fetch things, at the beck and call of most of the students, Hermione's stomach had twisted when she realised that the creatures were sentient. She'd gotten into an argument with Pansy Parkinson about it, until Greg—of all people—ended up dragging her away before she did something stupid like slap the other girl. Her friends had cornered her, summoning Millie's house-elf, Tuttle. Tuttle was not only well-treated, but well-read, and easily explained to Hermione the simple give-and-take relationship between house-elves and wizards. While she still felt somewhat uncomfortable at the idea that most people she knew were waited on by the creatures, she lost a little sympathy for them when Flora and Hestia Carrow had their personal elves—Baba and Yaga—put beetles in her bed.

"Not to be a bother," Hermione said, interrupting the house-elves argument. "But can either of you direct me to the kitchen? That is, if guests are allowed."

Smiling brightly, the male nodded. "Dobby takes you."

"Dobby changes his clothes," the female said, looking fit to burst into tears.

"I think he looks all right," Hermione said. "Maybe just . . . a belt?" She smiled and removed the green sash from around her waist, gently handing it out toward the elf.

His lips parted, eyes excited, as he reached out. Winky slapped his hand, but he nudged her away, taking the sash from Hermione. "It's the most beautiful belt," he said with a tone of awe. "Dobby treasures it forever." Then, with little fanfare, he wrapped it over his head and tied it in a bow beneath his chin like a bonnet.

"Oh, that is the most fashionable thing, Dobby."

Hermione looked over her shoulder to see a smiling witch in the doorway holding two glasses in one hand, with a bottle of sparkling cider in the other. She looked older than Professor McGonagall, but not so near as old as Professor Dumbledore. Unlike most of the witches in the other room, she had her grey hair cut short, with only a simple black comb pinning some of the strands back from her face. Also unlike the other witches, the woman had an American accent.

When the witch made eye contact with Hermione, her smile widened. "Escaping the crowd?"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "I was actually looking for Madam Potter."

The woman nodded her head. "Come along then. She's just through here."

Hermione said a silent farewell to the elves. Dobby was busy petting the ends of the sash as though they were made of the finest silk. Winky, on the other hand, was eyeing Hermione suspiciously, looking terrified that she might be given something as well.

As she left one room to follow the older witch down a long hallway, she cleared her throat. "I don't . . . I'm sorry, but I tried to learn all the names of the coven members so that I could introduce myself when we met."

"Oh, I'm not in the coven, dear," the witch said. "Just a friend visiting. Madam Potter and I know each other from years ago."

"Oh," Hermione said, letting out a small sigh. Meeting someone else not in the coven was something
of a relief. It seemed like everyone she knew was either related to, a member of, or trying desperately to become a member of the Black Coven. "I'm Hermione Granger, by the way."

The woman stopped as she approached a door, turned, and smiled again. "It's lovely to meet you, Hermione. I'm Tina Scamander."

Hermione's mouth fell open as simultaneously, her feet stuck themselves to the floor in absolute shock and excitement. "Scamander?"

"You read, I gather?" Tina said with a small, amused laugh. "I assure you, he's just as much a creature as the ones he writes about. Sometimes more odd." She stumbled a little, looking down, and Hermione followed her gaze to the largest cat she had ever seen before in her life.

"That's a real Kneazle," she said, heart thudding in her chest at the sight of the animal. "Is it yours?"

"Mhmm." Tina tucked the bottle into the crook of her arm in order to scratch the top of the cat's head, which was not much of a reach. "I have three, actually. You've probably seen Mauler's kittens roaming around here somewhere. She's having trouble letting go, so I said she could tag along."

"She's amazing," Hermione said, her cheeks hurting from smiling so much. She desperately regretted not bringing a camera. Her parents were never going to believe her when she told them all about the party. Nevermind that they looked a bit sceptical about what she'd already told them about Hogwarts.

The door behind Tina opened, and a redheaded woman peeked out. "Did you find the glasses?"

"And a new friend," Tina replied. "Hermione Granger, meet Dorea Potter."
December 22nd, 1991
Potter Manor

"Bad cats!"

Harry tried to summon his grandmother's stern tone of disapproval, the outright fear that Sirius could bring out in others, or even the way that a brief glance of disappointment from Remus could sink your heart right to the floor. He was positive that he was not doing any of them justice, considering both cats were not even looking at him, too busy licking their wounds and glaring at one another every so often.

His day had not gone well.

A terrible headache had woken him from a bad dream that he could no longer recall other than the brief memory of not having any hair and the heavy feeling of being stuck with someone he desperately hated and was unable to get away from. The headache persisted for most of the morning until Dobby and Aunt Camilla's house-elf, Winky, decided to get into an argument while picking out Harry's clothes and subsequently bathing and dressing him. While Winky had elected for dress robes that Harry was certain his grandmother would approve of, Dobby had clearly pilfered through both Sirius and Remus's wardrobes to put together an outfit so grotesque that Harry almost liked it. But he voted for Winky's ensemble in the end because he didn't want to be wearing it when Sirius found out that the image of one of his David Bowie t-shirts had been removed and sewn to the front of one of Remus's jumpers. Winky's outfit was also layered, and Harry knew he would be able to ditch the heavy robes early one in favour of simple trousers and a shirt.

Still while he had to wear them, the robes itched, his head still ached, his family was running all over the manor in preparations for the Yule party, and then all hell broke loose when Aunt Cassie arrived with three kneazle "kittens" that proceeded to lay claim to the entire house either by shedding on the sofa, peeing in the corner, or picking a fight with Max.

The black and brown kneazles were taken in hand easily enough, but the orange one slipped out the back door when Harry's grandmother began fussing over her newly clawed sofa before disappearing into the kitchen. Magic fixed the furniture up quickly, but no one else caught sight of the escaped kneazle, so Harry ran out the back door to track the beast down.

Easily distracted by the sight of his broom nearby, Harry—prompted by Neville's arrival—took to the skies, reasoning, at first, that the cat would be easier to see from above. Draco and Theo Nott joined them later on, thoughts of loose cats in the far back of Harry's mind as he and Draco fought tooth and nail over a Snitch that eventually took them both to the ground with a gaggle of Weasleys surrounding them at one point, egging them on. Bill Weasley broke up the lazy scuffle, shoving his brothers out of the way as he did so. Once Draco and Harry were parted, they shook hands, rolling their eyes and uttering underhanded insults about the other.

Eager for another game, they all grabbed their brooms, but Harry was distracted by the sound of yowling and was pulled swiftly away over concern that Max and the orange cat had gotten into another fight.

He had been right to be worried, and it seemed only his strong connection to his own familiar ended the mutual mauling. Sighing in resignation as his cousins started a new game, Harry decided to monitor the cats instead.
"Honestly, can't you stay out of trouble for two minutes?" he asked of Max, who curled her lip up at him. It did not escape his thoughts that the same could be said of himself and any of his new nemeses from Hogwarts—Sirius had said that it was nonsense to have an enemy at eleven.

"And you—" He turned to the orange kneazle, "—you're a guest in this house, y'know."

"King of beasts, that one. You won't convince him otherwise. Cats are stubborn creatures."

Startled, Harry turned to see an older wizard approach. Though they had not been formally introduced, Harry recognised him immediately and anxiously smiled, shoving his hands into the pockets of his trousers.

"If you think cats are stubborn, you should meet my dog," he said, thinking of Padfoot. Briefly, he wondered if his godfather was all right. Sirius sometimes had problems with crowds that seemed to come and go depending on his mood.

Newt Scamander sat down on a nearby log used for outdoor family gatherings, not even bothering to dust away the snow first. "I'd wager I know a Niffler or two that could out-stubborn the whole lot."

The man smiled at Harry, a twinkle in his eyes that briefly reminded him of Dumbledore, but in a way that left Harry feeling acknowledged rather than studied. Sitting down on the opposite end of the log, Harry held out his hand expectantly, feeling relieved when Max came over and butted her head into his palm. "Why'd you give those cats to Aunt Cassie?"

"Every creature needs a home. Needs someone who loves it. Someone to care for it in ways that no one else can," Newt said, mimicking Harry's gesture to the orange cat, who stared at Newt with what looked like disgust and then indifference before continuing to lick its paws. Rather than seeming offended by the clear insult, the man looked rather delighted that the cat hadn't just obediently come running to him.

Silence sat between them for several minutes.

Harry continued to pet Max, watching Newt from the side as he observed the other cat for a while before turning his attention to a nest of chirping birds in a nearby tree. The lack of speaking seemed to not bother the man, though Harry was not used to adults not having something to say, especially to him.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Harry judged the man's calm demeanour, bit his lower lip, and took a chance, asking, "Did you really fight in a war with Dumbledore?"

Newt did not look at Harry when he answered, "Wars are fought by soldiers. Warriors."

His wrinkled hands touched the snow near his feet, the tips brushing over it as though it were a pet. Harry noted that the skin of his fingers was discoloured and his knuckles were large. The hands of a man who works with them, Ted used to say, gesturing to his own.

"I've never felt like either, myself," Newt continued. "Then again, I suppose most who ended up in the thick of things didn't exactly sign up for it."

"My parents fought a war," Harry blurted out, a part of him wondering why. Maybe it was because most people acknowledged them, or his scar, or Voldemort and what happened in Godric's Hollow, especially when first meeting him. Maybe because having the subject ignored felt like something was being hidden, and Harry didn't like secrets. Harry didn't like not knowing what adults were thinking about him. Newt didn't even look at his forehead.

"Wars are fought by soldiers. Warriors."
Newt finally met his gaze, smiling softly. "I know. I never had the pleasure of meeting either of them, but I've heard wonderful things."

Harry didn't respond to that; most everyone he knew said something similar.

His parents were wonderful people—heroes. It didn't make them more real to him than Merlin or Morgana. They were just stories. Stories about people he could not remember and might as well have never known because they were fiction for all he knew. The only proof was photographs, which still felt unreal to Harry, who all too often looked for the sound of his mother's voice in the echoes when women of the coven spoke.

His parents were heroes who fought bravely . . . and still died.

Perhaps sensing Harry's shift in mood, Newt slightly changed the subject. "Creatures don't war. They fight over territory, mates, food . . . but nothing like people."

"Not even these two?" Harry asked, referencing the cats just as Max rolled over and began absentmindedly chewing on the sleeves of his shirt.

"That's not war," Newt said with a soft, affectionate chuckle. "Sizing one another up, is all. I think we're through with the battle already." Max purred next to Harry's side, relaxed as she rubbed her head against him.

The other Kneazle, however, was distracted, sniffing around the firepit. A Warming Charm had been placed over a pile of wood that was often used for both the firepit outside and the fireplaces inside. The charm kept the wood dry for yearlong usage, and also served somewhat as a heater for Harry and his cousins during days like today when the weather was cold but they didn't want to take a break from playing to come inside and sit by the fireplace to thaw their hands from gripping brooms and throwing Quaffles in the freezing cold.

Harry knew that other creatures enjoyed the warmth of the wood pile.

His eyes widened just as the orange Kneazle arched its back and let out a loud growling hiss, swiping its paw at something beneath the pile. Startled, and without thinking, Harry jumped up, knocking Max to the ground, and yelled, "No! Bad cat! Don't come out!" realising a split second too late—by the look on Newt's face when he turned to peek—that the words he had meant to say in English, must have been said in Parseltongue.

Avoiding eye contact with the older man, Harry looked back at the wood pile. The snake that he knew was there retreated back beneath the wood, and the orange cat began circling the pile once more, looking for an opening.

Nervously, Harry slowly turned his attention back to Newt, who was smiling.

"It's all right." The man held a hand out as though coaxing down a wild animal. "I won't say anything to anyone if you don't want me to. I know that Parselmouths are not looked on fondly here, but there's nothing to be ashamed about, Harry. You're not the first person I've met with an extraordinary ability that is badly misunderstood by others."

His breath coming out shaky, Harry wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "You won't tell?"

Newt smiled again, one side of his mouth turning up more than the other; his eyes crinkled at the corners. "I have no reason to tell secrets that are not mine. I imagine your family knows?"
"Why do you think that?"

"Your wand."

Harry glanced down, noticing his wand sticking out of the pocket of his trousers. Since they were unable to use magic at home, he had not thought much about it—especially since it had been quiet since arriving home—but Harry kept it on him at all times, just like his grandmother and Sirius insisted. "What about my wand?"

"Horned serpents are all but extinct in Europe," Newt said casually, "and they don't do well in Britain. There's a few nests of them in America that I've tried to help keep protected as an endangered species. A short time ago, an old wandmaker friend of mine asked if I knew where to acquire a horn from one. It just so happened that I knew an older serpent that had broken a horn in a fight. I'd kept it myself because it's quite useful for potions, but I sent several shavings of it upon request."

Gently brushing his fingers against his wand, Harry muttered, "What wandmaker?"

"Gregorovich," Newt said, gesturing to the wand. "And I know his style. Is that snakewood or cedar?"

"Cedar," Harry said. "You helped make my wand? But how did you know it was for me?"

"It's not a common wandcore these days," Newt admitted. "But it is known to be very beneficial to those with the gift of Parseltongue. It's supposed to be obedient and even protective."

Scoffing, Harry scowled and said, "It's more of a nuisance, really."

"Oh?"

Realising that he wasn't supposed to talk about it with anyone outside his family, Harry clammed up, biting his lips shut.

"Does it sing to you?" Newt prompted. The words sounded almost like a joke, but the look on his face expressed concern. When Harry remained silent, his heartbeat pounding in his ears—and his traitorous wand remaining silent—Newt sat up straighter, his mouth opening in obvious worry.

"Harry, does your wand make noise?"

Hosting a party for Yule had seemed like a good idea at the time. The family holidays had always been a little maddening over the years, but with extra guests and Camilla's house-elf taking over, Dorea had felt a bit like stepping back and leaving the hard work to the younger generation, the house-elves, and the busybodies.

It also didn't help that, normally, Yule was spent with Harry counting down the days until Christmas. It was not as though they didn't participate in Muggle holidays often, but Christmas was especially important to him since the few he had spent with the Dursleys had left him with rotten memories. Both Dorea and Sirius were determined to overwrite every single one of them. This year, however, Harry was at Hogwarts for the majority of the month, and even putting up the tree had been made sadder all by the fact that he wasn't there to run around it as she and Sirius levitated baubles onto the branches.

The arrival of the Scamanders was a lovely interruption.
While Cassie had always been fond of Newt, Dorea found him a peculiar individual that she sometimes struggled to communicate with. It, of course, did not help that she displayed an open distaste for nogtails from a young age when one had bitten her, and could not be swayed by Newt's passionate argument of the creatures supposed sweetness. He did not argue, however, and was not often one to easily make angry. But Dorea could tell that his opinion of her had taken a nosedive, and she highly suspected that anything she ever said to him again would be taken with a grain of salt.

Newt's wife, however, was a woman after Dorea's own heart.

Dorea had first met Tina Scamander before Newt, actually, long before even James had gone to Hogwarts. Charlus, irritated by the nonsense happening in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement where he worked as a consultant, had brought Tina home for dinner one evening when she was working as a representative of MACUSA during on of Newt's trips home to handle his own affairs in the Ministry.

Despite being from dramatically different backgrounds, the two witches bonded quickly over their thoughts on reform within both America's and Britain's magical governments and the problems associated with both blood purity and interactions with Muggles—or No-Majes, as Tina called them.

"I had a brother once," Dorea confessed over a late night glass of wine.

Charlus had taken Newt outside to offer advice on working around the D.M.L.E. and their kill on sight policy regarding werewolves that he was trying to help ban while also fighting an up-and-comer in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures by the name of Lyall Lupin. Newt had just passed a ban on experimental breeding, and high off the win, he was trying to continue his good works but was falling a bit short due to his inability to placate politicians and various department heads.

James was fast asleep in his room, snuggled up warm with a Demiguise that had, supposedly, sneaked through customs in one of the Scamanders' suitcases.

Newt and Tina's son, Jacob, was away at Ilvermorny, allowing the two of them to spend more time in Britain pushing forward with reform since, apparently, America had stalled him with red tape at every turn.

"Had?"

Dorea nodded, looking into her glass. "Two, actually, not that my parents would have ever claimed as such." At Tina's inquisitive glance, she sighed. "Marius was a squib. He died."

"Dragonpox?" Tina gently asked.

"No. It was not by accident nor illness."

She remembered crying, refusing to go near the pond behind their house for years after Cassie pulled their little brother's body from the water, Pollux looking on coldly from the bank, the sleeves of his shirt still wet.

"Some writer was touring around with a new book about his life as a squib, and there were riots in protest from the old families. Several members of my own family signed their names to petitions and laws put before the Wizengamot to have squibs cast out or killed, calling it an act of kindness to the unmagical," she said with a disgusted scoff. "No one could have found out about Marius. Not after that. It would have ruined them. And so . . ."

She tossed back the remainder of her glass.
After a beat, Tina drank her own glass down and said, "I had a sister. Have a sister. Somewhere."

Dorea looked up, curious.

"She fell in love with a No-Maj. It's looked down upon here in England, but when they met, it was illegal in America to mix with people who weren't magical. Jacob," Tina said, wiping at her eyes, "was a dear friend. And after . . . well, there was a bit of a scene, and he was ordered to be Obliviated. It didn't exactly take, in a manner of speaking, and eventually, he and my sister were reunited. But it wasn't to be."

Taking her friend's hand, Dorea asked, "Did he . . . ?" She stopped, not knowing exactly what the end of her question was.

"After the war against Grindelwald, which he and my sister both contributed to," Tina declared firmly and proudly, "my sister was given a choice. For her contributions to Grindelwald's defeat, she would be allowed to marry her No-Maj and not be carted off to prison, but only if she were . . ."

"Obliviated?" Dorea whispered, horrified.

Tina nodded, clearing her throat. "And relocated. No matter what they'd done for us all in the war, and regardless of the fact that it wasn't technically Jacob's war to fight, they'd broken the law. President Picquery order Queenie's wand broken. Newt and I were given strict instructions not to seek them out. Punishable by . . . a thousand different threats; I stopped counting. They threatened her too if I were to ever look for her and try to undo what they did. So she begged me to let her go. She loved him."

"Did you ever—?"

"No. But I know my sister. And she and Jacob were happy. That's what I wanted for her. The loss of magic . . . I can't even imagine, but I wanted her to have love, and a family. I have to know that they had a good life. Have a good life. Maybe. Somewhere."

Sick to her stomach, and still thinking of her dead little brother, Dorea asked, "How do you stomach it? Working for them after what they did?"

"I fight. I fight for change so that people like Queenie and Jacob never have to make choices between love and magic." Tina wiped at her eyes once more and then immediately refilled her glass. "Love is magic. And now, with what little I could contribute and unfortunately not retroactive, it's no longer illegal in America to marry a No-Maj."

"That's not good enough," Dorea said softly, feeling a hate in her heart for policies and laws.

"No," Tina agreed. "It's not."

Dorea thought of Marius, of Tina's sister, and of James's wife as she looked at the little Muggle-born girl in her kitchen, kicking her feet back and forth from her seat on a stool, watching in delight as Tina's kneazle, Mauler, wrapped her tail around her foot.

"Tell me, Hermione, dear, are you enjoying Hogwarts?"

Hermione looked up with bright eyes. "Very much so, Madam Potter. I do prefer the one-on-one attention we receive in the Muggle-born Overview Programme, but getting to actually use magic at Hogwarts is just—"

"Magical?" Tina offered with a soft chuckle. "If you think Hogwarts is amazing, you should
"consider touring Ilvermorny."

"Hush," Dorea said, swatting a hand at her friend. "Don't listen to this old hag, Hermione. Your blood is for Hogwarts and nothing less."

"She'd make a good Thunderbird, I say," Tina said, swirling her glass of wine.

"She's doing just fine as a Slytherin," Dorea retorted. "Or so Minerva tells me. I think she might even be envious. If you turn out to play Quidditch, dear, old Professor McGonagall might demand a re-Sorting."

Hermione, for her part, looked elated by the praise even as she laughed, and Dorea watched and waited to see if ego peeked through somewhere. Instead, she was met with pride and a familiar look of determination.

"She says you work very hard and help others when they struggle. Is it true that your group of friends all learnt the Levitation Charm before all the other first years?"

"Yes, ma'am. But Harry and the others weren't far behind. They need to enunciate better, if you ask me."

Grinning at the pure potential, Dorea chuckled.

"Oh, she'll be a grand addition to your collection," Tina teased. "Ilvermorny may be a better school, but there aren't any covens in America, and even teaching Blood Magic is illegal outside of Louisiana."

Hermione's hand rose in the air, catching both Dorea and Tina off guard. "May I ask a question?"

"Of course, dear."

Hermione took a breath, looking like she was gathering her courage. "I guess I just don't understand why a coven's magic, Blood Magic, is stronger. Isn't it just everyone doing spells together?"

Dorea glanced at Tina, who shook her head as though to say "This is your arena."

"Not at all," Dorea eventually said. Instructing children in regards to Blood Magic had never been something she needed to do. Charlus was much too conservative to get deeply involved, and even if it wasn't a controversial subject in their home, James never had the care for such things, preferring Quidditch and his classes at Hogwarts—which definitely did not teach Blood Magic. Harry had grown up with a bit of it, but learnt along the sidelines while the coven got themselves in order.

"It's much more complicated than that. See, when a family wants to protect their home, they construct wards. You can think of them like invisible layers of magic, sometimes as thick as bricks."

Hermione looked at her with wide eyes, paying attention, clearly absorbing every word Dorea spoke into her consciousness.

"Normally, when a parent, for instance, puts up wards around their home, they are one layer thick. Sometimes, they can add more layers depending on what specifications are needed," she said, thinking of the very detailed layers surrounding the homes belonging to the coven members and their families. "Other times, they'll have Curse-Breakers come and put up wards, adding their own layers. That way, if someone tries to break through and they understand the complexities of the homeowner's magical signature, they might be stumped when they run into a layer built by one or more Curse-Breakers."
"So how does coven magic differ?" Hermione asked, her fingers twitching as though she were subconsciously searching for a quill to take down notes.

"Coven magic doesn't work like layers," Tina answered with a smile, running her hand along Mauler's scruff when the kneazle leapt onto the counter, almost knocking over a plant in its wake.

"A coven weaves their magic together," Dorea added. "When a person tries to unravel it by plucking at one string, hooks in the magic will catch onto the different spells from other witches, and instead of unravelling, it will knot. Blood Magic allows us to weave instead of layer. Do you understand?"

Pursing her lips in deep thought, Hermione nodded. "I think so. I guess I'm just not sure why Blood Magic specifically has this specification?"

"Come here," Dorea said, turning around and opening the cooling cabinet. "Do you know how to cook, dear?"

Hermione hopped from her stool, adjusted her dress, and followed her. "No, ma'am."

"I didn't either for quite some time. ' Dorea thought of years earlier when she depended on house-elves for everything—until Dobby became more unpredictable. "But I insisted on learning. Have you ever seen someone make mayonnaise?"

"No," Hermione said, watching as Dorea removed items from the cabinet. "Mum buys it in jars from Tesco."

"There are three essentially simple ingredients: oil, vinegar, and the yolk of an egg." Dorea set a bottle each of oil and vinegar in front of Hermione, summoning a glass jar from another cabinet. "Do me a favour, dear, and mix these."

She watched with Tina as the girl set to work with the same precision as one would in a potion's lab. If she had long sleeves on her dress, Dorea was certain that Hermione would have rolled them up. She measured equal parts of the liquids, swirling them inside of the jar once the lid was secured. A bit of the ingredients mixed together for a moment, but once the movement stopped, they split.

"They separated," Hermione said, looking defeated as though she knew what would happen, but had hoped for a different outcome. "They're layers. Like the wards?"

Tina grinned brightly. "You're a very bright little witch."

"Both potent ingredients, strong magic, and while they can blend together temporarily, they ultimately function individually." Dorea snatched an egg from a basket in the corner of the counter next to a fruit bowl. "Now, let's add the Blood Magic," she said, pouring out some of the oil and vinegar and then cracking the egg into the jar. Tapping her wand on the lid once secure, the content stirred themselves rapidly until it thickened. "Care to separate it?"

Hermione smiled in obvious understanding. "I don't think I could if I tried."

"It would take a great deal of effort, a lot of time, and even still you would not end up with vinegar, oil, and an egg in the end. You'd be left with a bigger mess than when you began."

"So why are only family covens allowed to use Blood Magic?" Hermione asked, looking back and forth between Dorea and Tina.

"We have the same blood," Dorea answered. "It's why newly inducted witches undergo a blood ritual. Even a single drop, when merged with your magic, will blend seamlessly with the others."
The girl nodded thoughtfully. "And if others who don't have the same blood perform Blood Magic? Is it just like oil and vinegar?"

Smirking, Dorea replied, "More like oil and fire."

Hermione opened her mouth, presumably to ask a question, but a door opening stalled her.

All three witches turned to see Harry and Newt walk in, both looking more serious than either ever had a right to, what with a mutual playful nature.

Concerned, Dorea stepped forward, cupping Harry's chin in her hand. "What's wrong, lamb?"

He predictably leant into her touch, freezing only at the sight of Hermione before pulling back in embarrassment, loudly clearing his throat. "Hey. You came."

"Hi, Harry," Hermione said with a smile. "Your grandmother was just... teaching me to cook."

Harry scrunched up his nose. "Why?"

Newt cleared his throat, tapping Dorea on the shoulder. "If I could have a word?"

His tone made her heart race just a bit, and she looked between him and Harry for a moment before nodding. "Harry, see to your guest, please."

"Is everything all right?" Tina asked.

"Fine, love," Newt said with a smile. "I just need to—Whoa!" He leapt back a bit, stumbling slightly into the hutch behind him housing an array of china. Dorea flicked her wand, stabilising the heirlooms just as Newt caught his balance, almost upended by two cats growling and hissing as they barrelled between his legs in an attempt to attack one another.

"Max, no!" Harry yelled.

Tina, spotting the orange cat, sighed heavily. "Oh, you little devil." She eyed her own kneazle, who barely batted an eye at the display. "This is your fault, you know. He's your son."

"Uh oh," Hermione gasped as the cats came toward her. Cringing as the impact seemed inevitable, she held out her hands in obvious panic, and in a flush of accidental magic that poured over each of the animals, they froze mid-air.

"Well, look at that," Newt said, amused.

Squeaking at the sight of what she'd unintentionally done, Hermione pulled her hands back, at which point Max and the other cat fell to the ground, landing softly on their feet. "Sorry!"

Looking indignant, Max turned around, wrapping around Harry's leg in a splay of obvious dominance and ownership. The orange kneazle growled, glanced around, and then mimicked Max's movement against Hermione's leg, going so far as to purr loudly, rubbing his head against her shin.

"Oh," Hermione said on a breath, leaning down to pet the cat on his head before scooping him up into her arms. She smiled sweetly, kissing the little beast right on his squash face and looking up at the gaping mouths of everyone else in the room. "What? I'm sorry... it was an accident."

Tina let out a shocked bout of laughter, covering her mouth.

Harry stared unapologetically, looking horrified.
Dorea shared a look with Newt, who smiled at Hermione. "Congratulations, young lady. I think you found yourself a familiar."
"Because this is a family event, Sirius, and I am not family."

Sirius glared across the room at Hammond as the man did the final button on his Healer robes. They were dark blue with white lining, indicating his level of authority at St Mungo's as a department head, and thankfully weren't the hideous lime green that most of the staff were forced to wear. Sirius would have preferred the green robes today, though. It was irritating that Hammond looked so handsome while at the same time being a fucking arsehole.

"That's not why you're abandoning me."

Hammond sighed and pinched his brow, looking fed up. "Gods, you're so dramatic. I am not abandoning you. I am working. Unlike you, I don't have a stack of gold in my vault to rest my laurels on. I have important work. Besides . . ."

Sirius tensed, waiting for what he knew was coming.

". . . It's not like you didn't abandon me at the St Mungo's charity ball."

Rather than continue fighting, Sirius stood from his seat at the edge of the bed they shared, shoulder-checked Hammond on his way out of the room, and slammed the door behind him.

Coming home from his visit at Hogwarts the previous month had left Sirius in a mood. Worried about Harry, Harry's malfunctioning wand, the coven's meddling, and Dumbledore's extra meddling had left Sirius wanting to crawl into a bottle or a blanket fort. He sorely regretted ever sending Harry to Hogwarts, as there were few people that wouldn't side-eye him upon finding him in a tent made of blankets and cradling a bottle of Ogden's.

Instead of moping, Sirius went into preparations for the approaching holiday. Harry's largest present, a brand new Nimbus 2000, had been ordered, as well as a new briefcase for Remus, a silk scarf each for the members of the coven—charmed to never stain or fade, and a gold-lined new black marble Pensieve for his mother. Hammond, notably difficult to shop for, ended up getting a donation to his research.

He had been absent from the Muggle world since dropping Harry off at King's Cross. The Floos at St Mungo's, however, were in repair during a typical lunch date with Hammond. So that Wednesday afternoon during the first week of December, Sirius had opted for a trip into London with his boyfriend.

While most people tended to mind their business, they sometimes came upon bigoted arseholes who muttered rude comments under their breath or shouted insults from across the street. Sirius never minded, he'd heard worse growing up in Grimmauld Place or in Azkaban, but Hammond took it to heart a lot of the time. That day, however, Sirius was struck in the back of the head by a flung beer bottle outside of a pub, thrown by a stout man with a comb-over, shouting, "Disease-ridden poofs!"

Naturally, because Sirius could take an insult but not an assault, a fight broke out.

It wasn't until the police had departed after breaking the scene up, that Sirius realised what had really happened. A nervous-looking Muggle paramedic was whispering to a police officer and gesturing to
Sirius, who was still badly bleeding from the cut on his head. He knew he could easily go home and charm the thing closed, or even dart back to St Mungo's for the top shelf Dittany, but they were already being given suspicious glances over the fight, and at the mention of taking care of it himself, one of the policemen insisted that he couldn't just have someone walking down the street with an untreated head wound.

"Don't worry, love," Sirius said, trying to offer the paramedic a smile, "I don't bite."

Her nervous look turned to one of pure disgust, and he watched as she doubled up on the gloves before even bothering to approach him. "Shameful," she said under her breath as she carefully treated his wound, standing at arm's length as though Sirius had fleas.

"Uptight bitch," Sirius mumbled as they walked back toward St Mungo's, passing a newspaper stand on the way. A familiar figure on the front page of one paper stood out, catching Sirius's eye, and his heart stopped beating for more than a few reasons as he read the headline: Queen Vocalist Freddy Mercury Dies of AIDS.

Going back out into Muggle public, or even public in general, wasn't something he felt ready for, both because of the rage he felt and the absolute sorrow. Hammond still went to work, most unaffected other than humiliation and fear over the ordeal, and Sirius locked himself inside the manor, listening to "The Show Must Go On" on repeat, courtesy of Remus who had purchased the new album a month earlier.

The two friends sat in Remus's room like old times back at Hogwarts, listening to music and drinking butterbeer, until Theia joined them, switching to firewhisky.

Due to a hangover after a night spent with Remus and Theia, and a newly resurfaced distaste for crowds of strangers, Sirius had skipped the St Mungo's charity ball.

The first half of the Yule party, he observed from a distance. Black fur blending in well with the shadows, Padfoot stayed in the hallway, watching silently as people came in from the opened Floo, having their cloaks taken by Dobby and Winky, and being generally pestered by Cassie's new Kneazle pets. He watched from a window as the orange one picked a fight with Max, making a mental note to befriend the little creature who—unlike Harry's cat—had yet to hack up hairballs on Sirius's clothes.

"Lovely girl," Narcissa said to Lucius at one point, as a curly-haired little witch left the room. The former Death Eater made a noise of acknowledgement that went ignored by his wife, as she turned to Andromeda. "Any word on how Slughorn is faring back at Hogwarts?"

Padfoot looked up briefly as someone scratched his head. Ted Tonks smiled down as he passed by, joining his wife and daughter with the Malfoys. "Did I hear mention of Slughorn? We've had a few letters from the Muggle-borns in the programme. As skilled as Snape may be, he's not well liked with the children. They all seem to be looking forward to the change."

"They still have to see him for the new Defence class, though," Narcissa reminded. "I know it's important, but the children and Severus would all be better off if he was not in that school. He's not exactly . . ."

"He hates children," Lucius commented. "Though, that will likely be an advantage to them in learning Defence. He's unlikely to hold back because of their age."

"Is that wise?" Nymphadora asked, frowning. "Do you think anyone will get hurt?"
"They had better not," Sirius said after shifting back into human form and joining the conversation, stealing Andromeda's glass from her hand and drinking it down. "If Snape so much as looks at Harry wrong—"

"Better an apt teacher with an attitude problem than an idiot who teaches them nothing," Andromeda said. "Besides, Minerva is there, and Lucretia will be joining the staff soon as well. The children, Harry especially, will be well looked after."

Sirius shared a look of understanding with Ted. While the family had grown closer to Harry over the years, few knew what the boy was like when first freed from Little Whinging, and Sirius and Ted both had had conversations over the years on concerns regarding what might trigger old memories and fears to resurface. Snape off his leash could pose a serious problem, as far as he was concerned. He wasn't exactly thrilled with the change in staff at Hogwarts, but Sirius had been reassured by multiple members of the coven, his mother at the forefront, that it was all for the best. Still, he planned on looking into Harry attending the Muggle-born Overview Programme over the summer, just in case, because he had seen an outline of lessons in Remus's room that covered a good amount of Defensive Charms; and he trusted Remus more than anyone.

"Where's your young man?" Narcissa asked.

Sirius groaned and reached for her drink as well, but she pulled her hand back and narrowed her eyes.

"That says enough there," Andromeda muttered, reaching out and tucking Sirius's hair behind his ears as though he were her child. "What happened?"

"Nothing," he said stubbornly. "It's not as though we're married. He has a busy job. I can go about my life without someone holding my hand, thank you."

Ignoring his attitude, Andromeda sighed. "You know, I was at Twilfitt's this week purchasing some new robes, and Madam Primpernelle was there. Did you know she has a niece that recently moved back from—"

Throwing his head back and groaning, Sirius cut her off. "Please don't."

"There's a new wizard working down at The Fountain of Fair Fortune," Narcissa said candidly.

"For the love of—" Sirius growled, interrupted when someone looped their arm through his. He turned aggressively, expecting another witch eager to sell him off to the highest bidder in their personal game of matchmaker, when Theia grinned up at him, braids of dark hair spaced in between long, messy locks of hair that made her look untamed.

"These ruffians bothering you?" she asked, earning a roll of the eyes from the two Slytherin witches, and a laugh from both Ted and his daughter.

"Immensely," Sirius replied. "Save me?"

"Gladly," she said with a grin, blowing a kiss to everyone else before leading Sirius away from the crowd. "Where've you been? Remus and I were worried when you didn't show up right away."

"Fucking . . ." Sirius muttered, gesturing in the general direction of his quarters. "Hammond."

"Not lately, by the look on your face"
Snorting a little, Sirius shook his head and sighed.

"Rowing?" Theia asked, her tone taking on a genuine concern.

"He's being a shit. We had a rough time in London, and he's . . . Maybe I should just . . . be single forever. Embrace bachelorhood. I was good at that," he pouted. "I'm sure it's mostly my fault, but shouldn't relationships that are meant to be . . . be easy?"

"Meant to be?" Theia laughed. "Oh, love. Aren't you a sap? You need a pick me up."

"Remus finally learning to share?" he said with a smirk, eyeing her playfully up and down.

Theia snorted and rolled her eyes. "Gods, don't you wish, you slag. I was thinking less carnal and more . . . herbal."

Raising a brow, Sirius looked around, noting that the only ones left in the room were older witches and wizards, discussing politics and other things that bored him to death. Even Nymphadora had apparently sneaked off away from the conversations. Most of the children were outside playing Quidditch or chasing down Cassie's feral little beasts. Biting his lip and checking once more that his mother wasn't around, Sirius grabbed Theia's hand and darted back down the hallway.

"Where've you got it?"

Theia laughed as she let go of his hand, reaching for her wand to unlock Remus's room.

Sirius paused. "He's going to have kittens if we pilfer his stash."

"Where's your sense of adventure?" Theia asked, daringly.

Grinning, they both darted into the room, closing it behind. Sirius watched as Theia scampered over to the side of the bed, waving her wand and silently summoning an old briefcase from under the bed. Upon opening it, bars of chocolate were set out like money from old Muggle films where someone had been kidnapped and ransomed.

"Convenient," he said as Theia pulled the bars away to reveal a small tin beneath. Even from where he stood, Sirius could smell it. Once opened, he could see several joints, already perfectly rolled.

"Moony hid it beneath chocolate, in an old briefcase, beneath the bed? Man's getting paranoid in his old age."

"Old," Theia muttered sarcastically as she grabbed one and closed the tin, replacing the bars exactly before returning the case under the bed. "Give us a light."

He remembered getting high in Gryffindor Tower with his friends growing up, favouring a Muggle lighter with "Fuck You" carved into the side. Remus always used his wand, but Sirius was a hoarder when it came to Muggle things, and always had the light on him. At least back then. Now, he patted his trousers briefly before realising he had nothing on him. Cupping his hands, he focused until a small flame emerged in the centre from silent magic, and held it up for Theia, who lit the end of the joint, breathing in once before passing it to him quickly.

"Sex and benefits," he muttered on the exhale, watching the smoke dissipate into the air. "Lucky girl. Ought to make an honest man of our Moony."

Theia shook her head, falling back on the bed with her arms stretched above her, quietly chuckling. "Gods, you're an idiot, you are."
"How's that?"

Rolling her eyes, she sighed. "I'm not in for the long haul, love. Not my way. I adore the man to bits and pieces, but eventually he'll need real love, and I don't have that in me. Still," she said with a delighted grin, "he can enjoy me as long as he likes."

"Think it's in the blood?" Sirius asked, taking another hit. "Maybe our family is just too fucked up for forever loves."

"Don't be a drama queen. I'm happy with my life and knowing what I want out of it. That's what you need," she said, stealing the joint back. "You need to know what you want, accept what you actually deserve, and just let yourself have it."

"So I should apologise to Hammond?"

Theia laughed. "I didn't say that. Whatever's going on with the two of you, just figure it out. If it's something he can't handle or you can't change and makes you both miserable, then just let it go and be the better for it. Relationships are work, especially if you want in for the happy ever afters. If it's not worth the work, then you're both still young. End it while you're still friendly and don't put yourself through years of misery."

The bedroom door burst open, and Theia let out a yelp in fright, launching the joint into the air. Sirius dove for it, wincing as the still hot end touched the centre of his palm. "Fuck!"

In the doorway, Remus narrowed his eyes. "Thieves."

"Merlin, Moony! Scare us to death, why don't you."

Shutting the door behind him, Remus practically stomped into the room, reaching for Sirius's palm. "That would teach you a lesson, Padfoot."

He growled when Sirius held his hand back, and the two quickly fell onto the bed, rolling around as Remus attempted to retrieve his stolen item. Theia laughed at the two, pushing her bare foot against Sirius's hip until both he and Remus fell off the bed and onto the floor.

A noise from outside caused everyone to go still and silent. Muffled talking with the occasional knocking against the door as though a heavy breeze were moving through the hallway. Remus looked up, one hand on his wand, the other still holding Sirius down on the floor beneath him. In a paranoid tone, he asked, "Do you think that's Dorea?"

"No, she's gone and shut herself in the kitchen with Mrs Scamander," Theia whispered.

"Mmm..." they heard from outside. "Where can we go?"

"Floo could still be open? Head back to mine before your mum sees?"

Theia rolled her eyes and flicked her own wand at the door, letting it swing open. The two people on the outside that had been leaning against it, fell into the room, tumbling to the ground. Nymphadora tilted her head back, making eye contact with Sirius who was in a similar predicament with Remus on top of him. On top of her, however, was Bill Weasley, whose ears were as red as his hair at the moment.

"Wotcher, Sirius."

"Your mum know that you're off snogging a Weasley?" Sirius asked, coughing a little when
Remus's weight became a bit much to handle. Bucking his hips, he crawled out from under his friend and rubbed at his head.

Bill and Nymphadora scrambled to right themselves, adjusting their clothes as they stood. "She knows we're dating, thank you."

"Dating," Sirius said with a snort as he looked at how most of Bill's long hair had come loose from the ponytail he normally wore it in.

"Sorry to interrupt your . . ." Bill began, looking at Theia on the bed and Sirius and Remus on the floor. "Umm . . . I'm not entirely sure what we've interrupted."

"An aggressive discussion about personal property," Remus said stiffly.

There was a heavy moment of silence before Sirius tried to dart away from Remus, palm still gripping the joint tightly. The werewolf, however, was faster, and jumped back on top of him, struggling to open Sirius's hand. Eventually, the fingers pried away, and the joint rolled across the floor to Nymphadora's feet.

"Gotcha!" she exclaimed, leaning down to snatch it up. "Come on now, loves." A devious grin accompanied waggling eyebrows. "We're all family, aren't we? I think we're a family that shares."

Bill look briefly hesitant, looking back and forth between his girlfriend and the others before sighing. "My mum'll kill me."

"Scared?" she asked.

"Deathly so," he replied with a daring chuckle, lighting a small flame at the tip of his wand for her.

They both hesitated, looking at Remus for a second before he threw up his hands in annoyed defeat. "Might as well, I suppose. It's already covered in floor dust and dog slobber."

"Mmm, dog slobber," Nymphadora said with a laugh as she leant in to let Bill light the end. "Oo, good stuff this."

"And expensive," Remus muttered as he walked around the room, toeing the floor at the edge of his bed with his boot until it met the briefcase beneath. He looked down at Theia, who giggled up at him and opened her arms. "Minx."

"You're terrible at sharing," she said with a happy grin, licking her lips and running the fingers of her left hand through her hair.

"Always has been," Sirius said, plopping down in an armchair beside the bed. "Might as well have pissed on that weed."

At that, Bill—who had been taking his own hit—coughed loudly and doubled over, choking in between laughs.

Nymphadora giggled alongside him, affectionately rubbing his back as he cleared his lungs. "Lucky you escaped most of the party," she said, looking at Sirius. "Hardly a celebration as of yet. Mostly a lot of posturing from friends of the family, as though they've fallen out of the coven's good graces. That, and a lot of the aunts are going round inspecting the new recruits. Cute little witches. One of them's a Muggle-born too. Gods, it's funny watching Lucius Malfoy hold his tongue about that."

"Hermione's a smart girl," Remus said, pushing Theia's legs aside so that he could sit on the bed
beside her. Once down, she repositioned herself, dropping her feet in his lap. "Bright one. Friends with Harry too, no?"

Sirius nodded. "He writes of her. He's befriended a few Muggle-borns, thank Merlin."

"Morgana," Nymphadora cheekily corrected, sticking her tongue out at Sirius when he flipped two fingers at her. "Good on him. I bet half of those little pureblood brats were expecting him to be some spoilt little prince."

"My boy?" Sirius asked, flipping his hair dramatically. "Whatever would give anyone that impression?"

"He's a good lad," Bill said, passing the joint over to Remus, even though Sirius held his hand out for it. "Ron says he's sore to be left out of the trouble Harry and Neville get up to. I reminded him that Mum sends Howlers to communicate, and the Great Hall echoes something fierce. Seemed to do the trick. That and the detentions."

"Spoilt prince indeed," Theia snickered. "Harry's a Marauder, no doubt."

"And giving me angina," Sirius muttered, rubbing a hand on his chest. "At least he wins most of the fights he starts. I suppose there's that."

"James won most of his too," Remus reminded him, blowing smoke out and flicking his wand lazily, watching as it formed into a bird and flew toward the window, disappearing before it crashed into the glass. "Didn't mean it was right."

"Yes, Prefect Lupin, sir," Nymphadora said sarcastically, saluting him. "Ease up on him," she told Sirius. "Children fight. I got into plenty of scraps when I was at Hogwarts. Once, a boy called me the daughter of a you-know-what, and I hexed him so that his ears grew so big he couldn't hold his head up. Stupid twat tried asking me to Hogsmeade two years later."

Bill grinned, wrapping his arms around her from behind. "What did you do then?"

"Punched him in the nose." She held up her hand. "Broke these three fingers."

"From punching a boy?" Theia asked, sitting up and turning around so that Remus could play with her hair.

"No," Nymphadora laughed. "I got cocky while he was crying on the ground bleeding. Tried sauntering off like some hero of the sorts, and wasn't paying attention. Tripped over a rock and fell on a big ol' tree root."

"James and I put Mum through hell when we were at Hogwarts," Sirius said, kicking his feet up on a nearby footstool after pushing some of Remus's books off of it. "Here I thought Harry was putting me through the wringer when all along, it was poor Andromeda and Ted we should be pitying. They're both probably still recovering after all the nonsense you brought down on them. They should've named you Grace."

Nymphadora snorted, her nose turning into a pig's snout as she did. "That would've been funny. And still preferable than what I got stuck with."

The door burst open again with a bang, and everyone inside screamed. Sirius yelped, Remus cursed, and tried to hide the joint behind his back. Nymphadora turned to see who disturbed them, lost her balance, and fell to the floor, dragging Bill down with her.
"Amateurs," Cassie tsked each of them, shaking her head in obvious disappointment while two kneazles circled her feet, affectionately rubbing their cheeks against her calves. "I could smell you out in the hallway." She waved her wand, casting a charm that filled the room with the scent of fresh lavender. "Sober up, everyone." At that, she tossed Sirius a small phial of unlabelled potion. "Your mother is coming along any minute now. Children are safe, but it's time to parent."

Sirius drank down the bottle, wincing as all the brief happy feelings and pain-free muscles returned to their ornery and achy selves. "Hell," he groaned. "I thought she'd gone and locked herself in the kitchen?"

"Yes, well, it seems that, as usual, the Scamanders are full of surprises," Cassie said, ducking out of the room just as Dorea and Belina stepped into it.

Both witches stared at the group suspiciously, but only Belina looked like she knew what was going on. Dorea appeared to have other things on her mind. "Come with me," she said, looking at Sirius.

"What's happened?" he asked, wondering why Belina, of all the witches, had come with her. While not exactly anti-social, Belina was the least likely party-goer amongst the coven witches, and last he heard, she was trying to opt out of even attending. Now she looked businesslike, as though a party wasn't even happening in the other room.

"We may have an answer to the wand issue," she said.

Jumping to his feet, Sirius left Remus, Theia, Bill, and Nymphadora behind, swiftly leading Belina and his mother from the room. Once the door was shut, he looked at them both. "Harry's wand? We know what's wrong with it?"

"Something's wrong with Harry's wand?" Remus asked as he opened the door, looking concerned. "Wrong how?"

Dorea sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Theia, will you and Nymphadora please go and attend to the rest of the visitors? There's enough of us missing now, and I don't want to raise suspicions. William," she said, addressing Bill. "I would fix your hair before you go back out there. And charm the love bite off of your neck before your grandmother—or Morgana forbids, Andromeda—sees it."

"Good to meet you, son," Newt Scamander said, smiling brightly, as he took Remus's hand with both of his own.

Sirius watched, a feeling of respect for the man, even as Remus shook the man's hand enthusiastically. He never told a soul, but Sirius kept a running list in his head of people who spoke unkind words about werewolves—unless they were speaking of one specifically by name that had wronged them—and he even put names on that list of people who turned their noses up in his friend's general direction. The fact that Newt seemed genuine in his kindness while touching a werewolf, obviously knowing what he was afflicted with, made him an instant friend. The fact that he apparently had news about Harry's wand that could help them only increased the esteem that Sirius now held him in.

"It's an honour, sir, an honour," Remus replied as he took the seat beside Newt in Dorea's study.

Sirius sat beside his mother, a footstool pulled up beside her desk. Belina stood in the doorway, while Newt's wife, Tina, paced the room, looking ever the Auror even though she wore pretty robes and had long since been retired. Some positions went through straight to the bone, and the woman
held herself with a stiff, authoritative posture.

"My mother says you know what's wrong with my son's wand?" Sirius prompted.

Newt met his gaze and smiled softly. "I do. I had a lovely chat with your boy. He has a good heart, that one. You should be very proud."

"I am." Sirius looked at his mother and then Remus before adding, "We are."

"It's less about what I know," Newt proclaimed, looking at his wife. "When you sought out help from Gregorovitch to construct a wand for your son, he asked for my help. I did not know it was Harry that I was assisting. But the core inside your boy's wand was chosen especially to assist those with the gift of Parseltongue, no?"

Momentarily panicked, Sirius looked around the room, briefly taking note that no one else seemed to react with anxiety, and neither Newt nor his wife seemed concerned about Harry's unspoken ability.

"His secret will remain so," Tina assured him. "It's a gift that isn't looked down upon outside of Britain and other regions. One thing that America seems to get right when it comes to persecution of those who are different." Her gaze lingered on Remus for a moment, and she gave him a motherly smile.

"What's wrong with the wand?" Remus asked. "Harry says that it makes noise; that it's malfunctioning."

"The wand is perfectly fine," Newt said. "And it's doing exactly as it should."

"How so?" Sirius asked Newt, but the man gestured to his wife, and Sirius drew his attention to the witch.

"The founder of my school, Ilvermorny, was a Parselmouth," Tina began. "She was also a wandmaker and crafted wands for her two children, using the same core as your boy's wand. Horned Serpent horn. I don't know if she knew it at the time, but such wands are now known in America to assist their owners with an added layer of protection. They emit a noise, usually musical in sound; singing, perhaps. It's a warning of danger. It's especially sensitive to those with the gift of Parselmagic."

"A warning?" Remus asked, concerned. "Does this mean that Volde—"

"It may be," Newt interrupted. "Or it maybe be something harmless to the likes of us. As Harry grows and develops his skills, his personal threats will change. Right now, a Stunning Spell could severely injure him, but someone with developed and settled magic could recover from it with a bit more ease."

"So you're saying that his wand could be making noise because of the little shits he's been picking fights with?" Sirius asked with a stressed sigh, running a hand through his hair.

"It could even alert him to the trick step on the grand staircase," Newt said.

Tina shook her head, rolling her eyes. "Just fix the step. Why keep it there?"

Newt smiled sweetly at her. "She's not a fan of Hogwarts."

"Your school makes no sense to me."
'But could it be a higher threat?' Remus questioned, leaning forward. 'Could it be something genuinely dangerous?'

Newt's smile faded. 'It could. He needs to spend more time training with the wand so that it learns to work with him. Most wands choose the wizard, but this one was fashioned for him. It works, it belongs to him, but it needs a stronger connection. As Harry's skill grows, the wand will communicate with him on a level that Harry will begin to understand. In the meantime . . .'

"In the meantime," Dorea said with a heavy sigh, "he will return to Hogwarts, with the children of Death Eaters and a headmaster who is keeping a three-headed dog somewhere in the castle."

Hours later, long after the waxing moon had risen into the sky, the family and guests gathered together outside. The Quidditch brooms had been put away and the garden cleared. Sirius watched as the coven opened a circle around a large fire, each wearing their traditional robes. The two girls, friends of Harry's, stood to the side watching with firelight and awe reflected in their eyes. The one with green streaks in her hair rubbed the tips of her fingers together anxiously, mouthing along with the words that the older witches spoke. The other girl, Hermione, snuggled the orange cat close to her chest, smiling as he rubbed his squashed face against her throat.

Sirius smiled proudly as Harry, Neville, and Draco dragged the chosen Yule log from the orchards, cut earlier that month and set aside. Decorated with herbs and painted in reds, golds, and silver, they set the wood down outside the circle, smiling—but cringing—when Dorea, Narcissa, and Augusta kissed their cheeks.

Dorea poured a cup of cider on the log, and Minerva—back from Hogwarts for the hour—sprinkled a heavy handful of salt on the wood before Cassie and Callidora lifted it into the flames.

A new year approached, and Sirius held out one arm to Harry, glad that the boy wasn't yet too old to snuggle up close in the cold despite his cousins and friends looking on.

"Mr Scamander says that my wand isn't broken," he whispered.

Sirius felt his chest tighten. 'I know. I heard.'

"What should I do when I go back to Hogwarts?"

Taking a moment to think hard on the matter, Sirius pulled Harry in closer to him. 'Be careful. Listen to the wand. Trust your friends. Take care of yourself.'

"I like Mr Scamander," Harry eventually said after a few minutes of quiet, nothing but the sounds of witches singing in the background.

"Me too, son."

The witches closed the circle, and everyone clapped, shouting joyous cries of "Happy Yule" and "Happy Christmas" in mix-matched chorus. All the kneazles, Max included, began chasing one another around the circle, and the little girls chased after them, laughing. The Weasley boys instigated a snowball fight a ways off, and Neville came running up to Sirius and Harry.

"Come on, Harry, can't let them have all the fun!"

"Go on, lad," Sirius urged his godson. "Have fun with your friends."

When Harry vacated his seat, Remus took his place, sighing and putting an arm around Sirius,
patting his shoulder. "He'll be all right. Now that we know it's a warning, we can teach him to listen to it. Plus, look at all the friends he has."

Sirius took a cup of cider as Remus held it out for him, gulping down the spiced liquid and letting it warm his bones. The kneazles eventually joined the fray, leaping up in the air in an attempt to grab the thrown snowballs between the children. Hermione and the other girl, Millie, hiked up their dresses in the snow and joined the fight, though they looked to be more on the side of the cats than anyone else.

"I worry," Sirius eventually said, wishing that the smile on Harry's face would stay there forever.

"Trust me," Remus said. "When you're his age, and you've got the world on your shoulders, good friends ease the burdens."

"Happy Christmas, Moony."

"Happy Yule, Padfoot."
January 5th, 1992
King's Cross Station

The winter holidays passed much too quickly for Dorea's liking. Having Harry back home was a breath of fresh air that she found comforting; it was one that, from the look of it, Sirius required in order to function on any given day.

While James had always been a curious boy that could just as easily sit around and relax with his family as he could jump feet first into any new project or hobby, Sirius had always seemed lost without a purpose. As a child, he had directed that energy toward pranks at school, Quidditch, and, evidently, secretly training to become an Animagus. As the boy grew, his attentions had turned toward dating and his obsession with his Muggle motorbike atrocity. Dorea later learnt that Sirius had also put in a great deal of effort working for Dumbledore's Order, constantly eager to throw himself into the middle of the fray.

He simply did not function when forced to remain still for very long.

While she had assumed that a great deal of these isolation issues revolved around what had happened in Azkaban, Dorea also knew that without Harry to look after at home—not to mention the fact that his relationship with Hammond seemed to be at a bit of an impasse—Sirius was sinking.

As much as she would like to pull her son onto his feet by his ear, she also knew that forcing the issue would never work. Sirius's go-to reaction to being ordered about or forced to do anything was to rebel; a delightful personality trait instilled in him by his wretched early upbringing.

Putting aside Sirius's plans for the future—or, more aptly, her plans for Sirius's future—Dorea had insisted that she be able to take Harry to King's Cross Station for his return trip to Hogwarts. After all, the boys had been able to have one-on-one time during the trip back in September. Sirius, thankfully, had not objected, clearly buying the lie for now, and Harry had never been one to refuse her attention.

Just like September, they arrived early to avoid any potential photographers. Several other families had arrived early as well, and from the look of it, most seemed to be there on account of concerns of missing the train.

Dorea smiled as she watched several young children with open book bags, searching for potentially missing items. The prefects had arrived early as well, helping some of the younger students with their trunks.

Mary Cattermole greeted them with a bright smile.

Aside from Nymphadora, she was the only other Hufflepuff in the coven so far. At the top of her class at Hogwarts, Mary was a shining example for the Muggle-borns in the Overview Programme, having grown up Muggle and still flawlessly integrating herself into the Wizarding world. The coven had not thought very long or hard over offering her a position amongst them.

Mary was married to a sweet man who worked at the Ministry, and the two of them had three little
ones—all of which were currently underfoot. Her two daughters were chasing a small cat in circles around a nearby trolley, whilst her very small son looked up at the Hogwarts Express in obvious awe, his little fist clinging desperately to a well-worn stuffed hippogriff.

"Not many years off," Dorea commented, gesturing to the children.

Mary looked like she was trying not to cringe at the thought, though her smile remained. "Oh, don't try making me cry this early. I've not even had a proper cuppa. Maisie, Ellie, come and say hello to Mrs Potter," she said, trying to collect her children.

The two little witches with matching yellow ribbons in their plaits both smiled shyly up at Dorea. Alfred, the little boy, was still gawking open-mouthed at the train, jumping when it let out a bout of steam.

"We thought we'd see all the Muggle-borns off this morning and then go visit Daddy at work when he takes his lunch, right?" Mary asked her children. Maisie began jumping up and down excitedly. Ellie appeared to not hear her mother, still looking around for the cat she had been chasing with her sister. Little Alfred had returned his attention back to the Hogwarts Express, examining it suspiciously as though it might expel steam at him again.

"Perhaps I'll see you there," Dorea said idly as she ran her hand down the back of Harry's head in a life-long, multi-generational attempt to get the boy's hair to sit flat. He scrunched up his face a little at the tender moment, narrowing his eyes when two passing children near his age chuckled a bit. Dorea briefly pinned them each with a small glare, watching in minor amusement as they turned tail and ran. Harry turned his head up to look at her curiously, but her glare had long faded into one of perfect innocence. "I have a meeting at the Ministry. Dropping off a few forms in regards to the financial records for the programme."

Mary frowned. "Oh, I could have done that, Dorea; you needn't bother."

"Not at all," Dorea said, waving her off. "It gave me a good excuse to get out of the house. Plus, I'd already planned on accompanying Harry to the train."

"Are any of the Muggle-borns here yet?" Harry asked, looking around. "I told Dean and Hermione that I'd save a seat for them on the train. Max, don't even think about it," he cautioned his cat, who was sniffing around a book bag left unattended. "I don't care what food they've got packed. It's not yours."

Mary laughed softly as the cat gave a little huff only to return to Harry's side, leaning against his leg as though walking around the train station was just too much of a bother. "Just a few, but I haven't seen the Grangers or Mrs Thomas yet."

"Maybe I should go and make sure our compartment is still available," Harry said, looking up at Dorea with a sad little smile. "Is that all right, Grandmother?"

She sighed and took his face in her hands, glad when he didn't pull away this time. "I am going to miss you terribly, lamb."

When he hugged her goodbye, Dorea was reminded of the clinging hug he gave her the night of the Yule party, just after finding out that his perfectly-crafted wand had been trying to warn him of impending danger for months, rather than malfunctioning, as he had thought. It was a stressful night, even among the celebrations, but Dorea had assured her grandson that the family would be looking into his Parselmouth abilities in greater detail to help him attune himself better to the wand.
Newt had turned out to be a great help in that, claiming to have a rudimentary understanding of the language himself. She thought it a lie, but apparently, Dumbledore spoke some Parseltongue as well, in addition to Mermish and a handful of other almost pointless languages unless one had a job requiring them—or, as Dorea personally believed, a great need to show off.

Grateful for Newt's assistance, Dorea almost forgave the man for accidentally letting loose a fwooper in the manor which she found days later, nesting in her wardrobe. Thankfully, she had recognised the little bird on sight and cast a Silencing Charm before it began singing, bringing insanity with it. Unfortunately, the beast stubbornly refused to come down. She'd caught him once with the Silencing Charm, but any other spell to try and get him out from the corner of the wardrobe had failed. It wouldn't have been so bothersome except he was moulting bright pink feathers all over her good robes.

"Stay out of trouble," she cautioned Harry. "And please no more fights."

Harry sighed and nodded solemnly. "I'll try. I promise."

"I know it's in you to defend yourself and others, which I do not discourage," she assured him. "What I want to see for the rest of the year is your ability to navigate around those who offend, and outsmart them. You're far too intelligent to rely solely on physical confrontation."

"Is that permission to—?" Harry began, using the smirk he'd inherited from James, the one that Sirius had helped him perfect over the years. At her expression, he stopped talking and jumped up on his toes to kiss her cheek.

"Such a sweet boy," Mary said as Harry jumped on the train after loading his trunk, Max ever on his heels. "Oh, Dorea, if you'll excuse me, some of the Muggle-borns have arrived. I want to say hello to their parents and check in to see if they need anything."

"Go on," Dorea replied, trying to hide the emotion in her voice. Even after sending two boys to Hogwarts, it pinched something in her heart seeing her Harry step onto that train. There was something about coming to King's Cross that stirred her magic the same way as when she'd first woken from her coma—as though her magic were reaching out for a connection.

Knowing that she would certainly shed a tear or two if she actually watched the train leave, she bid a silent farewell to Mary from afar, smiling when the Muggle woman she was speaking with nodded her head in polite greeting.

Headed for the nearest Floo Network within the station, Dorea took a moment to compose herself before taking a handful of powder and dropping it into the flames, shouting, "Ministry of Magic!"

The Ministry of Magic

Dorea had always been one to have a good control over her emotions. It was often said that anyone born into the Black family was cursed—or gifted depending on ones perception—with an affinity for terror. Dorea could admit that even young Nymphadora, Hufflepuff though she may be, could be just as frightening as the rest of the members of her family when provoked. It was in their choice of display where they all differed. Women like Walburga and Bellatrix, and even Dorea's own mother, might as well have been sorted into Gryffindor for their recklessness when emotional. Others, however, learnt to control their emotions—or at the very least conceal them.

Dorea had always been good at controlling her emotions.
And then Hammond Dillonsby gave her the blood of a dragon, tempting fate.

Another thing tempting fate—and Dorea's severe struggle with her temperament—was the stunted little witch who had all but insisted in sharing a lift with her once she'd exited the Floo at the Ministry of Magic.

"Minister Fudge has a great list of things we—I mean, of course, he—wishes to implement in the Ministry," the woman went on and on at great length, never once letting Dorea get a word in edgewise. "Perhaps even a reform, if you will, to the good old days. Much like your coven seems to enjoy going about with. I mean, there are things, if I may say so—"

"I'd dare to think I could stop you, Miss Umbridge," Dorea said, trying her best not to pinch the bridge of her nose in obvious irritation.

"Well, there are a few things we are concerned about, in regards to some of the people your wonderful coven sisters are . . . mingling with. Not exactly the proper sort, I'd say. No offence intended, of course."

Wondering, and not for the first time, if the witch had put a curse on the lift to move slower, Dorea slowly inhaled in an attempt to control herself.

On any other day, she might have easily brushed aside the toady little woman, but after sending Harry back to Hogwarts under Dumbledore's watchful eyes, she was not in the mood to deal with people in general, let alone the upstart little bitch blathering on next to her, daring to question her motives, judgements, and even associations. As though a woman like Dolores Umbridge could have any say in the decisions made by the Black Coven.

It was only Umbridge's position that kept her out of harm's way—that, and Dorea was sure that if she were to set the entire lift on fire, it would plummet them both to their deaths.

The coven had supported Cornelius Fudge's aim for Minister for Magic a few years earlier, when the only other options had been people who would move against the family, or others who would be utterly useless. Fudge, however dull and dim the man was, had respect for the old ways, or at the very least, a heavy amount of fear and superstition. Back when the coven was deciding who to help promote in the election, Lucretia dug up dirt on the Fudge family, discovering an old myth that one of Cornelius's ancestors had been cursed by Morgana herself.

With no other proper options available, not without putting one of their own in place and looking like they were trying to achieve a complete takeover of all Wizarding Britain, the coven banked on Fudge for Minister in hopes that his fear of them would keep the man in line. So far, it had done just that. Minister Fudge was easily flattered, and more easily intimidated. Many good things had come to pass once the coven helped to secure his position.

It was the positions that Fudge was handing out, that they had little say in.

Such as his Undersecretary.

"For instance, I'm well aware that you've taken great pity upon the Muggle-borns, even permitting them place amongst proper witches in your coven," Umbridge went on.

Dorea knew that she, herself, wouldn't be killed by the fire, should she actually burst into flames, but the fall would certainly be fatal. Sirius and Harry would be upset, she tried to remind herself.

"But I do have concerns there. Muggle-borns just aren't able to control whatever magic they have, you see. When I was the Head of the Improper Use of Magic, why, we had reports coming in
daily, hourly even, of magical eruptions all over Muggle areas. I don't know how the children do it, mind, but I have some ideas on how to go about permanently—"

"Forgive me, Miss Umbridge, but this is my stop," Dorea said, yanking the grill of the lift open and doing her best to step out as quickly as possible without looking like she was trying to get away.

"Oh, well . . ." Dolores paused, looking around the lift before deciding to exit as well. "I don't have my meeting with the Minister for another twenty minutes."

"Unfortunately, I am late for a meeting of my own," Dorea said, turning around and counting the other people on the floor who would either report any attack or end up as casualties in the process. Putting up with Rita Skeeter was one thing. The woman wrote what Dorea wanted—most of the time—and seemed only ever interested in her own career advancement. What made Umbridge different was that she was using what power was given to her to not only advance herself but to press others she felt beneath her under her foot. While it had not become public yet, one of their former Death Eater spies in the Ministry came forward to the coven with word that Umbridge was working with some members of the Wizengamot on reevaluating werewolf restriction laws, and had even strong-armed some of the department heads into stalling Arthur Weasley's Muggle Protection Act.

"I'll walk with you," Umbridge said, taking a moment to adjust the pink bow in her hair. "I'd hate to cut a good conversation short, after all."

Cringing, Dorea tried to think of somewhere she could disappear to. She didn't actually have a scheduled meeting. She was just there to drop off paperwork and peak in on a few people if the opportunity presented itself. Lost in thought, she didn't notice Umbridge was trying to get her attention once more until the woman snapped her fingers in Dorea's face and loudly cleared her throat, "Hem hem!"

Eyes wide at the pure gall of the woman, Dorea could feel heat flow from her chest, down her arms, and into the tips of her fingers. By Morgana, there were just too many witnesses. "Listen here—" she began before feeling a gentle hand on her shoulder, distracting her.

"Madam Potter, I was worried you wouldn't make it."

Turning around in surprise, Dorea came face to face with a man.

"Tiberius?"

Tiberius Ogden had been a great supporter of the coven from day one, and a casual acquaintance of Charlus from their youth. While Charlus had been a Gryffindor and Tiberius a Ravenclaw, the men—boys back then—were friendly thanks to a shared interest in Quidditch and the Gobstones Club. Dorea knew the man never had any children of his own, leaving reproducing to his younger siblings. Tiberius ended up taking over a large brewing factory and creating Ogden's Firewhisky, effectively destroying the monopoly that the Blishen family had on the business. Once wealthy enough, Tiberius somehow glad-handed his way onto the Wizengamot, much to Dorea's benefit as he had always sided politically with the coven.

"Mister Ogden," Umbridge said with a simpering tone, "such a pleasure to see you again."

"Sorry," Tiberius said, scratching at his short silver beard as he looked the woman over, "have we met?"

Dorea sucked in a breath in response, hoping that the following exhale didn't come out as laughter.
Umbridge turned as pink as her robes and finally, for the first time that morning, shut her damned gob.

"Oh yes," Tiberius went on, snapping his fingers in her face, "you're on the Wizengamot. The Minister's little secretary, aren't you?"

"I... sir, I... am the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic!"

"Hmm," Tiberius said thoughtfully, looking like he was doubting her words. Eventually, he shrugged his broad shoulders, as though her words eventually reached but turned out to be meaningless to him. "Thought you looked familiar. If you don't mind, Madam Potter and I are very late for an important meeting."

He held his arm out to Dorea, who took his elbow like a lifeline, glancing back at Dolores with as genuine an apologetic look as she could possibly manage.

Tiberius led her down a hallway and then around a corner before patting her hand and letting her go.

"Looks to me like the coast is clear," he said with a chuckle in his throat, his blue eyes full of mischief. "Unless you were trying to spit roast her right there in the foyer? I'm not exactly caught up on what coven traditions you've brought back, Madam Potter. Is this time of year even good for human sacrifice?"

Shaking her head and laughing quietly, Dorea finally let out the breath she had been holding. "We usually reserve that for the *summer* festivities," she said with another laugh, lightly slapping his arm. "You're terrible, Tiberius. Just wicked."

He lazily proffered his hands, clearly unfazed and without a care for his behaviour. "I try to have a little fun every day."

"Don't you have a company for that? Plenty of bottles to go around," she teased.

"Calling me a lush, are you?" he asked with a wink, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Shame, and here I was planning on sending your family a good vintage for Christmas."

"Christmas was two weeks ago," she coyly pointed out, doing her best to ignore the flirtatious tone he had taken on.

"Hmm," Tiberius said thoughtfully, scratching his beard once more. "Maybe the Healers are right and I shouldn't *drink* my breakfast." He grinned brightly, the corners of his eyes crinkling when Dorea laughed at him. "You looked like you needed a hand back there. Umbridge can be very... boisterous when she's on a roll. Most of the Wizengamot just ignore her."

Sighing, Dorea clenched her fists. "I'm more concerned with the members who *do* give her their ears."

"Well, I'm glad to have saved yours, at the very least," he said, sticking his hands in the pockets of his robes. They were well-made, but nothing overly fancy; clean but showing a few small signs of wear on the cuffs as though he'd not minded getting his hands dirty with work, clothes be damned. "I have been meaning to reach out and catch up. You've always seemed so very busy, though, and I'd hate to be an inconvenience."

"Old friends are never an inconvenience," Dorea said with a soft smile, wondering when the last time she had actually caught up with old friends that weren't a part of the coven or some part of her long-working machine of securing the everlasting safety of her family.
"Dinner then?"

Her smile faded at the sudden offer, caught completely off guard. Lunch, perhaps she had expected, or even coffee somewhere. But dinner? Dinner was an implication, and she was a . . . She looked down at her left hand. She'd put her wedding ring away long ago; logic seemed to require it no matter how she had felt at the time. She'd woken from her coma a widow of several years, after all.

As though he could read her thoughts, Tiberius took her hand and squeezed it lightly. "Charlus was a good man."

Swallowing down the grief that ebbed and flowed depending on the day or her dreams or memories that popped up whenever she saw the water rings on the tables in her house or a certain way that Harry challenged her with a smirk he inherited from James, who had naturally inherited it from his father.

"He was."

Patting her hand gently, Tiberius sighed, not appearing to be out of impatience or irritation; his intentions seemed very on the surface, and in that moment, he looked full of understanding. "I meant no offence to you or to his memory with my offer. But I would be thought a fool for the rest of my miserable life if I didn't at least offer to take a beautiful woman out for a good meal."

Hesitantly, and trying her best to get Cassie's pushy voice out of her head, Dorea cleared her throat. "Tiberius, I appreciate the offer, it's only that—"

"Say no more." He held his hands up, briefly disconnecting her gentle grip on his arm. "A man knows when he is defeated. If you ever change your mind, I'm easy enough to track down. Now, may I escort you to your destination? I was on my way to the Aurors myself."

Grateful, she took his arm again, recalling the months and months of flowers sent by Thoros Nott no matter how many Howlers she sent back in reply. It had been many years since a rejection coming from her had not been met with harassing insistence.

"I had some paperwork to deliver to Administration. Just some filing needs to be done. Why are you visiting the Aurors?"

Tiberius walked slowly in the direction of both departments. Dorea was glad for the company and even more glad that the Administration Department was just down the hall from the DMLE.

"Oh, nothing serious. My uncle Bob's up there in age, and not always in his right mind. Got himself in a bit of trouble this morning causing a fuss in Little Hangleton. When he started getting sick, he'd forget himself—and the year—and go around harassing old criminals he'd arrested back in the good old days. It's been worse in the past, but thankfully, whoever he was visiting today didn't live there any longer, or so the owl mentioned. Still, he was ranting in front of a bunch of Muggles, and the Obliviators were called out. I'm just dropping in to pick him up. Maybe take him to St Mungo's for an update on his potions since these ones obviously aren't working."

He looked suddenly tired, and Dorea felt for the man. "It's hard taking care of family." She thought of Sirius, lost and still a bit broken by what Azkaban had done to him. She had half a mind to ask Tiberius to give her son a job until she recalled what the man brewed for a living. Nope. Not for Sirius. "I hope he'll be well in time."

"You're very kind," Tiberius said with a sad little smile, the crinkles around his eyes more subdued.

As they approached the Auror office, Dorea could hear yelling, and she gave Tiberius a sympathetic
"Here's where I leave you, Madam," he said, making a grand show of bowing and kissing her hand. She watched as the light from overhead made the strands of his white hair stand out amongst the grey, gleaming like diamonds spun into threads. Dinner or not, he was terribly handsome, and she'd be a liar if she said—even to herself—that she did not enjoy looking at him.

"I wish you and your uncle a better day ahead," she said softly, jumping a little defensively when the door to the Auror's office almost blew off its hinges in an obvious burst of magic. Reactively reaching for her wand, Dorea watched as Tiberius held his hand out, beckoning her not to.

"Uncle Bob?"

"Who are you?!" A plump little old wizard hobbled out of the office, leaving coughing Aurors in his wake. He had no wand on him, and one of his eyes was white with cataract. In sudden recognition, Bob sighed in relief, looking watery-eyed as his focused gaze fell on his nephew. "Tiberius? Oh, my boy, have you seen what they've done to my office?"

Tiberius sighed and put an arm around the short, old man, waving a silent apology to two young Aurors behind, who looked more annoyed than terribly worried about the old man as they cleared the smoke away and then walked off. "It's not your office any longer, uncle."

Ignoring Tiberius's comment, Bob Ogden looked up, making eye contact with Dorea. "You look like Violetta."

Huffing slightly at the comparison to her mother, something she knew even Cassie would take offence to, Dorea held her head a little higher, trying to remember that the poor man was a little lost in his mind. "I am actually her daughter, Dorea."

Bob made a grumbling noise. "Blacks." Turning to Tiberius, who was offering a look of sincere apology in her direction, he said, "Just as bad as the lot of them. Blacks and Burkes and Bulstrodes. Not near as bad as the Gaunts, mind." His eyes widened just a fraction, and he clutched at Tiberius's robes. "They took me away, boy, the other Aurors. Wouldn't believe me when I told them about that Gaunt lad. Snake speaker and Dark wizard. Muggle murderer."

Doing her best not to react to the man mentioning a "snake speaker", Dorea wondered if she should leave, but it felt as though it would cause more insult to Tiberius to leave in the middle of his uncle's breakdown.

"Uncle Bob, you're confused again. Dorea, I cannot apologise enough."

"There's nothing to apolog—" Dorea began, but was promptly cut off when Bob gasped, clutching at his head, his gaze becoming a bit clearer.

"Oh . . . I think . . ." He looked up at Tiberius. "Did I retire?"

Sighing in obvious relief, Tiberius patted his uncle's shoulder. "A long time ago, I'm afraid. Uncle, I think we should go back inside." He made eye contact with someone inside the room that Dorea could not see, looking back at her once more apologetically before directing his uncle once more to the room. "Aurors, I'm terribly sorry."

Dorea lingered outside the door, mostly out of curiosity, especially when she heard the familiar voice of Alastor Moody grumbling in annoyance.
"Ogden, I swear to bloody Merlin, you were good in your prime, probably better than the lot of us, but if I have to send out a team of Obliviators one more time to fix the Muggles you've sent into a strop, I'm going to retire!"

There was another chuckle from inside, and Dorea peeked in to see a tall man standing behind Moody's desk, his arms crossed in front of his chest, appearing to enjoy the frustration coming from his superior. "You make that threat any time an owl shows up unscheduled, Moody."

"Shut it, Shacklebolt."

"I'm sorry, again," Tiberius said, voice tired but rough, finally sounding his age. "Was it very much trouble?"

"Six Muggles," Moody went on, shoving a stack of papers forward. "And he broke into some empty mansion only to accost the bloody gardener. I'm shocked the man didn't try to get Muggle police involved. Do you know what we'd have to do if that happens, Ogden? The Minister would hear about that. Last thing we need is him and that little jumped-up bootlicker of his trying to make an example of the department. As it is, she's been snooping about the files trying to nitpick every bloody thing we do around here."

Annoyed that Umbridge was infiltrating other departments, with or without the Minister's instructions, Dorea stepped in. "Apologies, gentlemen, but I couldn't help overhearing. As you might understand, I have a personal issue when it comes to department heads sticking their noses in the DMLE without good reason. Things tend to get overlooked and innocent people imprisoned." She referenced Sirius, of course, but moved to stand directly behind Bob Ogden, as though daring anyone to condemn the poor man for losing his mind in his old age.

Auror Shacklebolt smiled brightly at her in greeting, but Moody narrowed his one good eye. It looked like the mechanical one was attempting to mirror the other, but instead, it made a loud whirring noise sounding almost like a growl. "Can I get through one day without someone sticking their hands in my business? If it's not department heads, or Dumbledore, or the board of governors, it's coven witches."

Dorea kept her face stone cold as she met the man's stare. "I'm sorry, Alastor, I don't recall the last time my coven sisters and I have bothered you."

"It's less about the coven sisters than your blood sister," Moody replied.

Making a face, Dorea hoped to hell that the man wasn't on Cassie's long list of former—or, Morgana forbid, current—paramours. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

Shacklebolt cleared his throat to interrupt them as he pushed a file toward Tiberius. "Third time this year that we've explained to your uncle that the Gaunts were arrested back in the 1940s. He and his team booked them in themselves. The old man died once he was released, and the son was taken in for murder a few years later. He's still in Azkaban."

Bob nodded in a motion that looked as though he were consoling himself. "Yes, yes. Arrested. I arrested that Gaunt boy. I knew he was the bad sort. Tried to tell my higher-ups, but you know how they go on about the old families." At this, he turned his head and cast a sideways glance at Dorea, clearly not remembering who she was. Dorea met the man with a challenging raised eyebrow, but he went back to ignoring her. "Terrible tragedy."

Tiberius smiled softly at Dorea, causing her cheeks to warm over in ways she had not felt in years. It was one thing that the man was a hard worker, a good man, and a bit of a flirt, but he clearly held...
family as a priority, something she found absolutely admirable.

"Most tragedies are terrible," she offered quietly.

Bob nodded, no longer looking at her as he mumbled to himself. "I knew the whole family was bad."

"The Gaunts always were. Nutters, the lot of them," Moody commented, looking over a file. His faux eye spun around, and Dorea wondered if it did so as to read the papers upside down.

"Never found the girl, mind, and Marvolo was long dead when the Muggles were murdered," Bob continued, repeating what Shacklebolt had said as though he'd not heard it himself. "Not that the bastard would not have pitched in, given the chance, no, no, no," he angrily muttered, shaking his head. "Just like all the others. Tiberius, boy, you'd best keep away from their sort. Wretched. The Gaunt boy, I know he did it. Arrested him, didn't I?"

"I'm certain you took care of it," Tiberius patiently assured him. "You were the best Auror I've ever known."

Dorea frowned thinking of her own family members who would've gladly murdered Muggles, given the chance. Though not as quite inbred as the Gaunt family had been rumoured to be before they died out, the Blacks were at least not deranged enough to just go about randomly murdering.

Then again . . . Bellatrix . . .

"I found the bodies, you know," Bob continued, touching a swollen knuckle to his watery eye. "They looked well off, that family. All dead now, though. Morfin Gaunt murdered the Riddles, I know it in my heart."

Dorea felt a coldness sink into her bones as her heart sank into her stomach. She cast a glance at everyone else in the room, none of whom reacted as though the name meant a single thing to them. To Dorea, it meant everything. "What did you say?"

Bob looked up at her, perplexed. "Who are you? You look like Violetta."

"The name of the Muggles that the Gaunt boy murdered. What did you say?"

Tiberius turned his attention to her, looking concerned. "Is everything all right?"

Bob continued to stare at her in absolute confusion.

Shacklebolt took pity and pulled back the file, glancing at Moody as though asking for permission. The ornery old Auror waved him off, rolling both eyes. "Three Muggles were found dead in their home in Little Hangleton. Thomas, Mary, and their son Tom Riddle. They were discovered by neighbouring Muggles, no signs of any reason for their death. Aurors received reports from a Squib living in the nearby village," he said, looking up at Dorea. "I'm sorry, Madam Potter, did you know these people?"

"When did you say they died?" she asked, using everything to keep her voice calm and still.

"1943."

It couldn't be the same Tom Riddle, of course. Voldemort would have only been a boy at that time, just a few years older than Harry. "And they were all Muggles? You're certain? I'm just curious why Aurors and Mr Ogden here were so focused on the crime, especially considering the time it
happened. I was just out of Hogwarts, but I recall there not being much focus on getting involved in Muggle affairs."

"Because three Muggles were murdered with the Killing Curse," Moody sharply cut in. "Bob here arrested the Gaunts for attacking the younger Riddle a time or two. They got aggressive during questioning. It was more about the Statute of Secrecy than anything else at the time. Planning on changing that too?"

Dorea ignored the man's sour tone, focusing instead on Kingsley. "The Killing Curse? How awful. And the Gaunt boy, he was responsible?"

"He wasn't very mentally sound, according to the files."

At this, Bob snorted, clearly back in his own right mind. "Might as well have admitted to the whole thing."

Shacklebolt sighed, and continued, "He was convicted the same year. Life in Azkaban."

"Dorea?" Tiberius asked, his brows drawn together in obvious worry when she fell silent for longer than she had planned, rolling the numbers, dates, and possible situations around in her head.

Stepping back and letting out a slow exhale, she struggled to pull herself together, just as Bobb Ogden seemed to be doing. "I'm so sorry, Tiberius. I . . . I knew someone once with that name long ago. Not sure from that area. I just . . . I thought perhaps it might be the same . . ."

"I'm sorry, Madam Potter. Were they a friend of yours?" Shacklebolt asked.

Finally composing herself, Dorea forced a smile. "Nothing to worry about. As you've said, it's been a long time since they died, and I don't believe they were of any relation. They certainly weren't Muggle, from my recollection. Quite proud of their pureblood lineage, in fact," she said with a note of derision, as though cementing her position just in case any of the men called that into question. "I'm sorry to have upset you, Mr Ogden. If that's all, I think Tiberius would like to take his uncle home."

Shacklebolt looked amused with her very subtle demand, but Moody appeared apathetic. She half-wondered if he was serious about retirement. He looked like he needed a good long rest and a large glass of brandy. After this news, she was terribly tempted for a glass of her own.

Chapter End Notes

AN: A huge apology for the long wait. Lots has changed in life, and I'm finally rid of that awful job that stole my brain. I have something new, thankfully part time, and hopefully I will be back to writing more often. I finished this (and almost done with the next chapter) and was going to save for posting until after the new year when I had a batch of chapters ready to go. But, well, it's almost Christmas, and I thought I'd get some stuff out before 2019 started, if only to say thank you guys for putting up with the terribly 2018 version of Shaya. ♥
January 13th, 1992
Little Hangleton, Yorkshire

While Dorea had called a coven meeting immediately following the events at the Ministry, they had all decided to wait at least a week before visiting Little Hangleton. Alastor Moody was a paranoid old bastard, and the last thing they needed was Aurors getting involved in coven business. Some wanted to wait longer, but Dorea could not eat or sleep without thinking about Voldemort, his Horcruxes, and his connection to this murdered Muggle family and the Gaunts. It might've been more efficient to speak with Morfin Gaunt, but it was unlikely they'd get any type of visitation without drawing unwanted attention. Afterall, none of the Blacks had even bothered to visit their own niece, Bellatrix, nor Cygnus, who were both currently rotting in the prison across the sea.

Taking as small a group as possible, Dorea Apparated to Little Hangleton with Belina, Camilla, and Nymphadora in tow, all wearing Muggle apparel, which Dorea found decidedly uncomfortable compared to her everyday robes. After asking directions from a few Muggles—and Obliviating them directly thereafter—they made their way to the old Riddle house. What once must have been a very pristine manor, was in shambles. The great home sat on a large hill, like a castle overlooking the small peasant village below. It looked pretentious, even in its current state, with most of the windows boarded up, the roof falling to pieces, and ivy crawling up the sides of three of its grand walls, clearly long since left unattended.

Finding the gardener that Bob Ogden had accosted was easy enough. The poor man had a limp that they noticed as they came upon him attempting to weed the large, terribly overgrown garden in front of the manor. Dorea noticed a loneliness in the man's eyes that turned to shock and suspicion when the four women approached him.

"Don't think it's for sale yet," the man said. "Current owner hasn't visited once since he bought the place. Tax purposes, I suppose. Still, he pays me something to do what I can." He looked at the garden in sorrow.

Dorea wondered if, in the prime of his life, he'd taken a great deal of pride in his beautification of the land. Now, however, the upkeep was just too much for him. "Do you know much about the previous owners?"

The man fell quiet at that, looking ever more suspicious.

"Forgive our intrusion," Camilla said calmly, stepping forward and extending her hand at the same time that Belina subtly aimed her wand at the man and whispered, "Pax et Veritas". "I'm Camilla Crouch. These are my cousins, Dorea, Belina, and Nymphadora. We've an interest in the history of the place."

"Heard it's haunted," Nymphadora said bluntly, quickly hushed by the other women.

The man sighed, his shoulders looking a bit more relaxed and his suspicious eyes softening. Still, he looked down even as he took Camilla's hand showing that the peaceful compelling spell had worked, but not gone as far as to imply anything remotely close to an Imperius.
"Might be," he muttered. "Surprised you didn't hear more. I'm Frank Bryce, y'see." When none of the women reacted to his name, his eyes brightened fractionally. "No one mentioned me? In the village?"

They shook their heads. People had mentioned him, of course, but they weren't going to let on that they had been told by no less than five people that the Riddles' gardener was a serial killer who got off due to a lack of evidence for killing the entire family. They were warned not to go near the place, that Frank was a psychopath probably just waiting for unsuspecting women to come around asking after the place only to end up on his chopping block.

"Family died in it," he said simply. "Long time ago. They were . . . good to me. Not the most decent sort, but they liked my roses." Frank looked along a large circle of upturned dirt. Some of the weeds had been recently pulled, but it was still overflowing with thorn bushes and rotting mulch. "Their boy took up with the young lady down the way," he gestured to a dirt path. "From what I gathered, neither set of parents were pleased with the idea. Haven't seen the other family since the Riddles were . . ."

"You knew the Riddles well?" Dorea asked. "Did they have any other family? Who took over the home?"

"None that I knew of. Strangers bought the place up. Only two owners since, and nobody to help keep the place in order," he cringed as he tried to straighten his back, wincing as he rubbed one arthritic hand down his bad leg. "Might've had. Last person I saw was a young boy with dark hair come looking 'round for them. Not sure who he was, but I saw him looking through the windows one day. I tried to shoo him off the property, but I can't . . ." He looked down at his leg. "Young people are a bit faster than me, y'see. Still get trouble with teenagers coming about to vandalise what's left of the house."

"This boy," Belina asked, stepping forward, taking Frank's full attention. "When was the last time you saw him?"

Almost as though entranced, Frank met her eyes and quietly muttered, "The day before they all died."

"Do you think the owners would mind if we took a look around?" Dorea asked.

However, the compelling spell had started to wear off, and Frank began to shift uncomfortably. Too impatient to keep appearances up, Nymphadora muttered, "Confundo," and they all watched as Frank stumbled a bit, looking around as though he were suddenly lost.

"Oh, you poor dear," Dorea said, quickly taking his hand so that he did not fall and injure himself. "You look a bit faint. Go on and rest up. We'll finish the inspection of the manor on our own and will send the owner the results as previously agreed upon."

Frank touched his hand to his head, blinking rapidly. "Yes, the umm . . . inspection. For the . . .?"

"Mould," Nymphadora quickly supplied. "And like we said before, you absolutely should not step foot inside for at least the next few months—just in case."

Dorea nodded in agreement. "Absolutely. You're not paid enough to catch your own death, you know. Do you need assistance to get back to your home?"

Shaking his head, he smiled kindly at Dorea. "You're kind to think of my health, Miss . . .?"

He glanced back at the other three women. "Terribly sorry for this. It was a pleasure to meet you . . .?"

"Sara Good," Camilla supplied.

Belina offered a courtesy nod of her head and said, "Janet Horne."

"Ruth Osbourne," Nymphadora said cheerfully.

Once Frank was out of sight, Dorea turned stiffly back to her coven. "Quietly arrange to transfer funds into the man's account. Let's get him off this property and out of this village."

"From which accounts?" Camilla asked, summoning a quill from her purse.

"Take it from that secret account we found Vernon Dursley setting up. Fool thinks we can't access Muggle bank records?" She scoffed a dark laugh under her breath. "Besides, it's been well over a year since we infested their last home with bedbugs."

Nymphadora loudly cleared her throat, rocking back on the heels of her boots.

"It's been over a year since you infested their home with bedbugs," Dorea corrected.

Grinning madly, Nymphadora dusted off her shoulders in a show before taking a bow. "That took a lot of coordinating without magic, by the way. Since we didn't want the boy harmed, I had to wait until he'd sleep over at a friend's. Those bloody Muggles spent three days in hell before checking themselves into hospital."

Dorea smiled toothily when recalling the memory that her young niece had shared with her: Vernon and Petunia Dursley running from their home in nothing but their pants, scratching and screaming in horror. She always liked to visit the Dursleys in one way or another every year—always at a different time, so as not to let them suspect anything. Everyone loves surprises, after all.

"Let's get this over with," Belina muttered, heading for the manor.

They spent hours inside, scouring the place for residual traces of magic. It was unlikely to find anything since the deaths had occurred almost fifty years earlier, but Dorea wondered that, if these people were in any way related to the Tom Riddle they were looking for, then perhaps he could have hidden another Horcrux under the baseboards somewhere.

"Nothing in the attic," Belina said, dusting herself off and stretching her arms above her head with a groan. "The new owner or the one before must've scrubbed the place clean. That's what I'd do."

"All the rooms are clear as well," Dorea said with a sigh, magically removing the dust from a large armchair before taking a seat. "Camilla and Nymphadora have gone down the path that the gardener mentioned. Could be the Gaunt shack that Mr Ogden had mentioned."

"Bloody Gaunts," Belina grumbled, shaking her head. "We've loads of records on them at the shop. Used to sell their things here and there and then try to buy them back for less than half the price, accusing my family of thievery if they disagreed."

"Anything of note?" Dorea asked curiously.

The look on Belina's face made her regret her question.

"Just a locket."
Thinking of the dead Horcrux buried in her garden, Dorea waved Belina off when she opened her mouth to speak further. No more needed to be said. She no longer had any doubts that these Muggles were somehow related to Voldemort, and that the Gaunts might be too. If not, they had at least clearly aided the young Tom Riddle prior to their incarceration.

Just as she was ready to stand up and look through the kitchen and dining room, a jackrabbit Patronus slipped through the nearby window. When it sat right between Dorea and Belina, its mouth opened, and Nymphadora's voice came out: "Better come down here quick. We've found something."

As derelict as the Riddle house had been, the Gaunt shack was a festering pool of mould, decay, dust, and a very palpable amount of Dark Magic. Dorea felt as though she should hold her breath the moment they entered.

"Don't touch a bloody thing," Camilla ordered as she descended the rickety staircase. "It's a thousand times worse than Grimmauld Place. We tore the upstairs to pieces. Found a few mentions of the Riddles in an old journal full of broken English. Love letters, from the looks of it. Leather's been pierced a few times with some sort of blade. Either the girl we've heard about was badly spurned or her father or brother or both held a damned good grudge."

Dorea coughed, covering her mouth, when a nasty stench hit her. "Anything related to Voldemort himself?"

"Dead mice," Nymphadora answered, shutting a cupboard door that loosely hung from its hinges. "The smell, not Voldemort. Nothing so far about him. It's hard to pick through all the layers. It's almost like blood wards," she said, flicking her wand in the air and looking at the visible magic. "But not woven properly. It's just a mess. Like wading through a swamp of bad magic."

"Dark?" Belina asked, pulling her own wand.

"That too. But not just. This is poorly executed."

Dorea glanced around the room, hoping to find something to come out of this day other than a name and a very likely connection for Voldemort's origin.

"Wait!" Nymphadora screamed. "No one move."

They all froze exactly where they stood as the young witch stepped slowly into another small room, ducking through the ribbons of magic. "Everything's poorly done. But this . . . This is different. Aunt Camilla?"

"Don't get any closer." Camilla came up from behind Nymphadora, casting a series of charms that Dorea did not know, assuming them to be pertaining to Curse-Breaking. Magically prying the floorboards up, obviously minding her own rules of not touching anything, she levitated a small, dusty, golden box, setting it down in the corner of the room. "Alohomora."

The top of the box sprung open as though held together by a tightly wound spring. Inside, red velvet lined the four sides. The bottom, however, was unable to be seen. A ring hovered in the centre, casting an odd black shadow down, making the bottom of the box look endless.

"Whatever you do," Camilla said carefully as she wordlessly directed Nymphadora to take over protective enchantments, "No one touch it."

"What kind of idiots do you take us for?" Belina asked begrudgingly, tucking her black hair behind her ears as she edged in closer to Dorea, eyeing the ring with concerned interest.
Dorea's hands clenched so tightly, she was starting to lose feeling in her fingers. The magic in the room was pulsating like a heartbeat in a way that made her absolutely sick. It felt almost as though they were inside of some beast that had swallowed them whole.

"It's one of them, isn't it?" She could already feel the Fiendfyre Curse whispering temptation down her throat and settling in the centre of her sternum, burning hot with desire for destruction.

"Undoubtedly," Camilla answered, watching Nymphadora's wand movements before retraining her own wand on the ring and casting something silently. "But there's something else."

There was a sickening hiss that sounded like fire sizzling on flesh, and a nasty smell of sulfur filled the air. Dorea began to cough, covering her mouth with her hands. The air suddenly became much cleaner, and she looked to the side to see that Belina had cast a Bubble-Head Charm on all of them. Raising her own wand, she muttered a Clearing Charm, sucking the smoke all into one area and sealing it off magically into its own little bubble.

"Bloody hell," Nymphadora whispered, releasing the Bubble from her head at the same time as the others. "What was that?"

"A nasty curse," Camilla said disdainfully. "That's not just smoke we pulled off. That was death."

When she reached for the ring, Dorea gasped, holding her hand out to stop her.

"What?" Camilla asked, picking up the ring. "It's perfectly clean now. I mean, you know, for a Horcrux."

Belina stepped in between Dorea and Nymphadora to look at the ring between Camilla's fingers. "It's not familiar to me. And this isn't the Gaunt family crest. I've seen this symbol before, but I can't place it."

Dorea glanced at it herself, inspecting carefully as though the ring might pop out another attack on them. The bubble of magic behind her fizzled like butterbeer before evaporating entirely, essentially eating up all the oxygen within the magical sphere and then itself.

"I've seen this too," she said, trying to pinpoint the location. On the centre of the stone, was a light carving. It was hard to make out, but a light through the nearby broken window highlighted the delicate carving of a bisected triangle encompassing a circle. "A mark of some sort. On a grave, I think." She tried to imagine if she had seen it in Godric's Hollow or perhaps up in Somerset where her parents were buried.

"I think I know it from a book," Belina said with a growl in the back of her voice, clearly irritated with not being able to recognise its meaning. "Or another object. Maybe a necklace? Or a pin."

"Lucretia would know," Camilla offered. "Especially if it's in a book."

Letting out a breath, Dorea drew her eyes to the front door, eager to get out as quickly as possible. "Symbolic meaning or not, it's a Horcrux, and will only have one end. Thank Morgana, the children are all at Hogwarts. We're about to cast Fiendfyre in the garden again."

January 19th, 1992
Potter Manor

As horrible as the approaching full moon was for Remus, Dorea was glad that Sirius had managed to come out of his isolation in order to help his friend. It was good to see her son moving about the
manor again, rather than being locked away in his room by himself, tinkering with Muggle things all night and sleeping well into the day.

"You haven't asked about Hammond lately," Sirius commented idly in the kitchen, examining a brew he was working on. From the smell of it, Dorea figured it to be some type of Pain Relief Potion for Remus. The ones bought in local apothecaries were decent enough, but the small greenhouse that Enid had helped cultivate at the manor two years prior was producing a wealth of quality ingredients, so most of the family did their own brewing.

"That looks about ready," she said, glancing at the cauldron.

Chuckling at her obvious change in subject, Sirius shook his head, swirling the liquid. "Needs another eighteen clockwise stirs, but you knew that already."

"Did I?"

"What are you witches up to today?" Sirius looked up at the nearby window as several of the coven members passed by, headed out to the old warded area. "Not a full moon ritual."

"Of course not." Dorea carefully reached above him, grabbing a handful of chamomile for the kettle that was already heating up on the cooker. She made certain not to accidentally drop any of the tea in Sirius's cauldron. "You know that full moon rituals are done at Longbottom Keep or Hollyhock Gardens. I would never want you or Remus to worry about where to spend the night. You already have too much to be concerned with on the full moon."

Sirius looked tired, which worried her. His long hair was pulled back from his face, loosely knotted in the back. A single strand had fallen, so she took the moment to tuck it away behind his ear. "Make sure to drink an Invigoration Draught before the sun sets, please. I know you concentrate an awful lot on taking care of Remus, but I would be failing as a mother if I didn't make certain you were taken care of as well."

Smiling softly, Sirius nodded. "I'm fine, Mum."

"Are you?"

Sighing, the smile faded away from his face. Normally, Sirius always had a good sarcastic quip in reply, but he had been obviously lonely lately, with too much on his mind. She half wondered if his relationship with Hammond was a distraction from other things that plagued him, and now, without the handsome Healer around, Sirius was a prey to his own thoughts.

As though he could sense her growing concern, Sirius straightened his posture and turned, giving her a dashing little smirk that reminded her of the boy he used to be. "I'll bounce back. You know me."

Leaning up to kiss his cheek, Dorea nodded. "I do, which is why I worry about you."

Clearing his throat, Sirius finished his stirring and used his wand to extinguish the fire from beneath the cauldron. "You ladies will be done by sunset?"

"Of course, love. Just a little meeting."

"Near that thing you lot buried," Sirius idly commented, not making eye contact with her.

Thinking of the dead Horcrux in the garden and the very much alive one that Camila was currently transporting back there, Dorea pinched her lips together briefly before saying, "We have everything under control. When there's something to say, I'll tell you."
The full coven stood around the hole in the garden.

Wards had been strengthened just like the last time they'd killed a Horcrux, but with additional layers, just in case. While it would be Dorea to cast Fiendfyre, Camila, Belina, Cassie, and Minerva stood as focal points—each standing on a specified corner to help contain the blaze should Dorea lose control. Lucretia had used a containment spell, drawing a large circle around the area they all stood in, summoning a wall of water that pulled from the ground and went straight up nearly thirty feet into the air. Water, of course, would not be enough. Each member of the coven cut open the initiatory scars on their palms, pressing their hands into the liquid wall, infusing it with protective blood spells of their own choosing, letting them all mingle, weave, and fuse together as one large shield.

The locket had been removed from the hole and set outside the wall of water. None of the women were sure what might happen if they were to wake this Horcrux so near another piece, destroyed or not. The ring was tossed down into the empty space, sitting there like a single piece of treasure, ready to be buried.

"It's the Peverell coat of arms," Lucretia said, sitting on a nearby rock with a large book open on her lap. Three more enormous tomes were stacked near her feet. "I'm sure of it."

"I'm not sure I agree," Belina commented. "I was finally able to track down where I'd seen the symbol before. There isn't much left, but we've a few things in storage for the shop. People used to come by decades ago, selling off anything they could after the defeat of Grindelwald, thinking that connections to him would earn a pretty Galleon. I'm dead certain that's his symbol."

"Can it be both?" Mary asked, hesitantly peering into the hole to look at the ring. "Even in the Muggle world, symbols used by evil men weren't just created. They came from somewhere. Usually somewhere good."

"Possibly," Lucretia said, flipping through another book, her wand tucked behind her ear. "And I have a theory, but I'm just not certain how plausible it is."

"Does it matter?" Callidora asked stiffly, sneering at the ring as though it emitted a horrible smell. "It's a Horcrux. That much is certain. Historical artefact or not, it needs to burn."

Everyone nodded in agreement, even Lucretia who stubbornly put her books away into a large waterproof bag, levitating it through the protective wall around them.

Reforming the circle around the small pit, Dorea took centre stage, wand in hand. Each woman around her followed suit, wand in one hand, the other pressed to the shoulder of the woman to her left.

"No hesitation," Minerva reminded her. "We're here with you."

Dorea nodded, aiming her wand down at the bit of Voldemort locked in the small token. She cleared her mind, closing her eyes to focus on the dragon blood in her veins, feeling the fire burning hot beneath her skin. Casting Fiendfyre was generally done in a moment of rage, but Dorea had learnt to control a portion of it by using her blood to channel the inferno.

A single ball of fire shot from her wand, echoing like a cannon blast when it collided with the ring. It faded briefly, as though the fire were sucking in a deep breath of air, before breaking open, wild and feral, taking the form of a dragon. The flaming beast spun around, snarling and roaring as it made eye contact with each witch in the circle, eventually settling its gaze on Dorea, its maker.
Unflinching, Dorea narrowed her eyes at the creature as though she were not only its creator, but its entire world; its god. "Devour," she whispered, the words coming out in a thin vapour of smoke from her lips, sizzling in the stifling air between her and the Fiendfyre.

Shrinking much like an Occamy would, the dragon pushed itself back into the pit, and the oranges and reds of the fire turned blue in an instant.

There was no sound other than the roar of the fire for a long moment; then, a deafening crack rent the air followed by another roar—this time coming from the Horcrux. A bolt of green light burst straight through the flames, cutting through them like a Severing Charm with all the aesthetic of a Killing Curse.

All the women took a step back at the sight, Dorea included.

The dragon shifted from its creature form, swirling around the light like a tornado made of fire.

Very slowly, in a fluid movement, a blackness from the pit began edging out from the centre. Like claws, something dark beneath the topsoil stretching outward, looking almost like infected Devil's Snare, reaching, reaching, reaching for something to hold onto.

Each witch took another step back, ever closer to the wall of water that surrounded them. Dorea, unable to take her focus from the fire, did her best to sidestep when it came near her feet.

"It's getting closer," Narcissa muttered, anxiously clinging to Andromeda's shoulder with Nymphadora on her other side.

"What if it goes under the wall?" Enid asked tentatively.

"Then we stop it," Andromeda hissed, stepping forward and pushing Narcissa and Nymphadora together to close the brief break in the circle that she had created.

As though the darkness could sense the split, its attention turned toward Andromeda, and it rushed forward, every black branch of it beneath the ground aimed in her direction.

Lifting her wand into the air, Andromeda brought it down like a knife, stabbing it into the earth with a rush of power. The ground broke beneath her feet and cracked clean open, creating a barrier of purple light that circled in front of all the women except Dorea, who still stood at the centre.

Twenty feet in the air where the top of the fire and green light met, the dragon head formed once again. Looking furious, the beast opened its jaws, swallowing the light before rushing down to engulf every last ounce of it and then vanishing.

Falling to the ground from exhaustion, Dorea felt someone immediately at her side. She looked up at Cassie and smiled, cringing when her sister pushed sweat-soaked strands of hair from her face.

"Well done," Cassie said with a grin. "You've always had a flair for the dramatic."

"I knew it."

Looking up at the sound of Lucretia's voice, Dorea's eyes widened as her gaze was drawn to where Lucretia was staring, right down into the hole in the ground. Much like the locket, the ring was blackened and melted, a hideous looking thing that reminded Dorea much of what she imagined Voldemort's soul actually looked like. The stone, however, was completely intact, glowing gold, and pulsing like a heartbeat as it hovered several inches from the bottom of the pit.
"What is that?" Mary asked, helping Cassie to bring Dorea back to her feet. "Did it not work?"

"I think it worked quite well," Lucretia said, capturing the stone with a bit of magic in order to levitate it for a closer inspection.

"How is that possible? Fiendfyre burns everything. It took all of us to contain it just here," Minerva insisted, stepping closer and looking furious. "What the hell is it?"

Lucretia smiled, her eyes alight with intrigue as she held a hand out, not touching the stone but gently caressing the gold aura around it. "This, sisters, is the Resurrection Stone."

"The what?" Mary asked, looking confused even as every other woman in the circle either gasped in shock and awe or disbelief.

"It's a story," Enid said as she moved closer. "Just a story. The Deathly Hallows can't be real."

"Of course they can," Lucretia all but snapped. "I'd just never . . . Do you think he knew? Voldemort. Do you think he knew that it . . .? It has to be written somewhere." She abandoned the hovering ring, rushing through the wall of water—triggering it to collapse in a splash all around them, soaking the hems of their robes—and returning with her bag of books.

Eventually, the glow of the ring faded, and it fell to the earth looking no more different than any other stone other than its shape. When Theia stepped forward, hand extended, Camila shoulder checked her out of the way. "Are you insane? Don't touch that thing!"

"We have no idea what it really is," Callidora muttered angrily, grabbing Theia by the arm and pulling her back protectively. "Bury it with the ring and locket."

"It's a Hallow!" Lucretia shouted, nose buried in her book, her wand tucked back behind her ear. "It was a Horcrux!" Callidora snapped back.

"Is anyone going to explain this?" Mary asked, looking pleadingly at Dorea. "What's a Hallow?"

Sighing irritably, Andromeda pulled her wand from the ground. "I'll loan you my copy of Beedle. In the meantime, we need to figure out if it really is what Lucretia says it is."

"It's a Hallow!" Lucretia repeated, sounding offended at being questioned. "And I can prove it!"

She stood, holding open one of her books. "The Peverell family tree. It was their coat of arms, just as I said. And look, the tree begins with three brothers. There aren't any records that go back further than that. The names of their parents aren't even recorded. If we go by the story . . ." she muttered, turning the book around to face her. Pressing a finger on the page, Lucretia followed down the paper, eventually turning a page and then unfolding a bit that had been pressed into the centre like a map. The page unfurled about thirty or so inches, and she muttered under her breath as she followed the words. "Aha!

"What is it?" Dorea asked impatiently, stepping to Lucretia side to look at the book in her hand.

"Cadmus Peverell," Lucretia said, as though that were an answer. When no one reacted, she sighed loudly. "The family line traces down through the generations, all the way into the founding of Hogwarts even, right to Corvinus Gaunt."

Eyes wide, Dorea stared at her. "Gaunt. As in Marvolo Gaunt?"
Looking victorious, Lucretia bounced on the balls of her feet and began muttering about the history of the Gaunt line, which traced itself back through the Slytherin bloodline all the way up beyond the history of Hogwarts and then some.

While Lucretia educated the coven on the history of the stone, Dorea flipped the page, immediately realising where she had seen the Peverell coat of arms before. There, at the top of another page, was the family line of the youngest brother, Ignotus. Much like Lucretia had done, Dorea followed it down, already knowing where it would lead.

"Gaunts, Slytherins, Peverells. It doesn't make that rock what you say it is. It's just an ugly rock," Cassie insisted, kicking it with the tip of her shoe. "It wasn't even a *pretty* ring."

"She's right," Dorea said, the words feeling like ash in her mouth.

"Thank you," Cassie said with a smug grin.

"Not you. Lucretia." Minerva walked to Dorea's side, looking down at the book. "How do you know that?"

Looking up at her friend, Dorea sighed, her breath feeling shaky with the exhale. "Because I know what happened to the Cloak of Invisibility." She pressed her finger on the page just below a name: *Charlus Potter*.

Minerva's eyes widened and her mouth fell open. "Surely you don't mean that the—?"

"I do. Charlus had the thing for years. Given to him by his father, and his grandfather before him. And now . . . it belongs to Harry."

She thought about the day Sirius came home to tell her that Dumbledore had given it to Harry, as though it was *his* to give away. She had been furious. It was a family heirloom, passed from father to son for centuries, or so Charlus had informed her. She never thought much about the cloak, other than to question whatever spell had kept it intact for so long. Most invisibility cloaks she'd seen were not nearly as finely made, nor as powerful, and certainly not as long-lasting.

"What do we do, Dorea?" Andromeda asked, looking around the circle. "If that ring really is the Resurrection Stone, we can't touch it. The story says it'll bring pain to the loved ones who've departed."

"Anyone have any dead relatives that we don't care much about?" Theia asked. When they all looked at her, she narrowed her eyes. "What? In *this* family? Someone pick up the bloody thing and call Walburga back here."

Minerva shook her head, walking over to where the ring sat on the ground. She stared at it with obvious temptation, clearing her throat. "Only one way to find out." With everyone gasping around her or shouting out objections, she picked up the stone and stared at it as though it were trying to threaten her.

Nothing happened.

"Bloody Gryffindor!" Callidora snapped at her. "What were you thinking?"

"It's a rock," Minerva snipped. "Nothing."

Clearing her throat, Lucretia—with another book in hand—frowned at Minerva. "Turn it in your
Looking unnerved, as though in daring to pick up the stone in the first place she had all but lost her reserve of courage, Minerva swallowed and used her shaky right hand to slowly spin the stone in the palm of her left.

The coven watched in anticipation and worry. Most, if not all, knew Minerva's story. There were quite a few people who could appear to her, but it was her husband, Elphinstone, who they all expected. By the tears springing to the woman's eyes and the sudden brightness of her countenance, Elphinstone had made his appearance.

Neither Dorea, nor any of the others, could see a single thing, but Minerva's gaze was fixed to a point right in front of her, never wavering.

"You're not hurt?" Minerva asked, voice soft, before clearing the emotion from her throat.

None could hear the reply, but whatever it was made Minerva laugh—a sound not heard very often. "Of course not. Don't be stupid. I just . . ." She shifted on her feet, the only sign that she might be nervous. "I wanted to see you." Another pause of silence, presumably filled with Elphinstone's voice. "Yes. I'm . . . I'm glad I have them too," she said, finally breaking eye contact with the point in front of her to briefly glance around at the women nearby.

"Is he all right?" Dorea whispered, thinking of Charlus and wondering if the spirit of her own husband was at rest.

Minerva nodded her head in answer and smiled once more at something her dead husband said before wiping her eyes and closing her fingers around the stone into a fist, turning over, and looking ready to part with it.

Silently, Camilla placed her open palm beneath Minerva's fist, catching the stone as she dropped it.

"Are you all right?" Dorea asked, not knowing if she would have the courage to visit with Charlus, no matter how terribly she missed him. She very briefly thought of Tiberius's offer for dinner, figuring that if she were able to speak with her husband, and he knew, Charlus would tease her relentlessly about it.

Minerva cleared her throat again and smoothed her hands over her hair, obviously desperate to compose herself. "I'm fine. The stone works. It's real. It did not harm my husband, but . . . it wasn't as though he were a ghost like we've all seen at Hogwarts," she told them. "He could not touch me, and his colour was all lacking. He said he was not in any pain but had been pulled to me without question. We can't say for certain, but if we're going by the old story, then prolonged use of the stone could cause the spirits of the dead immense harm. I would not suggest we investigate further on that notion."

"Unless it's someone we hate," Nymphadora suggested.

"Agreed," Dorea said, taking Minerva's hand and squeezing.

"The question then is . . ." Cedrella said quietly, biting the corner of her lip anxiously and twisting the long sleeve of her robe in hand, "how do we use this against Voldemort?"

All eyes fell on Dorea.

It was not strange for their attention to move in her direction—she was, after all, their High Witch.
But she knew then why they were looking at her. It was not for her position or power, and they were not looking to her to direct their decisions. They were asking permission. If they were to defeat Voldemort, they needed to know everything about his life, his Horcruxes, and his death.

And one of the last people to have seen Voldemort alive . . . was James.

Camilla held her hand out to Dorea, stone securely inside.

The thought made Dorea sick to her stomach, and she actually struggled not to run to the nearest shrub to choke up her breakfast. She made eye contact with her coven sisters, hoping they understood that even though Minerva assured them that her husband had been in no pain, the idea of summoning James, to see him years older than the last time, and . . . What would he look like? She had once gently asked Sirius about the night he found the ruin of Godric's Hollow. He had broken down crying, telling her upon request about the emptiness of James's eyes, how he found him crumpled in a heap near the bottom of a staircase with half of the roof collapsed onto his body.

Dorea never wanted to see that. She did not want to see any ethereal version of her son that she could not touch. She wanted him alive. If she could not have that, she would stick with photographs and memories, just as she would with Charlus. She could not be the one—not unless there was no other choice.

"I can't."

"It's all right, love," Cedrella said, rushing toward her and pulling her tightly into a warm embrace, smelling like cinnamon and nutmeg. "We would never . . . We won't ask again."

Camilla looked at the stone in her hand. "We need to find out more about it. The Hallows actually exist. And, technically, we have access to two of them."

Most were smiling with intrigue, but Belina stepped forward, taking the stone from Camilla and examining it. "We have a problem, though. If the stone and the cloak exist, that means . . ."

"The Elder Wand," Lucretia said in agreement, also looking nervous.

"The Death Stick," Belina added. "Did Antioch Peverell have any descendants we could track down?"

Cedrella shook her head, frowning. "The wand was stolen from him. When he was murdered. That's what the story says, at least."

Dorea felt somewhat defeated even though their investigation into Tom Riddle's past had never been about Hallows. They were looking for Horcruxes. Still, this felt like something important. "There's no way to track it."

Lucretia crossed her arms and lifted her chin. "Well, if there is, you bet your arses that I'll figure it out."

Chapter End Notes

Happy Christmas, Solstice, Yule, Holidays, and a late Happy Hanukkah!
January 20th, 1992  
Potter Manor

Sirius had woken up in the orchards of Potter Manor, stretching out his long legs in front of him, marvelling at the fact that the black fur had yet to turn grey. His hair in human form didn't really have any noticeable strands of silver either, but Sirius was just waiting for the day when age hit him in the face. He knew it was on the horizon somewhere. Shifting into human form, he glanced over his shoulder to the man at his back, fast asleep. Remus's hair had plenty of grey streaks these days, though the fur of the wolf didn't show it as much.

Cracking his neck to the side, he tried to pop out the kink that came from sleeping on the ground. The grass was crunchy with early morning frost, but at least most of the snow from the month earlier had already melted. The full moon in December had been a pain in the arse when he'd woken up with cold, wet fur.

"Moony," Sirius quietly muttered, gently touching Remus's bare shoulder, glad to not see any new scars. It had been quite some time since his best friend had torn himself up like he used to, years even. For that, Sirius was incredibly grateful. A single potion and a friend in Animagus form were all Remus needed to keep from getting too hurt. If only parenting, not to mention being in a bloody relationship, was as easy. Cringing at the thought of Hammond, Sirius mentally scolded himself for not replying to the owl that came earlier that week, requesting a date for lunch. Since their fight before the Yule party, Sirius had only seen Hammond twice, and both times had been awkward and tense.

Resolving to deal with his love life later, Sirius pressed just a bit harder on Remus's shoulder, stirring the man awake. "Come on, Moons. Let's get inside where it's warm. You'll freeze to death out here if you plan on staying starkers all day." When Remus growled at him groggily, Sirius smirked. "Not that I don't appreciate the view, of course."

Remus swatted a limp hand at him, missing by several inches.

"Come on, Remus." He knelt down, reaching arms beneath his friend, grunting bitterly about how much easier it was to carry him around when they'd both been sixteen. "Hell, what is Theia feeding you these days, you fat lump?"

That, at least, earned a snort of amusement from Remus, who gripped Sirius's shoulder to get his balance. Neither bothered to cover Remus up; even if anyone was home, most knew to not go near the orchards or the back garden until well into the afternoon following a full moon. His clothes had been set aside before they'd even come out to the orchards the night before, hours after the coven had departed from doing . . . whatever the fuck they had done out there.

Sirius glanced at the broken bit of earth near the warded area of the garden, wondering what the hell the witches had been burning. Freshly dug up earth covered an obvious hole that even Sirius wasn't stupid enough to go near. He might not know exactly what they'd buried back there, but he really didn't want to. He strangely never really questioned his mother when she said that it was Dark Magic they were getting rid of in order to prevent any possible return of Voldemort. As long as Harry was safe, Sirius was happy to let the witches fuck up a washed up Dark Lord. Still, the circle of broken ground and the black vine-like patterns on the dirt inside of it had him pondering exactly what kind of blood magic the women were up to these days.
"Any idea what that's about?"

Remus met his gaze, eyelids heavy, before looking over Sirius's shoulder at the ground. "Whatever it is, I think they killed it twice."

"Hope so," Sirius muttered. "I know they're powerful, I do, but . . . that's still my mother and, hell, every cousin and aunt I've got that I don't want to see sunk to the bottom of the ocean. Can't help but be a little concerned. Sometimes I have dreams that a nightmare version of the Whomping Willow grows out of that pit there and starts attacking."

Remus chuckled, his throat obviously still raw. "To be fair, the real Whomping Willow wasn't very fun either. The coven knows what they're doing. We have to believe that."

While he could never really compare the two, Sirius recalled James often saying the same thing about Dumbledore and the Order back before the world went to complete shit. Dumbledore knew what he was doing. They had to believe that. And look how well that had turned out in the end.

"Theia ever tell you?" Sirius asked as he held the back door open for Remus, grabbing the set of soft, night robes that he'd placed there the evening prior. He waited for Remus to answer, even as he wrapped the man up, holding the sleeves open for each of his arms, and stepping around to the front to help with the buttons out of pure instinct and muscle memory. When no answer came, Sirius prompted, "Or is your relationship with my cousin one that doesn't often involve talking?"

Rolling his eyes, Remus made his way down a long stretch of hallway, smiling at Dobby in passing as the house-elf held the door to the kitchen open for them both. "Have you always been so chatty?" he asked, opening the cooling cabinet and grabbing a wrapped package of cold, but cooked, bacon. "No, we never talk about the coven's business unless it relates to the Overview Programme or . . ."

"Or Harry," Sirius finished for him. "I think Mum's keeping things from me. Not out of spite or anything, or that she thinks I'm too stupid to understand."

"Coven business is private."

"Not even that," Sirius said, taking a piece of bacon from the package before Remus finished off the rest and tossed the paper in the bin. "Feels like she's doing that coddling thing again but from a distance. Like she's keeping her eye on me in case I'm going to do something stupid, but she's not intervening."

Raising a brow as he took a seat, Remus asked, "Do you want her to?"

Sirius shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. I've not exactly been great these past few months at managing my own shit."

"It's been a rough couple of months. Maybe you should get a job to keep occupied," Remus said, offering out another piece of bacon to Sirius when he'd all but swallowed the previous one whole. "How's Hammond? I saw the owl. You ever reply?"

Groaning, Sirius fell into a nearby chair and pushed his fingers through his hair, begrudgingly chewing on the bacon and swallowing. "You ever think that maybe all of my relationships get fucked up because I'm searching for Lily or James. What they had, I mean."

Nodding slowly, Remus sighed. "I think I do the same thing, sometimes. Even if I was keen on marriage, which I'm not," he said stubbornly, "Theia's made it quite clear that she doesn't want that. I'm honestly not even sure what she wants, but definitely not long term. I'm shocked we've lasted as long as this."
Tilting his head to the side, Sirius peeked at Remus from between the strands of black hair that had fallen in his face. "Hammond was easier to deal with long distance. He's always busy with work, and I've always had Harry to look after and keep me occupied. Did you know he's not even that big of a fan of kids? Says he never wants any of his own even though his mum is frothing at the mouth for grandbabies."

Brow furrowed, Remus pointed out, "But you've always had Harry. At least as long as Hammond's known you."

"Yeah, and he just happens to show up in person the day I send Harry off to Hogwarts. Not a good omen, I think," Sirius said, feeling miserable. "Then everything with the bloody Muggle thing," he added, thinking of the day they were assaulted in London. "Maybe I need to go back to women."

Remus laughed, causing Sirius to sit up and narrow his eyes. "God, if you could see your face. I know you've always been fond of both sexes, but you look like someone just told you to drink Skele-Gro."

"What's broken?" Theia asked as she walked into the kitchen, wearing a pair of Remus's boxers that hung low on her hips, paired with a white vest that Sirius was pretty sure she nicked from his room. She opened the cooling cabinet and pursed her lips. "Did you eat all the bacon? I'll bring home some from work. Tom ordered too much last week. It'll go bad soon if no one eats it, and there's nothing worse than a grown man bitching about spoiled meat."

"How about a grown man bitching about his clothes being stolen?" Sirius asked. "Your tits stretch out my shirts, y'know."

Theia turned around and smirked, grabbing a handful each of her own breasts. "Liar. They aren't even bigger than yours." Turning around, she poured two cups of tea and brought them to the table, setting one down in front of each man. She ruffled Sirius's hair when she approached the table, leaning over to plant a kiss to the top of Remus's head. "How're you feeling, love?"

"Less furry," Remus commented. "Might head for a kip soon. He stretched his arms above his head, wincing when one of his shoulders made a popping sound. "But I'm a good friend, so I've put that off in favour of listening to Padfoot's love troubles."

"Still haven't gone back to shagging the Healer?" Theia asked. "Morgana, it's been over a month. I'm surprised you don't have carpal tunnel."

"Ha. Ha," Sirius said, flipping her two fingers. "Said the woman who's incapable of settling down. What's wrong with Remus that you won't marry him?"

Remus, who had been mid-sip, choked on a mouthful of tea and glared daggers at Sirius.

Theia only laughed. "Because I'm not a wife," she said clearly. "Never will be. That's not our future."

"You know what they say about cows with free milk," Sirius said with a chuckle, grinning when Remus kicked him from beneath the table. "You expect Moony here to wait for you forever?"

"Nope," Theia replied, playfully popping the 'p' when she spoke. "I'm here to get him ready for when true love comes around."

Sirius watched as the two made eye contact. Remus looked confused but unsurprised, as though the two had had this conversation before. "You mind offering to help with my love life while you're at it?"
Shaking her head in obvious exasperation, Theia kissed Sirius's forehead and whispered, "You're a fucking idiot."

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**January 25th, 1992**  
**Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry**

Harry stared down sadly at the Helga Hufflepuff card in his hand, the chocolate frog in his mouth tasting like envy with just a subtle hint of regret. "I would've had all four Founders," he said miserably, tucking the card into the pocket of his robes.

"Still can't believe Malfy tricked you out of the whole lot," Ron said, licking smeared chocolate off of the edge of a Burdock Muldoon card. The image of the man on the card side-stepped Ron's tongue with a horrified look on his face before vanishing entirely from sight. "I told you Slytherins were rotters."

Rolling his eyes, Harry didn't bother to argue. All anyone knew was that Draco had Harry's card collection. He hadn't told a soul that it had been an exchange for Hermione's safety. He was, however, starting to wonder if he'd actually bought nothing. Hermione was powerful in her own right, and ever since they came back from Yule break, her new familiar stalked the halls with the same menacing look that Max usually had, though even Max allowed more than just Harry to pet her. Crookshanks, on the other hand, only had eyes for Hermione. Anyone else that got too close earned a growl and a hiss in warning. Thankfully, the kneazle had warmed up to him just a touch, usually when Max wasn't around.

Coming back to Hogwarts, Harry had felt anxious. Between the truth about his wand and worrying more about Dumbledore now that he had another secret to keep, he spent the train ride trying to figure out how to stay out of trouble like his grandmother had asked. It was one thing to try and side-step the nasty side of Slytherins, but avoiding the headmaster, keeping up with his homework, and figuring out how to get on Snape's good side?

Luckily, Harry found that as long as he kept his mouth shut in Practical Defence class, Snape actually didn't bother him so much. He still clearly thought Harry wasn't up to the task of fighting off a Cornish Pixie, but the comments came at him with much less vitriol now that he had started showing up on time and actually trying to pay attention. Slughorn, who had taken over Potions, made the class easier to tolerate, but anytime he looked at Harry, Ron, Neville, or Draco too long, he fumbled over his words nervously. The first class back, when Hermione and Millie were talking about the Yule party, Slughorn dropped a phial of salamander blood when Hermione mentioned Harry's grandmother by name.

Quirrel, meanwhile, pouted at the staff table at every meal. Since Theoretical Defence was now optional, most students—Harry included—opted for Practical instead, even if it was with Snape. Quirrell must have taken the slight very personally, because when Harry got a headache while apologising for dropping his class, Quirrel didn't even ask if he was all right. He just scowled and turned away, stomping off toward his studentless classroom.

Harry just avoided him now.

Dumbledore had not been much of a bother recently. Harry wondered if his grandmother had visited the headmaster or sent an owl. Other than occasionally looking in Harry's direction, the older wizard hadn't made contact since Harry's return.

"You would've liked it," Neville said to Dean. "The elves made these amazing lemon cakes, and Aunt Cedrella made sticky toffee pudding. Between all the aunts, I think there were about ten
thousand biscuits."

Dean smiled sadly. "Wish I could’ve come. Grandad would've been alone for Christmas, though, and Mum says he's not doing well. I don't like visiting him," he said, looking a bit angry which made Harry wonder if there wasn't more to that story, "but I think it'd be mean to leave him on his own for the holiday."

"Seamus, if you set the Quidditch stands on fire, not a single one of us will save you," Harry warned, watching as his roommate was aiming his wand at a book and muttering under his breath.

Laughing, Seamus shook his head. "I'm trying to use a Doubling Charm. Keep forgetting it in my room, and last time, McGonagall took five points."

Ron stared with trepidation, scooting closer to Neville in the process as though the book might explode. "Mate, that's a fifth year spell."

"So?"

Dean chuckled. "Who gets to take him to the hospital wing when he hurts himself? One, two, three, not it!"

"Not it!" Harry yelled.

"Not it!" Neville followed.

Ron groaned. "Oh, come on."

"Sorry, Ron," Dean said with a grin. "The last time I helped him there, Madam Pomfrey had me hold the burn-healing paste. Smells like farts."

The boys all laughed, but their conversation stopped when the Gryffindor Quidditch team entered the field, all taking to the sky with ease. The first years all stared up in excitement, awe, and not a small amount of jealousy on Harry's part. He missed flying.

It was something most of the boys shared—a love of Quidditch. Even if Dean had only ridden a broom in Flying Class and both Ron and Seamus had the absolute worst taste in Quidditch teams, as far as Harry was concerned. After classes and before dinner, the boys had all agreed to go out to the pitch to watch their House team practice from beneath the stands. It wasn't a very private area, since most of the banners had been pulled up that morning for Hagrid and Filch to deal with some overgrowth of winter weeds, but the area was hidden well enough that they wouldn't cause a distraction for the team.

"Percy says that Oliver Wood is a nutter," Ron said, watching the Keeper with a crooked grin as he took his place in front of the large hoops. "Only ever talks about Quidditch. Fred and George say that's what makes him the best. I bet the Cannons try to recruit him."

"Poor Wood," Harry said with a snicker, dodging to the side when Ron tried to punch him in the shoulder. "I think they're all brilliant. You see last game when Angelina Johnson tricked Flint into crashing into the stands? It was awesome."

"How about when Ron's brothers sent that Bludger at Bletchley and knocked him through the hoop?" Neville added with a bright grin.

"I still think they should've earned points for that," Ron added.
Sighing wistfully, Harry put his elbows on his knees and leant forward, resting his chin in his hands. "I still think first years should be able to try out. I miss flying. Hell, I even dream about it most nights."

His friends and roommates suddenly went quiet, all looking awkward.

"What?"

Neville shook his head at both Seamus and Ron, but Dean cleared his throat. "Harry, mate, umm . . . We've been meaning to ask you about something."

"We haven't," Neville insisted. "It's not our business."

Ron stood up, nudging Seamus in the shoulder. "We should go."

Harry narrowed his eyes at all of them. "What?"

Ron's ears were pink, and Seamus was looking down at him with an obvious expression of pity. They both mumbled apologies before leaving, Seamus taking his book with him—which had started to smoke a bit at the corners.

"What the hell?" Harry demanded, looking at Neville and Dean.

Neville sighed. "I didn't want to bring it up. It's your business."

Harry glanced between his two best friends, curious and upset. "Is it family stuff?" he asked Neville, wondering if he was trying to say something that Dean wasn't allowed to hear. "Unless it's stuff that our grandmothers wouldn't want him to know, I don't care what Dean hears." Hell, Dean knew about Harry's wand problems, even if he didn't know the whole truth of Harry being a Parseltongue. Even Neville didn't know about that. "I do care that the two of you are keeping something from me, though. And apparently, Ron and Seamus know?"

"You've been talking in your sleep," Dean said.

Panicked, Harry began wondering if he spoke Parseltongue when he was unconscious.

"Crying," Neville quietly clarified. "We were worried, is all. Didn't want to embarrass you."

Feeling embarrassed regardless, Harry looked down. "It's nothing," he muttered angrily. "I just . . . I've been having nightmares lately."

Eyes wider, Neville leant in closer and whispered. "Is it about . . . you know? Voldemort?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Yes. I don't . . . It's just my parents. Been dreaming about that night."

"What night?" Dean asked. When Harry and Neville pinned him with a look, he frowned. "Oh. Sorry."

"Just dreams," Harry said with a shrug. "Don't mean anything."

Neville gave a single nod. "I sometimes have nightmares about what happened to mine too," he said. "Happens a lot after I go visit them. I don't tell Gran, though, just in case she thinks it might be better to not visit as often."

Dean shuffled in his seat a bit. "My dad died. I mean, my step-dad too, but my real dad. Mum says he was in the army. Special forces, or something. I don't even know how he died. That gives me
nightmares sometimes. I don't like watching war films because of it."

Harry put his hand on Dean's shoulder. "What about your step-dad?"

"Car crash. Just after my sisters turned two."

"Bloody hell," Harry murmured with a heavy sigh. "Aren't we a happy lot."

At that, Dean cracked a small smile, and Neville huffed a laugh.

"Look how adorable. A bunch of ickle firsties all snuggled up together. Ten Galleons says that we just interrupted a game of spin the bottle."

Harry felt the hairs on his arms stand up, and he clenched his teeth as he turned to look up at Marcus Flint, flanked by his usual cronies. Pucey, Bletchley, a fourth year that Harry didn't recognise, and Vincent bloody Crabbe.

"Bugger off," Harry snapped. "We're not bothering anyone. And this is Gryffindor Quidditch practice."

"Oh, are you on the team?" Pucey mockingly asked. "We've more right to be here than you."

Harry stood up, immediately feeling Dean at his side. Neville stood behind him, a hand rested on his shoulder as a silent warning. Harry knew what it meant. He wasn't supposed to be fighting. All the teachers—Snape and his Aunt Minnie most of all—had cautioned him. Not to mention Sirius and his grandmother. Clenching his fists in frustration, Harry sighed and jerked his head, motioning for Dean and Neville to walk off.

"If you'll excuse us then," Harry muttered and tried to side-step Flint and the group of Slytherins.

He let Dean and Neville go in front of him, a conscious need to make sure that they didn't get hurt. The Slytherins all laughed, and just when it was Harry's turn to move, he felt large hands on his back shoving him forward and into Neville. They both caught their footing, and Harry spun around, his hand hovering on his pocket where he kept his wand. All of the Slytherins already had theirs out.

"Harry don't," Neville said.

"They're not worth it, mate," Dean angrily added.

Harry remembered what his grandmother had told him. He wasn't to use physical violence. He had to be smarter than his enemies. Then again, Sirius wanted him to stand up for himself as well, and Harry couldn't just let this go. It was basically giving permission for Flint and the others to pick on them anytime they'd like.

Holding up his hands and backing up several steps, out into the open, Harry feigned worry. "Don't worry, Nev. I'm not stupid enough to hex them. Not with what we overheard over Yule."

Flint smirked and stepped forward, following after Harry even as he continued to move backward. "Oh? What did you hear over Yule? Your parents decide to sell you to the lowest bidder? Oh, wait. You don't have parents."

Trying to keep his temper in check over that slight, Harry forced a snicker. "What? You don't know? I'd have thought Snape would try to warn his own House. The Board of Governors met over the holiday. They found out the spell that the Ministry uses to track underage magic when outside of Hogwarts. They put it on the whole castle to prevent students from hexing one another in the halls."
"That's stupid," Pucey said. "Don't believe him, Marcus. He's just trying to get out of this."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You think I wouldn't be trying to defend myself if I didn't believe it? I'm not afraid of you lot. Come on then," he challenged. "Have at it."

Flint quickly moved forward, wand gripped tight. The look on his face showed hesitance, though, and Harry tried not to feel victorious in that moment. Obviously irritated, Flint pocketed his wand. "You think we're just going to let you get away then? I still owe you for that smack last term."

"Harry," Dean said. "What are you doing?"

"Don't get involved in this, Dean," Harry demanded. "You either Nev. This is between me and Flint. Fair fight."

The other Slytherins laughed.

"It won't be fair, Potter," Pucey said. "We're gonna make an example out of you."

"That so?" Harry asked with a grin. "You gonna punch me so hard that I look as ugly as the lot of you?"

And that did it.

The Slytherins all charged, wands tucked away.

Harry turned and ran toward the opening of the pitch, shouting for Neville and Dean to stay ahead. He didn't get far, tackled to the ground by one of them, who shoved his face into the dirt before flipping him over and punching him in the cheek so hard that he saw stars. It hurt like hell, and Harry wanted to fight back, but instead, he brought his hands up to his face and began to shout for help.

Neville and Dean were ten yards away still, but Harry knew they'd come back. When he looked to the side as Flint sent a fist into his stomach, Harry shook his head and yelled at his friends, "No!"

"Leave him alone!" Neville yelled, looking torn over whether to help or to listen to Harry.

The Slytherins continued to laugh, and Crabbe and Pucey stepped forward to kick Harry in the side as Flint pinned him down and sent another balled fist into Harry's cheek. The other two Slytherins, Bletchley and the one Harry didn't know by name, suddenly looked concerned.

"Marcus, that's enough," Bletchley said. "He's just a firstie."

"Harry fucking Potter is what he is," Flint snarled before hitting Harry again.

He tasted blood in his mouth and was certain something was wrong with one of his ribs since he was having trouble breathing, though he couldn't rule out that his adrenaline might've had something to do with that.

"I'm out!" Bletchley said, grabbing the other boy and taking off.

"Stop it!" Dean was screaming.

Harry coughed and turned to look up at Flint through the one eye that wasn't already beginning to swell. He heard the familiar sound of brooms whipping through the air, and grinned. "You gonna stop, Flint? Like a coward?"

Flint must have not heard the sound that Harry had, because he growled and wrapped his hands
around Harry's throat, squeezing hard.

Just before Harry lost his breath and his voice, he cried out, "Someone help me!"

It took less than five seconds before Flint was thrown off of him. Oliver Wood standing in front of Harry with broad shoulders and windswept hair. "You out of your mind, Flint? Three against one? He's a bloody first year, you arsehole!"

"He started it," Crabbe said, stepping backward as Fred and George moved forward, standing between Wood and Angelina Johnson, who created a wall in front of Harry.

"That so?" Angelina snapped. "Doesn't look like he hurt any of you."

"Incarcerous!" Fred and George shouted, followed swiftly by Alicia Spinnet, coming up from behind. Instantly, ropes flew out of their wands, wrapping around the Slytherins and knocking them all to their knees.

Flint laughed. "What're you gonna do, Wood? We'll say that you lot attacked us, and Potter got in the way. No one will believe you. It's our word against yours."

"I beg to differ, Mr Flint."

Very briefly, Harry felt concerned. He'd provoked Flint into this situation, manipulating him into fighting without defending himself so that it would be seen. He had hoped that Madam Hooch or his Aunt Minnie would be the teachers to find them. The moment the Quidditch team left their positions in the air before practice was up was sure to draw someone's attention, and both witches were known to keep a close eye on the team.

Professor Snape catching them however . . . that was unexpected.

"Mr Wood, if you would instruct your team to release these boys, I will be taking them straight to the headmaster. If he allows any of you to remain at Hogwarts for this attack, you'll all be serving detention with me for the rest of the year."

Harry cringed, wincing as he rolled to the side, holding a hand to his ribs.

Flint looked almost happy with the news.

Snape, however, looked livid. "And you'll do well to remove that smirk from your face," he snapped. "It pains me to say that the Gryffindors are correct. None of you appears to have a single injury. Fighting like a bunch of savage Muggles? I'm ashamed all three of you were Sorted into my House. Get up and get inside the castle. Now."

Flint's smile faded, and he actually looked concerned.

Wood, however, didn't look happy with the news. "I'll be informing Professor McGonagall."

Snape, looking annoyed with that news, merely nodded his head. "See that you do. And get Mr Potter to the hospital wing before he bleeds all over the pitch." He spun around on his heel, storming back toward the castle. Flint, Pucey, and Crabbe following behind.

Flint turned back once to glare at Harry.

Harry grinned through his split lip, thrilled with the results, despite the pain—though that would soon be fixed by Madam Pomfrey's capable hands. As one last insult, Harry flipped two fingers at Flint
and then waved goodbye.

"Do you have a death wish, Potter?" Wood asked.

With the Slytherins out of sight, Harry sighed and took Fred's hand to pull himself to his feet. "Sometimes, maybe," he muttered as he wiped his bleeding mouth off on the sleeve of his robes.

Wood laughed brightly. "Bloody hell. You're made to be a Beater, I think. Seeing as you can take a beating."

Harry shook his head as he began walking toward the castle. "I've got another position in mind, cheers."

Wood said nothing else, but Harry could hear a sudden whizzing noise growing swiftly louder coming up from behind him. Spinning around as quickly as he could without tipping over in dizziness thanks to the hits he'd taken to the head, Harry threw his arm out, snatching the fluttering golden ball in the palm of his hand.

Wood was bent over a bit, one arm hanging lower than the other. He'd clearly been the one to throw the Snitch. By his posture and the sudden grin on his face, he hadn't given it a simple toss.

Harry smirked—hurting his broken lip in the process—and he tossed the Snitch back to Wood. "Keep that in mind next year?"

Laughing, Wood nodded. "You lot got him?"

Neville and Dean flanked Harry, each holding onto an arm. "We got him."

"You're insane," Dean said.

"Yep," Harry agreed. 

January 25th, 1992

Smiling brightly, filled up with pride, Hermione looked back over her most recent Potions essay, thrilled with the praising marks that Professor Snape had left her. Well, it was praise considering it was Professor Snape that had given them. Nothing too flowery, or anything of the sort, but the only thing he marked her down for was the length of the essay—which had gone over by three inches—but he left a remark in slanted black writing on the side, noting that he appreciated her additional comments in regards to how the proper containment of an ingredient could alter the strength or effects of the potion in question. It was something he was no longer required to do since his promotion to Defense Against the Dark Arts, but when she had asked for his input, he said that he might as well, since it was unlikely Professor Slughorn would accurately grade the work in a way that could improve a student's thought process in regards to brewing.

She was happy to be back at Hogwarts, even though she missed her parents terribly. Christmas was a comfortable affair, other than the trip to Potter Manor for the Yule gathering. She still worried about Harry, knowing that something was going on with him and his family, but it wasn't her place to mention it, so she just let him know that she would be around if he ever needed someone to talk to.

Unlike Harry, and most of the boys she knew, Tracey went on at length about every little detail of her life over the holiday, including a word for word retelling about a fight her parents got into over whether or not a set of frying pans was an acceptable Christmas present from her father.
The small group of Slytherins got right back into the habit of revising in the common room at night, and Greg had already made great leaps forward in his Charms homework. Tracey still spent the majority of her time filing her nails, but she did allow Hermione to quiz her whilst painting hers or Millie's toes, changing the colour every few days. She offered to do the same for Greg, and he made her promise that she'd never touch his feet.

Millie's hair still had not returned to its normal colour, the green streaks staying in place as though a Sticking Charm had been applied. Pansy and Daphne teased her relentlessly about it for the first two nights until Gemma Fawley had commented on them, saying that they made Millie look pretty and unique. Millie had awkwardly brushed off the praise, but Hermione caught her grinning deviously as Pansy and Daphne glared daggers at her from across the room.

Pulling her attention from her essay, Crookshanks butted his head into Hermione's side, flipping over onto his back for a belly rub. She truly had no idea why Harry's family and the Scamanders had looked so shocked over his affection. He was quite possibly the sweetest and most beautiful cat to ever exist, as far as she was concerned. Though he and Max did not always get along so well, she had seen the two carefully approaching one another from time to time without fighting.

Her parents had not been overly thrilled when she came home with a pet, especially seeing the size of him. Their eyes widened even more when Hermione mentioned he was still just a kitten and might get bigger. As it was, he took up all the space on her lap as she scratched at his furry belly. "Such a pretty boy," she said sweetly, stopping her petting to grab his head and plant a kiss right on his squashed little face.

"How sweet. The little Mudblood has a new boyfriend."

Hermione looked up, trying to narrow her eyes instead of widening them in fear as Hestia and Flora Carrow approached. While they hadn't bothered her so much after their house-elves, Baba and Yaga, had stopped trying to put bugs in her bed, every meal was spent with the older Slytherins glaring down the table at her. Even Pansy and Daphne had become a bit more nasty with their comments and looks, until Gemma cast a disapproving glance in their direction. Hestia and Flora were popular in their year, but everyone knew that Gemma ruled the dungeons with an iron fist. Only Professor Snape had more power over the Slytherins.

"Where did you get such an ugly cat?" Hestia asked, sneering down at Crookshanks, who rolled over in Hermione's lap, staring straight ahead at the girls.

Mr Scamander had told Hermione that kneazles were very intelligent and also incredibly protective. She already knew as much, seeing how Max behaved with Harry, but Crookshanks had yet to prove he was anything other than a lap cat, always looking for extra belly rubs, kisses, and treats. The way his body tensed made her a bit nervous.

Hermione wondered whether Millie and Tracey were due back from the library anytime soon.

Most of their housemates had already retired to bed. The girls were all back in their rooms—the older ones either fast asleep, exhausted from homework, or staying up later to catch up on revising for upcoming O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s in a few months. The boys, however, had all caused a big scene earlier that afternoon when Professor Snape escorted three of them back to the dungeons, looking as though he were tempted to be dragging them in by their ears. Hermione didn't know Marcus Flint and Adrian Pucey very well, only that they did not like her one bit, but for some reason, loathed Harry and other Gryffindors even more. Once Professor Snape had left with overheard detentions dished out, Cassius Warrington and his friends had threatened Flint and Pucey. When they had left the common room to go on Prefect rounds, Hermione overheard Thorfinn Rowle take the two bullies aside and scold them for acting out rather than playing it smart. She didn't know what her
housemates had done to earn the wrath of their Head of House and everyone else in Slytherin, but whatever it was, was being lauded as kin to Gryffindor idiocy and recklessness.

Vincent Crabbe, the only first year to get in trouble, had been left to his own, but Hermione had discouraged Greg from getting involved when Draco and Theo had invited him to help them do something nasty to the boy in retaliation for "disrespecting the family". Greg had gracefully bowed out—as far as she knew—but last she heard, the boys were considering putting spiders eggs in the pockets of Crabbe's robes while he slept.

Staring up at her own bullies, Hermione wished that her friends were there to stand with her. "Slytherins are cunning all on our own," Cassius had told her, "but when we work together, we're never to be underestimated."

Determined not to look intimidated by the older girls, Hermione scratched Crookshanks's head and eventually replied, "He was a Yule gift."

Flora laughed mockingly at her. "Someone must really hate you to give you that thing. Did you take your Muggle parents to Diagon? No wonder. Muggles wouldn't know how to buy a proper familiar."

Narrowing her eyes at the girls, Hermione straightened her posture. "He was a gift from Miss Cassiopeia Black, actually. I attended the Yule party held by the Black Coven."

She wanted to make them envious, but the girls' expressions darkened at her words, lips curling up into matching sneers.

"They let filth like you into their home?" Hestia snapped angrily.

"I was an invited guest," Hermione said, lifting her chin defiantly. "In fact, Madam Cedrella Weasley said that the coven was looking at me as a potential future member. Would you like me to put in a good word with them for you?"

Hestia's eyes widened in obvious fury. "Even if they do let you in, you'll just be another one of their little pet Mudbloods. Everyone knows that they already let one of your kind in. Absolutely ridiculous. It's not as though you'll ever be a real member. You don't have strong enough magic. They just pity you."

Trying her best not to believe Hestia, Hermione swallowed down the rising bile in her throat and stood up, effectively knocking Crookshanks to the ground. "I'll be a member," she said with determination. "And when I am, I'll remember this moment, and every other moment I've ever spent with the two of you."

Flora laughed. "You're actually threatening us? How stupid can you be?"

"Not nearly as stupid as you look," Hermione said without thinking.

Hestia raised her wand.

Hermione glanced down at the sofa where hers was tucked beneath a stack of parchment and a book. Cursing herself for her lack of self-preservation—something Draco had been scolding her about as of late—she tried to hold her ground, wondering if she could dodge whatever hex or curse flew out of Hestia's wand.

Before the other girl had a chance to attack, though, Crookshanks leapt into the air, snatching the wand right from Hestia's grip and running off into the shadows with it.
"You little beast!" she screamed, pushing at Flora to retaliate. "Kill that ugly thing!

When Flora raised her wand in the direction that Crookshanks had vanished, Hermione panicked and rushed forward, shoving the girl back. A dark red light lef her wand, hitting the ceiling above them and raining down dust and small bits of broken stone. Hestia grabbed Hermione by her hair and stepped forward, shoving Hermione back until her knees buckled against the sofa.

"Don't you ever put your filthy, Mudblood hands on—"

Hermione looked up as Hestia's grip on her hair loosened and followed the other girl's gaze over her shoulder. Perched on the top of the sofa, just behind Hermione, was Max. Her yellow eyes practically glowed in the dark, fangs shining in the dim light of the common room. Max let out a low growl of warning, arching her back and lowering her head. Her mouth opened, letting out a terrifying hiss.

Another growl came from below, and Hestia let go of Hermione to see that Crookshanks was circling Flora, looking at her like she was dinner. Millie's cat, Brutus had joined him, and the two closed in on the girl with menacing looks on their small faces.

"You think we're scared of your cats?" Hestia snapped.

Max leapt onto Hermione's shoulder, the weight of her pushing Hermione sideways a bit. Harry's familiar hissed again, swiping a paw at Hestia, claws extended. Crookshanks and Brutus quickly joined, each taking a side on the sofa next to Hermione as Max took up the space on her lap.

"We're not finished here," Hestia said as she stepped back, grabbing her sister's hand and pulling her to her feet. Crookshanks had left Hestia's wand on the floor, and she bent down to retrieve it but holstered the thing instead of aiming it once more.

Once they were gone, Hermione let out a heavy exhale, pulling all three cats into her arms. Max and Crookshanks both groaned a bit in obvious discomfort, but Brutus fell limp until he slipped from Hermione's grip.

"Are you going to be a crazy cat lady now?"

Hermione turned and laughed at the expressions on Millie's and Tracey's faces. Millie held a stack of books, and Tracey looked as though she spent the entire time in the library plaitsing her own hair.

Grinning down at the cats on her lap, Hermione nodded. "I think I might be."
April 29th, 1992
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Staring up at the looming castle in front of him, Newt sighed. As much as he loved Hogwarts and the few good memories it held for him from his youth, he rarely liked to actually visit. Most times that he’d needed to come back once he’d been expelled from school, had been under duplicitous invitation or out of necessity.

Today was a necessity.

He and Cassiopeia had spent months researching how to retrieve the cerberus from the school without Dumbledore's knowledge. Cassie had opted for ideas on how to lure Dumbledore away, but Newt was adamantly against manipulation, as it was a tactic that had been used on him far too many times in the past. He respected Dumbledore for the things he had done for their community; however, there was still a great deal of mistrust left between him and the man. Still, Newt was not the type of person to hold a grudge, and therefore, would not resort to playing the same cards that Dumbledore held in his own hands.

That left figuring out how to persuade Dumbledore that his actions were wrong. Cassie, along with the witches of the Black Coven Newt had had the pleasure of meeting, were all angry that Dumbledore was keeping secrets and endangering the students by keeping the cerberus inside the school. Newt, naturally, was concerned for the creature's well being. Cerberuses were known to be extremely large with a need for wide open space or, at the very least, a vast cave with various tunnels to dig around in. It was assumed that Rubeus Hagrid was taking care of the creature, and although Newt found the man's love of animals endearing, he worried that a lack of experience put Hagrid at a disadvantage.

The opportunity to speak to Dumbledore had presented itself, and Cassie had accompanied Newt to the castle. Lucretia Prewett had a scheduled appointment with Minerva at Hogwarts to set up a place for her class on Wizarding culture which was to be added to the curriculum the following autumn, but Lucretia still had to show both the board of governors and the Ministry that she had her things together prior to September first. A very determined individual, the woman had scheduled a set up as early as possible to try to prevent anyone from deterring her plans any longer.

Ahead of Newt and Cassie's arrival, Lucretia had been accompanied by Minerva, a few select members of the board, as well as the Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic and a few Aurors that looked, to Newt, more like bodyguards.

He and Cassie watched from afar as the small group entered the castle.

"When we cross over, it'll alert Dumbledore," Cassie said. "That will give Lucretia a chance to get her plans set in motion without him intervening. This works out perfectly."

Newt sighed at the cat-like look of satisfaction on her face. "Don't eat the canary just yet," he said, clenching his fists in an effort to bring a little heat to his stiff knuckles. Even in the springtime, the weather of Scotland was hell on his joints. Dorset had not been much better, and he missed his home back in America—better yet, the humid little cottage he and Tina had temporarily lived in whilst working in South America—but it was still heaps better than dealing with MACUSA on a near-daily basis.
"Let me talk to him first. He was a man of reason once. Sort of," Newt said, feeling the way his face contorted a bit as he cringed. He wanted to say that Dumbledore owed him, but those words felt bitter on the tongue, and he would not let them pass his lips.

"Fine," Cassie agreed. "I'll fly about for a bit and see if he's got anything else visible from a bird's eye view."

He could feel her impatience rolling off of her in waves, but was relieved when she took her Animagus form, shifting into the beautiful snow owl and then taking flight. Newt watched as Cassie flew once above the Forbidden Forest, eyes set downward in investigation, eventually flying toward the castle and perching atop Gryffindor Tower with several brown owls belonging to the school.

By the time Newt reached the front doors, they were open, and Albus Dumbledore was standing in the archway. Both men smiled and greeted one another with a hug. Whatever Dumbledore might be now, or what he had been long ago, there was a time when Newt considered him a friend, and being confrontational with people he had favoured at any given time had never been one of his strengths. In the heat of battle or an argument, certainly, but that was something entirely different.

"Newt, my boy," Dumbledore said with a bright smile. "It's been too long."

"Hardly a boy," Newt said with a crooked grin, tugging on his own beard which paled in comparison to the length of Dumbledore's. "Do you have a moment?"

"Here on business?" Dumbledore asked as he turned, leading Newt into the school.

The castle never changed other than the occupants. Everything looked exactly as it had the last time Newt had been here, years ago and under much worse circumstances. "No business left for me, I'm afraid. Retired now. Just me, Tina, and a handful of kneazles." Just as he spoke, a bowtruckle peeked out from behind the scarf wrapped around his neck. Clearing his throat awkwardly, Newt added, "And a few little ones that are a bit too attached to be relocated."

They walked past the large set of staircases, and Newt smiled as he saw two Gryffindor boys make a leap from one moving staircase to the other, landing just in time to avoid imminent death. A Ravenclaw prefect scolded them both, while a group of Slytherin girls shook their heads in disapproval from the staircase above which the boys had vacated. At the bottom of the stairs, another prefect, a Hufflepuff, was comforting a little girl from his House who'd fallen and skinned her knee. Briefly tempted to stop and assist them, Newt halted only when he watched the boy heal the girl's wound with a gentle smile, putting his arm around her afterward to help stop her tears.

It was moments like this that he regretted sending his son to Ilvermorny, despite how wonderful the education Jacob received had been. Ilvermorny would never be as magical as Hogwarts, no matter what Tina said.

They walked in silence toward the headmaster's office, and Newt wondered if Dumbledore was giving him the time to reflect on his memories of the castle. They had not all been good, of course. Newt had not had many friends, and most teachers had a hard time dealing with him as well. Still, Newt appreciated the gesture, at least until they reached the stairs leading to Dumbledore's office. Newt's left knee ached when he climbed it, reminding him of a nasty curse he had taken in the leg during his time in the war against Grindelwald. A war he had all but been manipulated into joining, only to lose nearly everything dear to him in the end. Tina was all that remained of everyone he'd loved before Grindelwald's war. He tried not to blame Dumbledore for any of it, but could not help feeling hurt by inaction, even all these years later.

"Tea?" Dumbledore offered as he sat down in his chair.
"Please." Newt stopped before sitting to admire the phoenix perched on his stand near the desk. The bird was small, likely having had a burning day no more than a month earlier. All the feathers had grown in well, but they were extremely soft to the touch. Newt smiled as the bird leant into his hand, allowing him to scratch the back of its neck.

"You remember Fawkes," Dumbledore said.

Newt's smile faded as flashes of phoenix fire alongside Killing Curses flying overhead came to the forefront of his mind. "I do," he said and then quickly took his seat. "I hear Fawkes is not the only creature you're keeping in the castle."

Dumbledore's smile did not fade.

Newt was not surprised that he hadn't caught him off guard.

"You've made friends with the Black Coven, I see?"

"I've always been friendly with many of the families," Newt said, thinking of parties in his youth that Leta had invited him to when they were still very young. "And my wife has been a friend of Dorea Potter's for many years."

"How is Tina liking Dorset?" Dumbledore asked, changing the subject.

Newt sighed, feeling too old for these games. He honestly had no idea how Dumbledore did it, being years older than him. "Albus, why are you keeping a cerberus in this school?"

"Am I?"

"Albus. How is it fair to that creature to be cooped up in here? There's nowhere in this castle that could possibly accommodate its size without being a neglectful environment. And what's it eating? Where does it exercise? Does Hagrid take it on walks?" he asked, feeling his temper rise a bit. "I highly doubt it."

Dumbledore sighed, folding his hands in front of him. "The cerberus is, I'm afraid, a necessary evil at the moment."

"It's not evil," Newt said without thinking.

"I understand," Dumbledore replied with a placating tone. "If you understood what I am . . . I tried to get others involved to help, but . . . I'm trying to protect something. It's very precious, and only here temporarily."

"Like the students?" Newt asked. "Precious and temporary, that is. I hear the creature already bit one of your staff members."

"The corridor is forbidden to all."

"But not warded," Newt added. "Albus, I know you always think you have your reasons for the things that you do, but—"

"Something is coming, Newt."

"Something is always coming, Albus."

Dumbledore's smile faded completely, and he truly looked his age in that moment. "Madam Potter and I have very similar goals, you know. I want to keep this world safe. I want to keep Harry safe.
But I also want to make sure that Voldemort can never return. There are steps needed to ensure that. Perhaps if you—"

"No," Newt said firmly. "I'm done with all that, and you, better than most, know why. Fight your wars, kill your Dark Lords, but I'll have nothing to do with it. I'm here about the creature, nothing more."

There was a long moment of silence, and Newt wondered if Albus was just regarding him or attempting Legilimency. Years spent in Queenie's company had helped Newt develop an iron thick wall of Occlumency, so he was not worried, but he could no longer feel when someone was even attempting it.

"Have you met Harry?"

Newt leant forward, putting his head in his hands. Cassie had warned him. Tina had warned him. Dumbledore could not be reasoned with when anything interfered with his own machinations.

"Thank you for giving me the possibility to visit, Albus." He stood up slowly, adjusting his robes and scarf, making sure his travelling bowtruckle was snug and warm. "It's always nice to see the castle."

As he turned to leave, Dumbledore said, "It's not that we seek out the wars to fight, Newt. But wars happen, and innocent people are pulled under regardless of whether or not they want anything to do with it."

"Innocent," Newt repeated as he turned around and made eye contact with the man. "Albus, they are alive. Living, breathing animals—humans and creatures." His gaze fell on Fawkes, smiling sadly when the bird chirped at him. "Remember that we all can't come back to life once your actions set us on fire."

Cassie flew around the castle a few times once Newt had vanished from her sight. Eventually, when nothing interesting could be seen, she flew into the owlery to have a look around. All she found there was a pair of Hufflepuffs snogging in a corner with all the owls looking bored or uncomfortable by the display. Then again, this might have also been due to the two students standing in one of the nests on the floor.

Taking flight once more, Cassie looked out across the Black Lake, over the vast expanse of the forest, and at the hints of the Hogsmeade village beyond. Had it been a normal day without coven business, she might've stopped in and paid a visit to Aberforth, who was currently dodging her owls and fire-calls, the relentless tease.

With a handful of other owls, she flew in through a large open window and into the Great Hall. Unlike the other birds who were there to drop off some packages, Cassie landed on the Gryffindor table near a small gathering of young boys who were sitting at the end with a mixture of biscuits and books spread out in front of them.

"We're revising," Harry said, looking at her with an intense expression, as though she would shift back into human form instantly and accuse him of mischief.

She had, of course, heard about the fight with the Slytherin boys on the Quidditch pitch. Minerva fire-called late that night to inform Sirius and Dorea, and both had been in a strop about it until Remus intervened with the notion that it seemed Harry might've provoked the boys on purpose, seeing as he had not fought back.
Dorea had still been upset that Harry needed yet another trip to the hospital wing, and all but threatened to pull him from Hogwarts and send him to Ilvermorny, but Sirius eventually caved and started laughing, calling Harry a brilliant boy, if a bit mental.

"Are you talking to that owl, Harry?" another boy with a thick brogue asked.

"Don't be ridiculous."

Neville looked up, meeting Cassie's gaze, and choked on a mouthful of biscuits.

"What a pretty bird."

Cassie tilted her head to the side as a small group of Slytherins approached, all led by the two girls that had attended the Yule party. Looking down, she spotted the little orange kneazle trailing behind, along with another fluffy cat.

"Is it yours, Harry?" the curly-haired witch asked.

"No!" Harry said loudly, as though he were being accused of something.

Offended, Cassie let out a little bark and snapped in his direction.

All of the Slytherins looked at him like he was insane.

"Okay," the girl muttered carefully as she eyed the other Gryffindor boys. "Well, I'd just been up to the library and Madam Pince said—Oh! You do have it!" She reached forward, snatching a book from the table. "Are you finished with this? It's the only one I haven't been able to get notes on that's not in the Restricted Section."

"For you, Granger," the Irish boy said with a grin and a wink, "anything."

All the boys glared at him, and the little girl scrunched up her nose in disgust before setting the book back down. "I can wait."

Harry sighed. "Hermione, take the book. I barely understand it anyway. My head's completely full of everything I've read, and it's all jumbled together. Exams are going to be a bloody nightmare." He paused, turned, and looked at Cassie. "I mean . . . they'll be fine. I'll ace them all. Everything is fine. Thanks."

The two other Slytherin girls whispered together, giggling a bit under their breaths. The boy in green robes at their side was staring at Harry with a confused look. The other girl, Hermione, stepped forward and put her hand on Harry's forehead. "Are you all right?"

He shrugged her off and scrubbed his hands down his face. "M'fine."

Giving the boy a break, and now thoroughly amused, Cassie spread her wings and took flight once more, leaving the children to their revising.

She left through a high window in the back, circling the castle to see that Newt was already outside. Dumbledore nowhere in sight. Instead, the man was surrounded by Lucretia and the people who had accompanied her. Cassie perched on the branch of a nearby tree, watching as Lucretia stared daggers at the short witch in front of her who carried a clipboard and was making notes.

"Of course we're going to allow the Muggle-borns to attend," Lucretia said. "This class is mostly for them and the children who were raised in families that aren't privy or don't often celebrate our
"Well, it's just my opinion Mrs Prewett, but I just don't think that Muggle-borns have the capacity to truly understand the complexity of—"

An extremely loud yelp of pain echoed across the grounds, and everyone turned their heads in the direction of the noise. The humans below squinted to see, but Cassie saw all too clearly. Just across the way, near the edge of the forest, the roof of Hagrid's hut was on fire.

Newt took off at a speed that seemed unlikely for his age, and the Aurors were quick to follow just ahead of the others. Cassie flew quickly toward the hut, hoping to assist if she could. Hagrid was a good sort, even if Dorea still held a bit of a grudge. It was no secret that the man blindly followed Dumbledore, much to his own detriment, but Enid had taken a shine to the bloke, and Cassie wasn't just going to let him burn to death because he was Dumbledore's pet.

Landing on her feet as a witch, Cassie removed her wand from the holster on her thigh and cast a spout of water at the top of the hut, doing her best to extinguish the flames.

Hagrid flew out the front door, choking for air as he collapsed to the ground. One large hand rubbed at his eyes, watery and red from the smoke inside. The other hand was clutched to his chest, his large coat pulled tight.

"Can you breathe?" Cassie asked, watching with intrigue as a green tail moved around from beneath the fabric. "Oh, that's not going to end well."

The Aurors, having outrun Newt in the end, arrived and did their best to put out the rest of the fire. One went inside to check for other survivors and potential damage. A large boarhound sat on the front porch, sleepy-eyed and looking barely affected by the commotion.

"Hagrid, are you all right?" Newt bent down, checking the man over. "What's—? Oh, Hagrid."

"Don't let 'em see," Hagrid cried, holding both arms to his chest.

"Cassie," Lucretia greeted as she approached with the members of the board, all looking with concern at the smoking hut and the man on the ground. "Out for a stroll?"

"Was visiting Aberforth," Cassie lied, mostly for the benefit of the other witch that joined them. "Saw the fire."

"All the way from Hogsmeade?" the witch wearing a pink bow in her hair asked in disbelief.

Grinning at her, Cassie held out a hand. "I don't believe we've met. Cassiopeia Black."

The woman blinked a few times in shock, and then cleared her throat. "Oh, umm, I am Dolores Umbridge, Undersecretary to the Minister for—"

"Feeling better there, Hagrid?" Cassie asked, cutting Umbridge off. She knew of the woman, of course. Anyone who stepped foot in the Ministry either saw the witch making a show, bragging about her station, or following Fudge around like a dog that was trying to take over control of the leash.

"I'll be jus' fine," Hagrid said gruffly, allowing Newt to help him to his feet. With his left arm still holding his coat closed, he had little stability and lost his balance, reaching out with his right arm to hold onto something.
Umbridge, nearest him, let out a shriek of "Don't touch me!" before jumping away, allowing Hagrid to fall back to the ground.

Despite the fact that Newt rushed to stop it from happening, Hagrid's coat opened up on the impact, and a large baby dragon rolled out onto the ground, spinning around at the circle of humans and hissing. Before Hagrid could offer an explanation or Newt could reach the little beast in time to work that famous magic he was known for, the little thing opened its mouth and growled in Umbridge's direction. A small ball of fire sizzled at the tip of its tongue, flicking out and catching the hem of Umbridge's robe on fire.

"Norbert, no!" Hagrid cried.

"Shit," Cassie groaned as Umbridge began wailing in terror.

After the board left Hogwarts, Cassie, Lucretia, and Newt had stayed behind, greeting Minerva and updating her on the situation. Dumbledore had come outside as well, surrounded by several of the other teachers. Madam Pomfrey loudly argued with the Aurors and Umbridge in order to attend to a severe burn on Hagrid's arm, but none—not even Dumbledore—were able to sway them from arresting Hagrid. Not only was he in possession of a smuggled baby dragon, but he had "allowed" it to attack a Ministry official. Umbridge said repeatedly that she was pressing charges, as though anyone but the Aurors needed to know.

As much as they wanted to assist the poor man, Newt, who had helped to draft most laws in Britain that protected dragons, informed them that there were no loopholes. Still, Lucretia sent a quick owl off to Cedrella, saying that she had a great idea but wanted another opinion on the matter.

"Minerva," Dumbledore said, looking morose as Hagrid was taken away by the Aurors, "I'll be accompanying him to the Ministry."

"He'll be going straight to Azkaban," Umbridge said with a huff, looking down at her singed robes, which she had yet to even bother trying to magically repair, likely in hopes of sympathy. "He'll sit in a cell there, properly guarded."

"Azkaban?" Lucretia asked, looking horrified. "There's no need for that. I know that the Ministry has holding cells for people awaiting trial."

Umbridge opened her mouth, looking as though she might protest having a trial entirely, but both Cassie and Lucretia took a step toward her. Clouds gathered overhead, and a dangerous rumble of thunder sounded above them. Umbridge shut her mouth with a click of her jaw before stiffly nodding her head.

"I'll take care of this," Dumbledore said, looking down at Umbridge with—what Cassie could only imagine since his facial expressions rarely shifted—disdain. "Minerva, I trust that the castle and its occupants will be well cared for in my brief absence. I'll return as swiftly as I can."

The moment that Dumbledore Disapparated at the edge of the grounds, followed immediately by Umbridge, Cassie turned and looked at Minerva. "Now's our chance."

Minerva sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, turning back to look at several of the other staff members that had accompanied her outside. "It's not something I'm glad to do, but Albus's brief absence will give us all a chance to remove that dog of his from this school. I don't care what he's bothering to protect. I will not be an accessory to whatever might happen should it be let loose. It's our job to keep those children safe when they are here."
Filius nodded his head. "How can we help?"

"The students should be secured in their common rooms for the time being," Snape interjected, folding his arms across his chest. "And not to be left in the hands of the prefects. Each Head of House should make sure everyone is accounted for before we meet back up to find the monster."

"It's not a monster," Newt said from below where he was kneeling on the grass, letting Hagrid's baby dragon nuzzle his fingers from within the cage that he'd been secured in. "Just an innocent creature."

"That innocent creature bit me last Halloween," Snape said, scowling down.

Looking up, completely unperturbed by the surly professor, Newt gave a half-hearted smile. "Cassiopeia and I have been working together to safely remove the cerberus from the school. We know how to handle it. Though, I do agree that no student should be left out in the corridors. If it gets startled in any way, there's no telling what it may do or who it would attack out of fear or defence of itself. If it's secured like we've been told, then we should have no problem collecting it. If something should go awry, though . . ."

"I'll go round up my lot," Pomona said, picking up her robes and turning on her heel. "Should we meet you all back in the Great Hall once the students are secure?"

Minerva nodded, turning her attention to Newt and Cassie. "Once the four of us confirm that the students are accounted for, we'll join the two of you on the third floor."

"What should I do?" Lucretia asked.

Sighing, Cassie flicked her wand at her heels, transfiguring them into a sturdier boot since she had a feeling she needed a good footing with whatever was going to happen next. "The others should be told about what's happened. Maybe someone can go to the Ministry on Hagrid's behalf. Stall Dumbledore there."

"I'll pick up Cedrella and Enid," Lucretia said, pushing her shoulders back with determination. "I think I know how to help Hagrid, but Cedrella's influence certainly wouldn't hurt. And I have a feeling Enid could cause enough of a stir at the Ministry to delay any proceedings. That should give you some time." Glancing down, she smirked at the baby dragon. "Poor thing. What will we do with him?"

"Her," Newt corrected as he stood up. "I'll arrange for a reserve to collect her. She'll grow up safe and happy with her own kind."

"Right then," Lucretia said with a stiff nod. "Not exactly how I wanted this day to go, but progress nonetheless."

When Newt and Cassie entered the school, the students were all being led off to their respective common rooms. Several Hufflepuffs stopped, staring up with wide gazes of recognition at the sight of Newt, and Pomona sighed in frustration as she stumbled into the group that had stopped walking.

"Mr Scamander is assisting us with a small infestation, off with you lot, go on," she said.

Newt smiled at the children. "It will be safe inside your rooms. Listen to Professor Sprout, please."

Not a Ravenclaw was in sight, their tower on the other side of the castle, but the Gryffindors were noisily rushing up the stairs, and the Slytherins filing down toward the dungeon.

Cassie spotted both Neville and Harry on the stairs, the boys turning back to give her a questioning
glance. She pointed her index finger at them in silent command to follow the others. Both looked nervous, or annoyed, possibly both, but they obeyed regardless.

Draco and Cassius Warrington approached her then, several other young Slytherins in tow, including the group that Cassie had seen at the Gryffindor table earlier.

"Should we know anything?" Draco asked.

"No," Cassie replied. "We've got it handled. Just stay in your rooms until you're told." She looked at Cassius and narrowed her eyes at his prefect badge. "Do you understand?"

The boy nodded, putting his hand on Draco's shoulder and turned. "No stopping," he said. "You heard Professor Snape. Straight to the dungeons and report to a prefect if you notice anyone missing."

"Shoo," Cassie told the orange kneazle looking up at her. The cat narrowed its eyes before darting off after its little witch.

Newt reached into his pockets, which looked much deeper than they obviously were. Up to his elbow in them, he squinted his eyes in concentration.

"Dare I ask?"

"I used to keep a flute on hand. Cerberuses fall asleep to music."

Grinning, Cassie nodded in approval. "Well done. I mean, that is, if you can find the bloody thing. I'm not much of a singer."

As Newt began to empty his pockets onto the floor, Cassie chuckled at the contents. Several potion phials, a container of murky gelatin-like substance, a very large bone, and a collection of what looked like cat toys were all piled at the man's feet.

Glancing up to see the last of the Slytherins walk toward the dungeon, Cassie noticed one that looked familiar. With Newt distracted, she approached the boy with a sweet smile. "Pardon me, young man. You wouldn't happen to be Aurelius Flint's boy, would you?"

Looking suspicious but polite enough, the boy nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, Aurelius was always such a lovely man," she said, extending her hand. When the boy took it, she stepped forward. "I'm Cassiopeia Black."

At the recognition of her name, the boy tried to pull his hand away.

She kept him in a firm grip as she stepped forward, leaning toward him to whisper in his ear. "And if you or your little friends put one more hair out of place on any of my nephews' heads again, I'll sew whatever's left of your skin when I'm done with you into pocketbooks and feed your bones to my kneazles. Have I made myself perfectly clear, little boy?"

She could taste the fear in the air, which left the skin on her arms covered in delightful shivers. Dorea had always been thought of as the intimidating one. She had been Head Girl at Hogwarts and ran off with a Gryffindor long before she ever had the blood of a dragon. She was ruthless in her rules and unpredictable. Cassie had always just looked pretty. But Cassie had been the older sister, and their parents did little in the way of raising them other than to insist they be proper young ladies.

No one ever questioned where Dorea had learnt to be ruthless.
"I believe I asked you a question."

The Flint boy stared up at her with wide eyes. He looked angry but more frightened than anything else, which was a very pleasing sight. He gave a quick nod of the head, and Cassie smiled brightly, using her free hand to brush the fringe from his forehead.

"So good to know that you'll be behaving yourself and also keeping your friends in line." She kissed his forehead, feeling a little thrill as he flinched. She watched as his friends looked on in horror as the lipstick print she left behind on him faded into his skin. The moment she let his hand go, he and his friends darted to the dungeons as fast as possible.

Newt looked up at her from the ground, where he was attempting to put everything back into his pockets. "Did you curse that boy?"

"Only a little one." She took her wand from its holster and cast a Cleansing Charm on her hands, pocketing the wand and then rubbing her palms together. If the Flint boy touched Harry again, Cassie would be alerted. It wasn't a very strong spell, and most grown wizards would be able to throw it off, but she hoped that the fear in him would be enough to do the trick. "I detest people who think they can hurt others just because they're smaller."

Looking worried but amused, Newt stood back up with a small flute in his hand. "I heard Harry handled himself well, in the end, at least."

"And now he won't need to. He can focus on his exams, just like my sister wants him to."

Shaking his head, Newt turned toward the now empty staircase. "I don't think I'll ever get used to coven witches."

Cassie followed after him, retrieving her wand once more. "Darling, you adore us. We're more like your loveable beasts than you give us credit for."

Chuckling softly, Newt muttered, "That's the concerning part."
April 29th, 1992
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

With the students in their common rooms, the castle was dead silent other than the sound of shifting staircases, murmurs from the portraits on the walls, and an echoing sound of Peeves several floors above them, sobbing apologies as the Bloody Baron scolded him for something.

Newt and Cassie slipped up the stairs, catching one just before it shifted away from them. Briefly, she wondered if it was pure luck or if Newt had cast something, as the case directed them straight toward the forbidden third floor. Once there, she stretched her neck and shook her arms out to loosen them up, preparing for any type of attack.

The corridor was pitch black, all the torches lining the walls had been snuffed out.

"That's ominous."

Newt gently shushed her as he stepped forward, sure-footed. "Do you hear that?"

Listening closely, Cassie could pick out soft notes of what sounded like a harp. She held her breath as the music stopped, fading into absolute silence. Newt glanced back at her, and they shared a worried look. Both jumped when the silence was ended by a low growl followed by a creaking door.

Newt quickly brought the flute to his lips, just as three sets of eyes, glowing in the dark, stared at them from the end of the corridor. Before Cassie could cast a Lumos or Newt could make the flute utter a single note, the cerberus charged. Faster than expected after being cooped up for months, the beast launched at them, mouths open and drooling with blood-lust.

Cassie grabbed Newt by the arm, pulling him out of harm's way just in time for the beast to barrel into the wall behind them. One of the heads bashed against the wall, cracking the stone and splitting it clean up to the ceiling above them. The front left paw clawed out, catching the hem of Newt's robe and jerking wildly. The man tumbled to the ground, losing his flute in the process.

The instrument rolled on the floor toward the cerberus, making a clinking sound as it tumbled down the staircase.

While the middle head of the dog was paying more attention to its brother with the injured head, the head on the right growled and snapped at it. The right and middle heads spun toward Cassie and Newt, with the left head following the sound of the flute falling down the stairs. The lack of unified purpose had redistributed the weight of the animal. Balance was obviously an issue, and as the beast tried to right itself, the edge of the staircase began moving, taking one of the large paws with it. Startled by the movement, the beast stepped backward, both hind legs staying on the staircase that began dragging it off of the third floor.

Panicked, Newt stepped forward, wand raised. "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The magic hit the right head in the face, and one third of the creature began floating up, but the weight of the other two kicking about tipped the entire body over the edge of the stairs. Newt struggled to hold his spell, but the animal was just too large.
Cassie rushed to the edge of the corridor, flicking a Cushioning Charm at the bottom ground moments before the cerberus landed there on its side, missing another rotating staircase by barely a foot.

"I don't think it's injured," Newt said with a concerned tone.

Watching with trepidation, Cassie's eyes widened as the cerberus removed its attention from the staircases, and instead focused on the front door of the castle. "Oh fuck."

After ordering the Fat Lady to make sure not a single Gryffindor left the tower, Minerva took a shortcut down one of the back corridors to a private staff-member-only staircase, hidden behind the tapestry of Andros the Invincible. She reached the Great Hall, meeting Filius there only to hear a loud scream coming from beyond the doors.

Exiting the hall, Minerva and Filius watched as Cassie, in owl form, flew out the broken entrance doors of the castle. Newt Scamander was running down a moving staircase, skipping every two steps as he did. Minerva cringed, hoping the man didn't fall and break a leg.

"What happened?"

"Dog!"

Minerva looked across the foyer to where Pomona and Severus stood in the archway that led toward the dungeons. The short witch was pointing at the broken doors, her mouth open in shock. Severus, meanwhile, looked as terrified as Minerva had ever seen him, and he was standing in a way that protectively angled his previously injured leg.

"We've got it, we've got it, no troubles here!" Newt said as he rushed off the bottom step, catching himself from falling just at the last second, before darting over the broken pile of wood in the entrance that used to be the doors, and disappearing from sight.

"Should we go after them?" Pomona asked.

Minerva looked up the stairs at the third floor. "Stay in the castle," she said. "Mr Scamander and Miss Black can handle the beast. But we've a more serious problem."

Severus joined her, already one step ahead as he began ascending the staircase. "Who let the monster out of its cage?"

"We're with you," Filius said, following after Minerva as she began to quickly join Severus.

She turned back. "Stay down here. Guard the front entrance, and the back toward the Quidditch pitch. Those are the two main ways in and out of the castle. The dog does not come back inside, and no one leaves. I would suggest alerting the rest of the staff, but there's not enough time. If anyone comes out, let them know what's happened."

"Understood," Pomona said as she put a hand on Filius's shoulder. "We've got this."

With the students and castle in good hands, Minerva and Severus leapt up the stairs as fast as they possibly could. She'd not seen the beast herself, but Severus had known exactly where Dumbledore had secured it.

When they reached the third floor, she cast a Lighting Charm that left her wand, hovering like a floating lightbulb down the long corridor until it reached an open door, hanging off of the hinges.
The inside of the room smelled like a kennel that had not been cleaned in weeks. She wondered if Hagrid had been too occupied with his new pet dragon to bother cleaning up after the cerberus. There were bones in the corner of the room, some with meat still hanging off of them. Clearly, the animal had still been fed recently.

"Dumbledore might have returned?" Severus asked suspiciously as he approached the closed trap door in the centre of the room.

Minerva shook her head. "Albus was protecting something, and not from us. As daft as the old fool often is, he would never actually release the dog inside the castle. That would be openly endangering people."

Angrily, Snape said, "Because he's never done that before."

"He's usually smarter than this."

"He's a Gryffindor," Snape muttered as he opened the door, silently casting charms to alert for any hidden traps.

Minerva ignored the slight against her House, and stepped down through the door, holding her wand out as the hovering Lumos returned, lighting the path down. There was a twenty foot drop from where she sat to the bottom, and she could see a broken ladder on the ground below. A spell shot from behind her, and ropes flew out of Severus's wand, weaving together into a makeshift climbing ladder. She put her wand between her teeth, descending into the large, dark room below.

Scanning the area once at the bottom, she took note of a wild Devil's Snare in the corner, growing up the side of the wall. Half of it was withered, the rest burrowed into the stone of the castle, likely seeking out water. It appeared to have not been well-cared for.

"This is what he wanted us for at the beginning of the year," Severus said. "Hagrid provided the beast. I would wager that Pomona was supposed to have taken care of that."

Feeling angry and frustrated with Dumbledore's lack of attention and monitoring of his own bloody obstacles, Minerva hissed under her breath. "Morgana help us if any other charms he lazily placed cause anyone more harm than they already have."

The other defenses protecting Dumbledore's secret treasure were just as bad as the withering Devil's Snare, if not worse. One room contained a Limbo Mist charm that turned the entirety of the room upside-down. Knowing that one foot inside the mist would create havoc with their equilibrium, they stayed put on the other side of the door. Minerva figured that this obstacle would have sent anyone from a third year and under into a panic. She, however, was just irritated. Removing several accessories, she cast the counter charm, and the gold mist in the room dissipated, putting everything to rights.

Another room contained jinxed brooms that turned to attack once the door was shut after entering. A quick and powerful Immobulus Charm from Severus stopped them in their tracks.

They found a dead troll in the room beyond that, its stench already powerful.

Stepping over the troll, Minerva reached a closed door, locked by several Muggle bolts and chains. Waving her wand, she attempted an Unlocking Charm, and watched curiously as static fluttered over the doorknob.

"It's jinxed. Some sort of electrocution, I imagine," Severus said. "Easily bypassed for anyone who's not a complete idiot." With a fluid flick of his wand, pins were pulled from the hinges of the door,
and it opened easily from the opposite side.

"This is asinine," Minerva hissed under her breath before she cautiously stepped through the door.

On the other side, she came face to face with a reflection of herself. It took just a moment before she jumped back, realising that the mirror in the room was the Mirror of Erised. Not wanting to look in the damned thing, Minerva took one step to the side and saw the shadow of someone behind the large frame, mumbling to themselves.

"Where is it? Where . . . ? I'm sorry, I don't know why it's not—"

Her eyes widened in shock. "Quirinius?"

Professor Quirrell peeked out from behind the frame, his expression one of surprise and dread. Sweat beaded on the man's forehead, soaking the bottom edge of his turban. "Minerva? Severus? It's . . . No. It's not supposed to be you. Potter should have—"

"Stupefy!" Severus yelled, pointing his wand at the man.

Quirrell dodged the curse, ducking behind the mirror, and the spell hit the glass, bouncing back. Both Minerva and Severus dodged it just in time.

"Quirinius, what have you done?" Minerva demanded, wand gripped tightly in hand.

The man continued to hide behind the mirror, using it as a shield for any spells that came his way. She heard the sound of snapping fingers, and ropes sprung from the floor, tightly winding their way around both hers and Severus's feet. The ropes were swift, reaching up and taking hold of their arms as well. Severus spent his efforts in cancelling the hex, while Minerva had an easier way out, though she decided to hold off for the time being in exchange for demanding answers.

"The mirror is the key to finding it," Quirrell said, stepping out from behind the mirror and looking into it from the side. "Clever of Dumbledore, really. But he's not here, is he? I need the stone, you see. I need it. I need to present it to . . . my master."

"Voldemort," Minerva growled.

Severus cringed at the name, but Quirrell practically shivered in terror and looked at her as though she had both blasphemed and cursed them to death at the same time.

"Stop wasting time," another voice whispered. "Kill them."

Bottom lip trembling, Quirrell raised his wand and aimed it at Minerva.

Narrowing her eyes and daring him to try something, she shifted down in the blink of an eye, leaving behind a cat standing in a puddle of loose ropes. Jumping from the pile, she darted toward Quirrell, clawing at his leg. With Quirrell distracted, Severus unbound himself from the ropes and shot off a hex at Quirrell that knocked the man to the ground. He screamed, rolling to the side and hitting the bottom edge of the large mirror. It teetered back and forth for a long moment before crashing down on its back, separating Quirrell from Minerva and Severus.

As he regained his feet, Minerva shifted back up onto her own human legs, eyes wide in horror. Quirrell's turban had come loose in the small scuffle, and she could see the twisted skin on the back of his head. The top was still covered, but the bottom was clear as day, even in the barely lit room. There was a mouth, and it was snarling at her.
"I'm sorry, Master!" Quirrell screamed and rushed toward the back of the room. Light illuminated from somewhere beyond, creating a large doorway broken through what had appeared before to be pure stone. Quirrell rushed through the opening, Severus and Minerva swift on his heels.

"Did you see it?" Severus asked as they ran together, slipping into darkness as the light from the doorway was extinguished.

Casting a Lumos, Minerva never stopped moving forward, but was furious to see that Quirrell had somehow taken a decent lead. They could no longer see him down the stretch of hallway in what felt like an underground tunnel, but she could still hear his whimpering and the sound of speedy footsteps.

"I don't know what I saw," she muttered angrily.

They ran for what felt like a mile, casting charms and hexes forward in the hopes of hitting Quirrell with something, even though the man could not be seen, only heard. By the time light was visible once again, the hint of an exit, Minerva was running on adrenaline. Severus had outrun her, so when she exited the tunnel, coming out into the bright lights of an afternoon sky, she was unsurprised to find the two men facing off against one another, wands drawn.

"Don't be stupid, Severus," Quirrell said. "You've already betrayed him once. He'd forgive you, if you came back to him."

"You should be more concerned with yourself," Severus said, sneering at Quirrell.

Quirrell actually laughed before turning his gaze on Minerva. "And as for you . . . My Master is unafraid of a band of little old ladies. You can't keep Potter safe forever."

Furious, Minerva shot a curse from her wand.

Quirrell moved just in time to avoid getting struck in the stomach, but it still hit the top of his right leg. There was a sickening sound of crunching bones, and the man let out a terrible scream of agony. He stumbled and fell, one hand holding his wand like a lifeline, the other clutching at his leg in horror.

She stepped toward him, biting the inside of her lip and drawing blood. Spitting it at Quirrell, Minerva watched as the blood splattered against the trousers of his broken leg, and she hissed out, "Perpetius!"

His eyes widened as he realised that what she had done was cursed with permanence.

"Even if Voldemort isn't afraid of my coven, perhaps you should be."

Quirrell glanced between Minerva and Severus, looking utterly trapped. He closed his eyes as though waiting for the inevitable, whispered, "I'm sorry, Master," and then vanished entirely in a swirl of pitch black smoke.

"No!" Severus screamed, shooting off several curses into the dark mist, but ultimately striking nothing.

Heart racing with fear and fury, Minerva looked at her former pupil. "Death Eater. This whole time."

Back in the Great Hall, Minerva's stress went up another level at the dishevelled appearances of Newt and Cassie. Both were filthy, obviously exhausted, and sporting minor injuries. Briefly
forgetting her own recent experience, she approached the pair who were being tended to by Poppy, with Pomona and Filius looking on nervously.

"What happened?"

Cassie let out an indignant huff. "Centaurs."

Minerva felt her pulse rapidly speed up. The centaurs had been disturbed? She remembered the state of the entrance doors, and wondered just how much of the Forbidden Forest the cerberus had destroyed. "Did the dog hurt them?"

Newt shook his head, wincing when Poppy ran her wand over a particularly ugly gash on his leg. "They're offering the cerberus sanctuary as long as he behaves himself. We were the ones who were caught trespassing."

"Thank goodness Newt has a prior friendship with their leader," Cassie said, rubbing a spot of blood from her dress with her thumb.

Severus approached from behind, gaping at the sight of them. "This is what happens with a prior friendship?"

Newt looked up, making eye contact with the man. "They were well within their rights," he said a bit defensively. "We came onto their land brandishing our wands. Magorian assured me that if the creature steps out of line, the centaurs will secure it and make contact in order to have him removed to a more appropriate location. If it were anyone else, I might have stayed to argue, but I know better than to pick even a verbal fight with a centaur."

Pinching the bridge of her nose and wishing her biggest problem of the day was scolding Harry for being late to class or taking points from Draco for charming wads of paper to hit the back of Hufflepuffs in the corridors, Minerva sighed. "So we now have a cerberus in the forest."

"Better than the third floor," Pomona said, looking like she was trying to smile at the silver lining but was having trouble in doing so. "Speaking of which, where did you two come from?"

Sharing a look with Severus, Minerva reached into the pocket of her robes, removing a red stone the size of her palm. "This is what Albus was hiding. Severus and I traced our steps back to a secured room. He has the Mirror of Erised as well. After looking in the bloody thing long enough and wanting to know what all of this was about, I could feel it manifest in my pocket."

Most looked at the stone with a passive, curious glance, but Newt stepped forward, hobbling a bit on his injured leg, and reached out. He let his hand hover over the stone, his eyes filled with obvious recognition. "I know this."

Sighing in relief for the first time that day, Minerva passed the stone into the man's hand. "I have my suspicions. Care to confirm them?"

Newt tenderly took the stone, examining it carefully. "This belongs to Nicolas Flamel. We were acquainted long ago. I still write to him and his wife every year or so."

Filius stepped off of the chair he had been standing on while observing Poppy's healing, and scurried over to Newt's side. "You don't mean to say that this is the Philosopher's Stone?"

Newt nodded his head. "Unless you've a mind to do something specific with it, I can contact Nicolas to have it returned."
Minerva stepped back. "Take it away from here. It's brought nothing but trouble. Giant dogs, ridiculous obstacles, and a . . ." She stopped, looking at each of the faces in front of her. All could be trusted, but this information could change so much. "A Death Eater."

Poppy stood up from where she was kneeling at Newt's side, trying to finish the work on his leg that had reopened when he walked to Minerva to take the stone. "In Hogwarts?"

"It's not unheard of," Cassie said with a playful smirk, looking at Severus, who glared back at her.

"Quirrell," Severus said.

Before anyone could ask any further questions, and they all looked like they had at least twenty a piece, Minerva cut in, "There's more. I saw something . . . peculiar and horrifying. I think . . . I think Voldemort might be alive."

She and Cassie shared a look that none of the others paid much attention to. Of course, they knew that Voldemort wasn't completely dead. They had been working with their coven for years to destroy the living pieces of his soul. But to see a possibility of such a thing with her own eyes . . . Minerva wasn't quite sure what to do other than to pass the information along to her coven sister, who would immediately report back to Dorea and the others.

"He's escaped," Severus added. "Quirrell and . . . what might be a manifestation of the Dark Lord. We think that Quirrell has somehow sacrificed a part of himself. He may be using his own life force to feed his master. If it's what we suspect, then the two are currently inhabiting the same body."

"The turban?" Filius asked, looking sickly green at the thought. "I knew that wasn't a gift from an African prince."

Poppy put a hand to her mouth, eyes fixed with concentration. "How is he even alive? That kind of magic wouldn't sustain an individual for longer than a few months, even with Dark Magic."

Newt turned back and glanced at Cassie, his shoulders slumping forward. "I think I know how."

When he returned his attention to Minerva, he looked grief stricken. "The reason Cassie and I were attacked is because the centaurs have been on alert. They've been hunting something that . . . that murdered a unicorn."

Everyone fell silent at his words. Even Severus, who was stone-faced in most of his interactions, looked horrified by the news.

"A unicorn?" Pomona eventually asked in a reverent whisper, bringing one hand to her heart as the other wiped away a stray tear. "What kind of monster would—?"

"The worst kind," Severus stiffly interjected.

Clearing his throat, Newt put his hand on Minerva's arm. "I have to report this to the Ministry. Unicorns are a protected species. And the centaurs are ready to attack anyone who they think could be associated with the killing. If a student were to walk into the forest . . ."

Nodding her head, Minerva waved her hand, giving him leave to go. "I need to send an owl to the Board of Governors. They need to know about Quirinius. If you happen upon the Aurors, Mr Scamander, I would be grateful if you passed along that information as well. Perhaps Alastor Moody's paranoia could benefit us at this time."

Severus made a soft grunting noise of displeasure, and Minerva rolled her eyes. "Don't start. That barmy old man hates everyone. You're not special in this."
Cassie stretched her arms above her head, rolling one shoulder that Poppy had healed. "Not that it isn't always fun to be back here, but with everyone off to run errands, I suppose I've a few to handle myself."

"Should we let the students resume classes?" Filius asked, looking fidgety as though he needed something to do himself.

Sighing, Minerva tried to think of what order things needed to be done. The children couldn't stay locked up forever, afterall. "Severus, if you and Filius would gather the rest of the staff from their quarters and see that the third floor is actually secure? Once you feel it's safe, we can allow the students to leave their common rooms. I believe we should excuse the classes for the remainder of the afternoon, though. I don't think I have the concentration for it."

The other professors nodded in agreement before turning to go off in various directions to attend to their errands. Newt, Cassie, and Minerva remained behind alone.

"So Voldemort was after the stone?" Cassie asked. "This have anything to do with the Gringotts break in?"

"Mention it to Dorea," Minerva suggested. "She has a way with the goblins."

Newt carefully tucked the stone in his pocket, waving his wand over it. He looked tired, showing his true age. His eyes were downcast, and his fingers fiddled over the grip of his wand for several long moments. "I didn't want a part in this," he eventually said. "I only came to try and talk reason to Dumbledore about the cerberus. But now . . ." He looked up, meeting Minerva's gaze. "I remember all too clearly what it was like when Grindelwald tried to . . . The last thing I want is to fight another war."

"Newt," Cassie said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

He held up a hand, shaking his head. "I'll help you. I'll do whatever I can to help stop the war before it begins again."

"Your assistance is highly appreciated," Minerva said, feeling a warmth blossom in her chest for the man.

Sighing impatiently, Cassie said, "Great. Now all we need is to track down a Dark Lord in hiding and figure out how to capture and destroy him. Fantastic."

Chuckling, a bit darkly and with a tired resignation in his eyes, Newt muttered, "Well, in my experience, a good Expelliarmus does the trick."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A huge thank you to everyone. I've been very sick as of late, so I appreciate your patience as I get the chapters updated. I truly hope to be able to continue posting them regularly.
May 2nd, 1992
Gringotts Wizarding Bank

It was a little soothing to know that her rage over finding out that Dumbledore had unknowingly been employing a Death Eater—and possibly some form of Voldemort—was met with equal fury by the goblins after figuring out that the break-in they'd suffered last year had likely been made by the same person.

Ragnok had been in a snit for an hour. Bogrod, one of Dorea's personal account managers, stayed with her in the office to take down notes and any potential thoughts she had that might assist the goblins, who were determined to help locate the now missing Quirinus Quirrell.

It made her sick to her stomach to know that the man, and therefore, very likely Voldemort himself, had not only been inside of Hogwarts and so close to her grandson, but that Dorea had confronted him once at the Board of Governors meeting, and had not suspected anything about him other than incompetence. She had even shared angry words with Minerva about the fact that Harry had been injured when under Quirrell's supervision for detention. Thankfully, Minerva was well aware that Dorea needed to vent her frustrations as a grandmother, and once that was done, the two were able to get back to sorting through what to do next. She had also promised that from that point forward, any detentions assigned to Harry—or any of the children related to coven members—would be handled directly by her or Severus Snape.

Despite being a former Death Eater himself, the man had proved himself helpful to the coven multiple times. Even Harry had written home after the last incident with the older Slytherin boys, stating that he was shocked but glad that Professor Snape had been the one to see the fight.

Bogrod set down a parchment in front of her, and Dorea pricked her finger, pressing it to the page. Like many times before in the bank, it glowed gold before settling into the paper.

"Please extend my gratitude to Ragnok and the rest of the horde over your organisation and openness about the artefacts in our vaults," she said with a smile, watching in amusement at how Bogrod still, after all these years, stared at her as though she were his own piece of deity due to her dragon blood. "I'm very pleased that all of the goblin-made items have been returned to their rightful owners."

Bogrod nodded, taking the scroll. "We still can't access the vault of Bellatrix Lestrange."

"Soon," Dorea said. "I know it's a bother because the vault likely contains many things. We'll figure out a way to access it without breaking any goblin law."

She knew it bothered them, sticking to their own rules. Despite being a Black and under coven law now, Bellatrix's vault had been reassigned under the Lestrange blood, and no one but her or her husband and his idiot brother were allowed inside. Goblins were proud of their security at Gringotts—which was why Quirrell getting away with breaking in had become such a thorn in their side—and despite the fact that all owners of the vault were in Azkaban, they could not break their own rules and just enter, taking things without permission. It would make them thieves.

With her business at the bank done, Dorea left the private room, a respectful nod given to Bogrod as she stepped through the open door.

"We will send word of any news, should it cross our desks, Dorea Opaleye."
"As ever, you are a gracious host, Master Bogrod."

"Even goblins adore you."

Turning around at the familiar voice, Dorea was surprised to see Tiberius standing there in finer robes than before. His silver hair had been pulled back, half of it secured behind his head with the remainder hanging down to his shoulders. The finely pressed dark robes looked good on him, but she was a liar if she said she didn't prefer the ones that looked more comfortable.

"Mister Ogd—" she began to say, but stopped at the look of incredulous amusement on his face. "Tiberius. It's good to see you. I hope only good things bring you to the bank today."

He chuckled, patting one of his pockets, the coins within jingling. "Just came to look over the monthly account statements and make a little withdrawal. Nothing requiring the personal assistance of goblins. Tell me," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "do they worship you behind those closed doors?"

"Oh, hush," she scolded playfully, stepping forward and giving him a good shove in the shoulder. "The goblins have always been very respectful and helpful."

"Opaleye?"

Sighing lightly, Dorea rolled her eyes a bit. "It's no secret now how I survived my illness. And goblins are quite enamoured of dragons."

Grinning, Tiberius shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Well, dragons are known to horde a bit of gold now and then."

Smirking, Dorea replied, "Among other things."

He laughed, a pleasantly rough sound that made her cheeks warm just a bit. "I do love a woman with secrets."

"As long as she's allowed to keep them," she said with a challenging lift to her brow. "I'd hate to see what happens to a man who dared to suss them out."

"I wouldn't dream of it, my dear lady." He held his arm out to her. "May I escort you back into Diagon? Perhaps if I play my cards right, I could convince you to hop into Florean's with me."

She took his arm, hesitating only briefly before breathing in the scent of cinnamon that seemed to cling to his robes as though the scent were woven into the very fabric. "Whisky for breakfast and ice cream for lunch? Are you certain you've left Hogwarts? Perhaps you're actually just two small Hufflepuffs in a large set of robes with a fake beard."

He tugged on his beard with his free hand. "Good Sticking Charm, that."

As Tiberius led her down the steps of the bank and into Diagon Alley, talking endlessly about his favourite flavours of ice cream, and how he had known Florean back when they had attended Hogwarts together, Dorea thought about his previous offer of dinner. She'd let busywork of the coven consume her thoughts during her every waking moment, but every so often, a glimmer of Tiberius's smile would edge its way into her mind.

The rest of her coven, Minerva and Augusta excluded, were mostly going on with their lives outside of coven business.
Cassie claimed to have a fleet of lovers, though Dorea was pretty certain that her sister was actually in love with Aberforth. Callidora, Cedrella, and Lucretia had been happily married for decades. Even her younger nieces, Andromeda and Narcissa were joyful in their unions. Camilla was in a long term relationship with Pomona Sprout, Nymphadora was not being nearly as secretive about her relationship with Bill Weasley, and Theia had been with Remus for over a year now. Mary was married with little ones underfoot, and even Jacintha had been courting with Thoros since the prior autumn. Only Belina refused to get involved in romantic affairs, having a general dislike of people outside of the family.

Dorea wondered if there was something about losing a husband to death that made everything harder. She, Minerva, and Augusta were similar in that way, but she also knew that the others had their own reasons for not pursuing another man's affections: Augusta preferred her solitude, and Minerva was too busy with her students to bother. Dorea tried to use the coven as an excuse, or Harry, or Sirius, or... but it all seemed to come up short.

*Excuses.* She could hear the word echoing around in her head in the gentle timbre of Charlus's voice.

Swallowing a bit of her pride—bitter in taste—Dorea interrupted Tiberius's ramblings as they approached Florean's. "I don't want ice cream."

He stopped and looked at her, his brows drawn together. Only then did she realised that her tone had been harsh.

Flushing, she brought a hand to her face and sighed, looking down. "I'm out of practice here, please forgive me."

His features softened, and Tiberius smiled. "Didn't realise one needed to practice eating ice cream."

Shooting him a slightly irritated look for his cheek, she was further annoyed that he seemed completely at ease with her narrowed gaze. "Dinner," she finally blurted out. The sudden look of surprise in his eyes was pleasant. At least she could catch him off guard, which made her feel better.

Eventually, he smiled, retaking his casual posture. "You'd rather have ice cream for dinner?"

Scoffing loudly, Dorea withdrew her arm from the crook of his elbow and threw both of her hands up. "Oh, you're positively insufferable, do you know that?"

Grinning from ear to ear, his eyes crinkling in the corners, Tiberius nodded. "I've been told as much. So dinner? Tonight? How about I take you to the Winter Willow?"

Dorea cleared her throat, thinking of the restaurant he had in mind. It was fancy, but private in the seating arrangements, or so she had been informed. Jacintha and Narcissa had both recommended it to her plenty of times. "I'll see you at seven."

Despite the pressing concern of what to say if Sirius were to see her getting dressed to go out that night, Dorea enjoyed primping in front of the mirror before dinner. She put aside her normal robes, favouring a deep burgundy tea length dress with a modest neckline. The colour was just a shade darker than her hair—despite the few strands of silver she found every so often. Thanks to the dragon blood, her health was almost always at its peak, so instead of the dark colours washing out her skin, her cheeks blossomed with a healthy pink glow that she stubbornly refused to associate with the flush of anticipation coming from a suitor.

Her worries about Sirius were far from her mind as her son had apparently found a new job. It was the third in as many months, but she refused to complain about his flighty personality, as the work—
temporary or otherwise—at least got him out of the house.

She arrived at the restaurant exactly on time, shocked to see Tiberius already waiting for her, and wearing a comfortable-looking blazer and pressed trousers. His shoes were old and worn, and looked like they had not been shined in quite a few years, but she genuinely enjoyed the sight of him, looking so very at ease in his own skin. He was a man who had lived a long life and had zero qualms about falsifying whatever it was he was selling.

His smile was wide as he approached her, kissing the back of her hand before cupping it in both of his and sending a warmth all the way up her arm. "You are a vision, as ever."

"You clean up quite nicely," she said with a smirk. "Tossed out the fancy robes, I see."

He playfully scoffed, rolling his eyes. "My business attire, I assure you. You, however, seem to come with accessories?"

Confused, she watched as he reached his hand out toward her face. Thinking that he was going to touch her emerald earrings, she tilted her head to the side to allow him a look. They were too expensive, but they had been a gift from James years back. Charlus had offered to pay him a certain amount for helping to wrangle several flutterby bushes in the garden that were infested with doxies.

Instead of touching her earrings, however, Tiberius pulled his hand back after gently tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, revealing a small pink feather.

Glaring at the offensive little thing, Dorea muttered, "Little shit," under her breath.

That earned her a bright grin from Tiberius. "Dare I ask?"

Sighing, she pulled her hand back and adjusted her hair, silently checking for more feathers. "I happen to have a loose fwooper in my home," she said tersely. "I plan on roasting him on a spit the moment I'm able to catch the rotten thing."

"Violent little witch," Tiberius said with a wink, tucking the feather into his breast pocket as though it were a silk pocket square. "Shall we?"

The food was delicious and the waitstaff absolutely delightful. Tiberius was apparently a regular, so they were treated like celebrities long before the first waitress realised who Dorea was. The poor girl had stammered out nervous apologies after dropping the water, forgetting for several minutes that it was a magical establishment and she had a wand in her apron before she stopped mopping up the mess with a napkin.

"I can't tell if they adore you or are afraid of you," Tiberius said, looking at her as though either option would please him.

Dorea brought her glass of champagne to her lips, sipping lightly and swallowing before whispering, "I do enjoy both."

They made small talk here and there, chatting about how the weather was clearing up, and how neither of them currently had much confidence in the Minister—considering his appointment of Umbridge—but since it seemed that things under his hand ran smoothly for the time being, there wasn't too much to complain about.

"Wish things at Hogwarts ran as a smoothly," she said softly, turning her attention down to her mostly empty plate, poking idly at a few remaining roasted carrots with her fork.
Touching her free hand, Tiberius said, "It can't be easy. After everything you've been through, I mean. I don't have children of my own, but I remember when you and your coven made your little entrance in the Wizengamot. I thought you were brilliant. I saw the paper before, with you and your grandson. It must be hard with him gone most of the year."

Smiling sadly, she nodded. "It's harder than I thought it would be." Clearing her throat, she opted to change the subject. "Why did you never marry and have children?"

Laughing, Tiberius took a sip of his whisky. She watched carefully as he savoured the flavour, glancing down at the glass with each sip to examine the colour as though it would change each time. "I was always too busy. I know I worked hard for what I have, but I'd be a fool to admit that luck didn't have a good part in it as well. Seemed like anytime that things started to settle enough for me to get out much, new opportunities opened up for me. Besides, I have nieces and nephews. My brother Titus married very young. I was happy to play uncle."

"I wonder if my sister feels the same way," she said, thinking of Cassie and always wondering if her sister didn't secretly wish her life had taken a different path. "Are you and your brother close?"

Tiberius shook his head. "He died ten years back." When Dorea opened her mouth to offer condolences, he cut her off with a small smile and a subtle wave of his hand. "He had a good life. It was an accident outside of St Mungo's. Some people tend to forget that the whole street isn't magical. He was hit by a car. He was instantly dead, or so the Healers say."

"It's still hard to lose someone," Dorea said. "Do you still keep in touch with his family?"

Tiberius nodded after another sip of his drink, still looking down at the glass as he swallowed. "My nephew went off to tour the world after Hogwarts. Found a pretty girl in Tokyo to settle down with. They both teach at Mahoutokoro. I stay close with both of my nieces. Roslynn married into the McLaggen family, and they've got a boy in Hogwarts now. I'm closer with Rosie since she peddles my wares." After Dorea raised a curious brow, Tiberius smirked. "She runs the Three Broomsticks up in Hogsmeade. Sells only Ogden's best, good girl. None of that Blishen's shit."

"Your niece is Rosmerta?" Dorea asked. "She and my son . . . I mean to say—"

Nodding, Tiberius chuckled. "I met your boy once, you know. Outside of that trial, I mean. He's a good lad. Seems a bit lost, and Rosmerta's not really one to settle down. She tells me they broke up amicably, and she'd be happy to see him come around if he's ever in the area."

Thinking about Sirius and how happy he had seemed with Rosmerta, Dorea wondered if she had pushed him in regards to Hammond. "He was happy with her, but . . . Sirius doesn't yet know his path, I think. He's having troubles with his current boyfriend. I don't know all of the details, but one of his close friends confided in me that they were assaulted in London by some Muggles last autumn. Despite living his whole life in a magical environment, I sometimes think Sirius would prefer to be around Muggles. None of them know who he is, who his mother is, or . . . or who his godson is."

The conversation briefly halted when the waitress returned, still flushed red with embarrassment over her earlier accident. She said nothing but gave them both smiles as she took their plates.

"Does he work there?" Tiberius asked once the girl departed. "Your son. Does he work in London?"

Laughing quietly, Dorea shook her head. "He's on a career hunt, these days. He tried a little stint with the Knight Bus, but apparently didn't get along well with the driver. Then he tried assisting Ollivander for a week. Some twenty-something boy came in with a broken wand, and the first that Sirius handed him sent sparks off and nearly set his hair on fire. He's trying his hand as an expert at
the Museum of Muggle Curiosities this week. I'll give it until next Monday before he realises he can't play with all the items and gets bored."

Finishing off his whisky, Tiberius picked up the dessert menu and tapped his wand against it, ordering himself a sticky toffee pudding before holding the menu out to her. She tapped her own wand on the little plaque, selecting a lemon sorbet.

"If he want something to do, I could always—"

"Thank you, but no," Dorea said, shaking her head. "I adore my boy more than all the stars in the sky including the one he was named for, but I am not blind to his faults. I'd rather he indulge in job where he can play about with Muggle things than live his passion for firewhisky out."

Nodding in understanding, Tiberius smiled. "Well, if you ever change your mind, or if there's ever anything else I can do for you and your family, please don't ever hesitate."

She thought of Tiberius's uncle, Bob Ogden, and the informations he supplied that had led the coven to discover not only the mystery of Tom Riddle's family but also another Horcrux. "You cannot imagine how much you've already done for me."

It wasn't odd when coven members met in the manor, even if his mother wasn't there: Theia practically lived in Remus's room these days—a far better bed to sleep in than the one she kept over the Leaky. Enid and Cedrella were often found either in the greenhouse or the back garden, foraging and planting to their heart's delight. Lucretia, in particular, had claimed the library as her own personal space. Sometimes, Sirius would see her go in and come out days later, never realising that she hadn't gone home during that time.

So when he overheard witches whispering in said library, it didn't even occur to him to stop and eavesdrop. Most coven gossip made little sense to him anyway, and whenever anything sounded interesting enough to get involved in, he would be spotted and someone would cast a Silencing Charm. Granted, the last time that had happened was when the women were planning a Beltane celebration that included a fertility rite they were helping a small group of witches with—just one of many things the coven offered to the public on a case by case basis.

He wasn't very interested in the whispers as he walked by the library, set on making his way to the kitchen to see if Dobby had saved a bit of roast from the night before. A long day of working in a museum filled with Muggle things—and not being allowed to touch or play with them—left him exhausted, frustrated, and hungry.

"I don't blame her, of course. If any of my boys had been killed in the war, or at all, I couldn't imagine being presented with this kind of power. It hurts my heart just to think about it. Poor Dorea."

Heart sinking, Sirius stopped in his steps and paused, turning to look back at the library door, left cracked open. Cedrella's words poked something inside of him, like a sharp stick stabbing into the dying embers of a fire.

"Has anyone tried it since Minerva spoke with her husband?" Callidora asked in a hushed tone.

Eyes slightly widening, Sirius swallowed down his suddenly rapid heartbeat. He knew that McGonagall's husband had died. And Cedrella had mentioned James, though not by name but the implication was clear enough.

"I tested it with my father," Lucretia said. "Just as Minerva told us. The stone didn't hurt him at all, but I didn't hold onto him long enough to test the longevity of the magic. He claimed it was likely a
fake until I let him try to explain any other way that I would have been able to speak with him beyond the veil of death," she added with a sad little laugh. "Then he said we were foolish to play with relics like this."

"Sounds like something Arcturus would say," Cedrella replied.

Sirius unwillingly flashed back to his childhood. Walburga hardly kept children's books around the home, preferring instead to school him on the genealogy of every pureblood family in Britain followed up by law books regarding Wizengamot proceedings and old tomes of Dark Magic that he knew—even at eight years old—he never wanted to play with. But the first summer he'd spent with the Potters, Charlus pulled out some old book and began reading from Beedle. Sirius always preferred *The Fountain of Fair Fortune*, but James . . . James had loved *The Tale of the Three Brothers*. Unsurprisingly, it was also Harry's favourite bedtime story.

Just a story.

Feeling panic rising, Sirius stepped in front of the crack in the door to observe.

In the centre of the room, with books all spread out over a nearby table, Cedrella, Lucretia, and Callidora flipped through a book each in their own hands as they whispered.

"I don't even want to touch the thing, truth be told," Cedrella said, glancing behind her at the table to something that Sirius could not see. "I've lost loved ones, certainly, but I know a fair few that've parted this world who would still have words with me from my youth. I was a terror."

"If any of us would be described thus, I'd wager you," Callidora added with a small smile. "Touching the stone won't do a thing. You've got to spin it thrice, just as Lucretia said. Just like Minerva did."

Cedrella shook her head emphatically. "Call it superstition if you'd like, but I'd just as well not touch it, thank you."

"Don't get sidetracked," Lucretia gently scolded, putting her book down and picking up a quill and a bit of parchment. "We're going to respect all of our wishes and not contact any loved ones for our purpose. We need to figure out how to channel the stone in order to speak with anyone who might have an idea of what to do next."

"Do you have Herpo the Foul written on your list?" Callidora asked, snatching the parchment from Lucretia. "All things considered, can we even be assured that he's dead?"

"No," Lucretia snapped, taking back the list, "but do you know anyone else who's made a bloody Horcrux? I figure begin with the source of what we know from history. It's either that or try to reach out to any dead Death Eaters, and it's not as though the living ones have been very forthcoming about things. Nott, Lucius, and Goyle have all been dead ends there. Not as though we could even ask them to help search for what we're looking for, that is."

Sirius's stomach churned with the words he was hearing. Everything all coming together in a jumble inside of his head. Half of what they were saying couldn't possibly be true. The other half . . . a Horcrux? He knew the word. He'd seen it in Walburga's books from long ago, and then again when researching Dark Magic for the Order during the first war. Dumbledore had brought a small collection from his personal library, and when he'd caught Sirius halfway through a chapter on wicked ways to earn oneself immortality, he'd all but snatched the book right out of Sirius's hands.

All at once, it clicked together.

The thing the coven had buried in the garden.
The place warded so that the children wouldn't go near.

The darkness and scorch marks on the burnt earth where nothing ever grew, not since the day they'd dug that hole.

He placed a hand against the wall to steady himself in the hopes of steadying his pulse in the process, but it didn't work. All he could think about was the idea in his head that the bastard that murdered his best friends and scarred Harry for life was somehow, inexplicably, still alive. There were rumours, certainly, and something upsetting had gone on at Hogwarts recently . . . Something about a professor in leagues with Death Eaters. His mother had been so furious that she'd gone out in the orchards and didn't come back until sunrise, looking cried out and magically spent. When he'd asked her what happened, she told him that he would have to make an oath not to tell a soul, and for some reason, Sirius hadn't wanted to know then. There was a look in her eyes that reminded him of Azkaban. She looked like she'd seen a Dementor, and he didn't want to experience that. It felt cowardly at the time, but she had reassured him that Harry was safe and the coven was working on it, so he'd stupidly let it go and rushed off to see about working for the bloody Knight Bus!

While he had spent the years since Azkaban trying to be a parent only to feel like he wasn't measuring up, and completely useless at everything else including relationships and a career, his mother and her circle of witches had been dealing with the Darkest magic known, all in the hopes of doing what Sirius had wanted to do all those years ago: murder Voldemort for good.

But now he knew.

And he knew he needed to tell his mother.

He wanted to help.

But suddenly, as Cedrella took a step to the side, Sirius's attention was drawn to a small stone sitting in the middle of a book. While he could not read the words from this distance, he knew the well-worn cover and the too-long golden ribbon hanging from the pages. A stone sitting in the open spine of the Tales of Beedle the Bard.

Impulsively, recklessly, and without thought, Sirius aimed his wand and muttered, "Accio!"

The book flew toward him, the stone captured and pinned between the pages.

The very second that the book reached his hand—he gripped tightly to the cover, his wand trapped between—the stone fell out, landing in his open palm. At the same time, all three witches looked up, eyes wide and looking more terrifying than he had ever seen them.

"Sirius!" Lucretia yelled.

Perhaps on instinct, or purely on muscle memory after hearing his name called like that, Sirius dropped the book and shoved the stone between his teeth before shifting down into Padfoot and immediately taking off down the corridor.

He could hear the door fly open behind him, so loud that it might've broken the hinges, but he refused to look back. Several spells shot beside him, missing him only by centimetres. Nothing offensive by the look of the colors that impacted the wall, but he knew they were aiming to stop him, and something in his heart couldn't allow that.

He didn't know why just then, but he needed this stone.

He turned a corner sharply, colliding with the opposite wall in the process and leaving behind a
Padfoot-sized dent. Several paintings on the wall grumbled in complaint, and one screamed in terror as it plummeted all of four feet to the marble floor below.

Knowing that he could not outrun them forever, Padfoot ducked into a small, doorless tunnel that Dobby—and the many house-elves over the generations that came before him—used to travel between rooms while avoiding carrying around dirty laundry or bins of rubbish. Most could Apparate around freely, but magic was best spent doing their duties, and many elves wouldn’t bother with Apparition since it made their jobs easier, and an easy life for an elf was often something that they’d punish themselves for even thinking about.

The small tunnel was even smaller for a dog of his size, but less easy for a grown witch to navigate. Had Minerva or Cassie been there, he knew he would have been in a world of trouble, but the three women at his back, continually shouting after him, were no match for his speed, especially when the tunnel let out in the back garden near the compost pile that Dobby kept well fed for the greenhouse.

Making his way to the orchards in an attempt to hide among the trees, Sirius shifted back into human form once he reached the stream that cut through the land. Looking back and hearing the witches in the far distance, he knew he only had a short time before they either caught up with him or realised they could Apparate right to his location if spotted.

He had been lost for so long. Perhaps long before the war had even begun. The only time he had felt safe was with the Potters, and it had all been because of James. James, who had given him a safe haven and a family. James, who had trusted him to be his original Secret Keeper before everything went tits up. James, who had made him Harry's godfather, and in doing so, made Sirius a dad. James, who was his brother.

James, who would know what Sirius should do now.

Spinning the stone thrice in the palm of his hand, Sirius clenched his eyes shut tightly, and wished, more than anything else in the world, to see his brother again.

"You're a reckless, goddamned fool."

Sirius felt bile rise in his throat at the voice. Slowly, he opened his eyes and looked at the spectral form—not quite human, not quite ghost—in front of him. He could actually feel the blood drain from his face, his head slightly dizzy from the swiftness of it.

"I take it you didn't mean for it to be me."

Opening his mouth, Sirius all but thought he'd completely lost his voice until he croaked out, "Reggie?"

Regulus smirked at him, that same annoying, self-righteous fucking grin he'd perfected since he was thirteen and started slinging slurs across the Slytherin table right along with his pompous serpent friends. But he wasn't thirteen now. No. He was as old as Sirius last remembered him but looking much better. While still alive, Regulus had looked haunted those last few months before he'd disappeared from the face of the earth, only to be proclaimed dead by a shrieking Howler Sirius had received from Walburga, saying over and over that it should have been Sirius who died. The black shadows beneath Regulus's eyes were now gone, and the paleness of his skin looked natural, almost shimmering as bits of starlight cut through him.

"In truth, I've been waiting for some time now to be called. I didn't think it would be you."

Sirius swallowed, feeling as though his feet weren't connected with the ground. "Reggie, I—"
"And I know I'm not the brother you were likely seeking, but all the same, I'd wager that I shall be of more use to you than James Potter." He looked irritated, the same way he always had when they were young and Sirius brought James around or even mentioned him by name in front of Regulus. Jealous and spiteful. But there was something else there in his eyes as well. Sirius couldn't quite put his finger on it. In some weird way, he looked like Remus. He looked burdened.

"Sirius Orion Black!" Cedrella shrieked at him as she approached from behind. "You are in so much trouble, young man. You give that bloody rock right back here this very instant!"

Sirius's hand clenched around the stone, unable to take his eyes off of the vision of his little brother. Regulus looked over Sirius's shoulder. "Tell them to shut up."

"Shut up," Sirius said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Not you . . . Er . . . I mean, yes you, but . . . that wasn't me," he tried to say. "I didn't—"

"Tell them you know where Kreacher got the locket. It's where I died."

Sucking in a sharp breath, Sirius finally turned around to face his aunts. His eyes were wide still, stinging with a lack of blinking and unshed tears. "I know where Kreacher got the locket."

Cedrella still looked furious, and Callidora had her wand aimed at him. But Lucretia lifted her hand to stop any spells from being cast, her eyes full of curiosity and obvious concern. "What did you say?"

His throat suddenly dry, Sirius whispered, "Kreacher . . . He found the locket in the place where . . ."

Slowly stepping forward, Lucretia held out her hands in supplication. "Where what, Sirius?"

"Where Regulus died."

As though they were a single unit, all three witches looked over Sirius's shoulder, to where Regulus was. They searched and searched, each appearing more and more worried by the minute.

"He's here?" Cedrella asked, bringing a hand to her mouth.

Sirius nodded.

"I don't know how much time I've got. They've only mucked about with the stone a few times, and there could be a limitation before I'm affected. So be clear and concise and repeat my every word, understood?"

"Yes."

"They've successfully destroyed two, but I know of at least three others. I'd only put it all together after I died, unfortunately, and I can't see everything from beyond death, so I'm not sure of all the details or if there are more. But he entrusted a book to one of his followers, something else to Bella, and there's another . . . something from one of the Founders. I'm sorry, but I don't know where. Tell them that I hope this helps."

Sirius turned back again and met his brother's saddened gaze.

"Tell them . . . Tell them I tried to help. I wasn't strong enough."
"Reggie—"

"Don't," Regulus cut him off. "No use in getting all emotional over someone who's been dead for
twelve years. And frankly, that should apply to Potter as well, if I'm being perfectly honest. The dead
don't mourn you, Sirius. Don't spend what life you've left wasting it away on the lot of us."

"Sirius?" Lucretia said, stepping close enough to touch his shoulder. "What's he saying?"

Regulus gestured to Sirius's hand. "Give them back the stone. Tell them you've all got work to do."

Eventually, Sirius's fingers loosened around the stone as he choked out through the tears that finally
spilt over onto his cheeks. "I'm sorry."

"Me too, Siri. For everything."
Malediction and Pocket Watches

June 20th, 1992
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

The clouds over the castle rumbled with approaching thunder, signalling a nearby downpour of rain over the Scottish highlands. Dorea looked out the window from Dumbledore's office as lightning struck in the distance. It felt appropriate, considering her mood.

She had fully planned on retrieving Harry from King's Cross that afternoon, hoping to greet her grandson with Sirius at her side, showing up as a family in support of the boy. Despite the fights with Slytherins, evading a three-headed dog, and having a secret Death Eater in the castle—not to mention losing the House Cup to Slytherin—Harry had written home with a good attitude, excitedly boasting that he had passed all of his exams.

She had wanted to take him out for ice cream.

Instead, she found herself at Hogwarts, watching as the train disappeared into the distance beyond the Hogsmeade Station.

She, along with many members of the coven, had wanted to storm the castle the moment Cassie had told them about what had occurred the day she and Newt tried to retrieve the cerberus, and Minerva recalled in detail her encounter with Professor Quirrell. Unfortunately, in order to continue benefitting from their status, they had to include the Ministry in on some matters, especially when their impact reached beyond the coven and the Black family. Had Quirrell personally attacked Harry or that blasted dog done something to single out any of the children related to the coven, they could have salted the earth at Dumbledore's feet without whispering in the direction of the Ministry. But, alas, the headmaster's unfortunate hiring of a Death Eater had not only put Harry and the other coven children in danger but every other student in the castle.

Dorea had alerted the goblins, of course, and Fudge was none too pleased to hear about the events—especially after Alastor Moody refused to retire after hearing the news, becoming an extra sharp thorn in the minister's side.

Fudge had elected to ask assistance from the coven, knowing their personal vendetta against Voldemort and every Death Eater that was not under their sanctuary, but Dolores Umbridge had stuck her fat nose into their business and convinced the man otherwise, implying that the minister himself was a powerful enough wizard to handle the situation.

Which was how Dorea found herself—along with select members of the coven—as well as the Board of Governors, standing around Dumbledore's office on the last day of school, just after the train back to London departed.

"From this point forward, Dumbledore, all staffing of Hogwarts—and I mean every last one—needs approval of the majority of the Board of Governors. Madam Longbottom and Mr Malfoy have both assured me that the Ministry will be kept alert of everything," Fudge said, looking like a puffed-up owl who'd had his treats stolen away. Umbridge, thank Morgana, had been left behind in London to look after his other meetings—which still unnerved Dorea, despite enjoying not having to deal with the woman.

"In addition to the fact that your past hirings were questionable at best, the lack of security is abhorrent in this school! And not only that, but you've lost a Defence professor as well as your
groundskeeper due to this lack of attention!"

"To be fair," Augusta interrupted, "we still have one competent Defence professor. According to my grandson, Quirrell taught them nothing. Despite Professor Snape's manner with the children, they are, apparently, learning."

Dorea nodded in agreement. "Harry scored quite well in that class."

"Almost all of the children have," Lucius added, the only one in the room sitting other than Dumbledore. The man was perched on the corner of Dumbledore's desk, his look of boredom perfectly disguising the pure contempt Dorea knew he had for the headmaster. "I've seen the reports that were sent to the board. Severus's instruction of all years has improved their scores by almost thirty percent from last year. I imagine it will only continue to improve once he has a better grasp of the curriculum."

"Fine," Fudge nodded stiffly, "leave Snape to it then."

Dorea made eye contact with Dumbledore and growled under her breath as she realised she was sharing a thought with the man. "There's still the problem of the official position being cursed. If we want Professor Snape to continue his work with the children, then the school needs to continue the farce of a Theoretical Defence class."

Fudge pinned Dumbledore with a look. "If that's the case, then whoever you hire will be approved by the board and the Ministry!"

Looking tired, Dumbledore reached into one of his desk drawers and removed a folded bit of parchment. He slid the paper across the desk, and Fudge snapped it up.

"List of potential teachers?" Lucius asked. "Any evil villains on it, or just the usual nonsense?"

Fudge let out an incredulous scoff every few lines, but then he smiled in amusement. "That one should do. He's harmless enough."

Lucretia stood up, peeking over Fudge's shoulder. She let out a groan of discomfort and rolled her eyes before returning to her place at the back of the room, muttering, "Imbecile."

"Well, he doesn't actually have to teach, does he?" Fudge asked. "He's a placeholder."

Minerva took her turn to look at the list, watching as Fudge handed it back to Dumbledore, who put a checkmark next to one name. "Oh for the love of—you know what? I don't even care anymore. He'll be gone in a year anyway."

Dumbledore put the list away and stood, walking to the window where Dorea was. Immediately, and for his safety—since the Minister for Magic was right there—Dorea left the window and walked across the room to stay beside Minerva.

"What about Hagrid?" Dumbledore asked quietly. "I had plans for him, you know. Professor Kettleburn plans to retire at the end of next year. I was hoping, with Hagrid's knowledge of creatures, that he would take the position."

"That's completely out of the question," Fudge said. "After what he did to Madam Umbridge?"

Lucretia cleared her throat. "Again, with all due respect, Minister, while Hagrid's actions were illegal and irresponsible, he meant no harm to your undersecretary. I was there. It was an accident."
The man softened only slightly but nodded in her direction. "Quite right. And it's only because of you fine witches that he was pardoned of those crimes." His attention returned to Dumbledore. "But returning to England, let alone Hogwarts, is not going to happen."

It had been easy, once Umbridge backed off a bit, to obtain the pardon for Hagrid. While Dorea still had issues with the man's blind loyalty to Dumbledore, she knew he meant no harm to anyone, least of all Harry. Once Lucretia got Cedrella involved in the situation—after Enid caused a scene at the Ministry, thoroughly distracting Umbridge—they were able to fire-call Cedrella's grandson, who worked at a dragon reserve in Romania. A little name-throwing from Dorea helped along the way, considering it was because of Hammond's curing her that allowed the reserve to benefit from donations from St Mungo's for the dragon blood research.

"Hagrid will be happy in Romania," she said softly, knowing it to be true.

Nodding in obvious resignation, Dumbledore eventually retook his seat.

From the way Minerva told the story, his return to Hogwarts to find out the truth about Quirrell had set the man off into a terrible rage. For the first time in decades, he sounded like the wizard who had fought against Grindelwald: powerful and righteous in anger.

Unfortunately, too little and too late.

Now, the headmaster looked as he had every time Dorea had seen him since she'd clawed those scars into his face: old and weak.

"Perhaps Wilhelmina could step in for Silvanus. There's still another year, but I had preferred someone to shadow him for at least the last term, especially since they will need to earn the trust of the creatures within Hogwarts's borders."

Dorea stepped forward, pulling an envelope from the pocket of her robe. "If you're speaking of Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank, she would be a fine addition to this school, but not the best. And considering you have to also fill the position of groundskeeper, well, Wilhelmina is near my age. I can tell you that I would hardly like to spend my entire day herding children and Hippogriffs, and tending to the grounds. Magic or not, the groundskeeper is also charged with dealing with the Forbidden Forest. With what happened to the unicorns this year, the centaurs need someone they can trust as a go-between."

Dumbledore looked down at the envelope.

"You can read it later, if you'd like," Dorea continued. "But it's already been approved by the board." She turned to the minister. "Mr Jacob Scamander has written, expressing interest in filling both positions. He's currently working with the American government in the same position that his father used to have here. Not only is the son of Newt Scamander well-versed in dealing with creatures, his mother was an Auror, and a damned good one at that."

Fudge looked so excited she worried he would burst at the seams.

"Well!" He threw up his hands. "As always, the Black Coven and their resourcefulness have benefited us all! I'm so glad to hear that everything is in good hands. Don't you agree, Dumbledore?"

The headmaster gave the minister a look filled with apathy as he tucked the envelope into his desk drawer.

"Dorea," Minister Fudge said, taking her hand, "I do hope to see you around the Ministry more often. It's always such a delight to be in your company."
Smiling at the man, Dorea allowed him to kiss her knuckles. "We shall surely sacrifice a fat goat at our next ritual in hopes of your continued wise management of the government, Minister Fudge."

Fudge's cheek turned bright pink, his eyes twinkling in grand amusement. "Oh, well, I . . . You're too good to me, my Lady."

Once Fudge left, Lucius led the non-coven members of the board out of Dumbledore's office, leaving behind only Dorea, Minerva, Augusta, and Lucretia. Cassie had, of course, begged to be there, but without being on the board, a staff member of the school, or having a child in attendance at Hogwarts, there was no obvious reason.

The moment the door closed behind Lucius, the witches spun on Dumbledore.

His wand was already in hand.

Fawkes made a loud chirping noise of distress.

"Quiet," Dorea said to the bird. "He'll live."

"So, it would seem that everything is going according to your plan?" Dumbledore asked, shoulders slumped forward.

Raising her brows, Dorea laughed. "My plan? My plans did not involve a Death Eater posing as a professor at the school where my grandson attends. You're honestly very lucky that it's us four in this room with you. Cedrella has four grandchildren currently in attendance, and she's often considered one of the most level-headed of all of us. You don't want to know what she had planned on doing to you."

With his free hand, Dumbledore touched the scars on his face. "You know that I did not wish for this, Dorea. I want the students here to be safe. Quirrell was . . ." He stopped, looking at a loss for words.

The coven had offered to help construct wards around the school. It would have taken all of them, and likely several sessions over the entire summer to do it, but Dumbledore refused their help once again, always leaning back on his mistrust of their magic.

Gently withdrawing her wand from her pocket, Dorea cast a Slicing Hex on her palm, whispering under her breath until the blood ignited into a singular flame.

Upon seeing the Blood Magic, Dumbledore stood, blue eyes wide. "Madam!"

"I swear this vow, by all the rights and privileges I have as the High Witch of the Black Coven, any grown witch or wizard that steps foot into this school with the intent to do harm to any of mine is our enemy, and our enemies will die screaming. So I swear this, by my blood and magic, and may Morgana curse their souls."

Before Dumbledore could reach her, and he did look like he was going to try, Dorea pressed her bleeding palm against the stone of the wall, letting the flames extinguish and the magic of her curse seep into the foundation of the school.

Making eye contact with the man, Dorea hissed, "I'll kill them. Keep that in mind for every new professor you hire, Albus. I will burn them."

She swallowed hard. It was more than a threat; it was a curse. A real and true vow on her blood. And it had taken quite a bit out of her, since melding her magic with the school's was not exactly
something she had asked permission from Dumbledore to do. But the castle seemed to agree with her, tugging on her magic like a comforting treacle tart, swallowing it down without chewing.

She leant against Lucretia when the woman rushed to her side.

Mouth open in horror, Dumbledore shook his head, his gaze turning to the wall. "What have you done?"

With one last glance in his direction, Dorea muttered, "More than you."

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**King's Cross Station**

The ride home from school was decidedly different than when Harry first stepped aboard the Hogwarts Express in September.

Instead of sharing a compartment with Draco, Neville, Hermione, and Dean, he found himself cooped up with his roommates as though they were still back in their dorm. Seamus and Ron played Exploding Snap. Dean curled up in the corner doodling in a sketchbook what looked like football players riding on brooms, kicking footballs through Quidditch hoops. Neville, despite earning good marks on his end of the year exams, was nose deep in his first year Potions textbook, reviewing.

Harry, meanwhile, had spent the first part of the voyage home wandering the train, poking his head into other compartments. He very briefly visited with Draco and Theo, who were sharing a compartment all to themselves, thankfully. Theo mentioned that Thorfinn Rowle, while initially considered a problem at Hogwarts, had graduated this year, but the Carrow twins, Hestia and Flora, would remain at Hogwarts.

When he'd asked after Hermione, Draco confirmed that the older girls hadn't bothered her much since returning from Christmas, though they were tight-lipped as to why.

After leaving one Slytherin compartment, Harry ventured into another, smiling when he caught sight of Hermione sleeping on the train with an open book, and her fat kneazle, in her lap.

"Want us to wake her?" Tracey asked from her place on the floor where her entire bookbag had been emptied out in what looked like an attempt to reorganise it.

Millicent shared a seat with Hermione, her legs kicked up at the end; her cat was quietly sleeping, curled up beneath her crossed ankles. Greg sat opposite the girls, a selection of trolley treats set out in front of him—most were Chocolate Frogs, and Harry gently touched the pocket of his robes where he kept his coins, wondering how many he could get with what he had on him. Without being able to go down to Hogsmeade, his new collection remained scarce.

"No, she looks like she never sleeps," he said with a grin. "I just wanted to come and say hello."

Eventually, back in his own compartment, with his friends off in their own worlds, Harry began organising the cards he was able to get off the trolley, making plans to beg his grandmother or Sirius for a trip to Diagon before they had to go home.

"You should come over this summer," he said to Dean. "Bring a football. I'm sure my godfather would love to learn how to play."

Dean chuckled. "That all I'm good for, Potter? Your Muggle amusement?"

"I don't see you offering much else," Harry joked, earning a playful jab to the shoulder. "Seriously,
though. It would be fun."

Nodding, Dean returned to his sketch. "I'll talk to Mum about it. She works a lot, though, and I have
to watch my sisters when she's gone. She had some help from a neighbour while I was at Hogwarts
this year, but I know she can't afford a babysitter when I'm home. Plus, I've also got the programme
classes. Mr Lupin already sent us a list with optional books to buy. Mum said that Mrs Cattermole
took all the Muggle-born parents to Diagon to shop for them last week."

Grimacing, Harry shook his head. "Sad you lot have to keep going to school even when you're not at
Hogwarts."

Shrugging his shoulder, Dean gave half a smile. "It's not so bad. Plus, with all of us separated into
different Houses at Hogwarts, I didn't get to visit much with my old friends, other than Hermione
from time to time."

Harry felt a brief pang of jealousy. He'd all but forgotten that Dean had friends, Muggle and Muggle-
born, before he'd come to Hogwarts. He was glad that Dean, no matter what happened during the
summer, would still come back to Hogwarts and share a room with him, but Hermione lived in the
dungeons. Between being separated by Houses and whatever she did with her Muggle life during the
holidays, he wondered how close they would be able to remain.

"Maybe I'll ask Remus or Ted if I can come by and visit you guys when you're in class," Harry
suggested. When Dean looked up at him with an incredulous stare, Harry narrowed his eyes. "What?
You expect me to be stuck with my cousins all summer?"

"Offended," Neville muttered under his breath.

Harry ignored him. "Besides, there are things I need to work on as well before we go back to school.
And my birthday is at the end of July. You have to come to that."

"Offended," Neville said again.

"And Neville's birthday too," Harry added.

Dean laughed, eventually tucking his sketchbook away in his bag as a voice overheard alerted them
that they were approaching King's Cross. "I'll ask my Mum. I should just tell her that there's nothing
more important happening this summer than celebrating the birth of one Harry Potter."

Neville looked up, narrowing his eyes at Dean. "Thanks, mate. Truly."

When they exited the train, Harry grabbed his trunk, insisting that Neville and Dean stick around to
help the Slytherin girls with theirs, even though Greg was making a true effort trying to deal with
Hermione's, which was stuck buried between two other, larger trunks. Ron and Seamus took off in
separate directions, and Harry watched as the Weasley clan met Ron, Fred, George, and Percy at the
other end of the platform.

"Can you see Sirius or my grandmother?" Harry asked.

Neville shook his head. "No, but there's my gran. I'll see you later, Harry. Bye, Dean!"

Greg, Tracey, and Millicent departed as well when their parents came to fetch them, leaving Harry
alone with Hermione and Dean.

"Your parents can get through the platform barrier, right?" he asked.
Hermione nodded. "One of the teachers from the programme usually accompanies them. Look, there's Mr Lupin!"

"There's my dad!" Harry yelled, finally catching sight of Sirius.

Abandoning his friends for the moment, he rushed into his godfather's open arms, clinging to his robes the same way that he clung to his father's invisibility cloak at night.

"There he is," Sirius said with a grin, eventually letting Harry go to ruffle his hair. "How was the trip?"

"Uneventful, but I got a few new cards," Harry said.

"Fantastic news!"

Harry looked back, watching as Remus began approaching with Dean and Hermione at his heels. He could see Mrs Cattermole and Nymphadora at other places along the platform, gathering the other Muggle-borns into small groups.

"Good to have you home," Remus said with a smile, putting an arm around his shoulders and pulling him in for a tight hug. Harry subtly slipped one unopened Chocolate Frog into Remus's robe pocket, tossing Sirius a conspiratorial grin.

"Dean, this is my dad, Sirius Black," Harry said, gesturing to his godfather. "And you remember, Hermione, Sirius."

"Indeed I do," Sirius said, making a grand gesture of bowing before Hermione, turning her cheeks pink with embarrassment. Harry laughed at the scene, grinning when Dean joined along before holding his hand out and shaking Sirius's. "Good to meet you, lad. Harry says nothing but good things. Frankly, I expected better of him. Thought he'd have it in him to befriend some good old fashioned troublemakers."

Remus sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Not everyone likes to set off fireworks in the bathrooms at Hogwarts, Sirius."

Sirius looked at Remus with a raised eyebrow. "I'll remind you, Moony, that the fireworks weren't my idea, hypocrite."

Eyes wide, Remus looked down at both Hermione and Dean, both of whom were staring up at him in shock. He cleared his throat loudly and asked, "Ready to head through?" gesturing at the barrier.

Once through the barrier, they began heading toward an exit, following along with the crowd of other magical folk mixed with confused Muggles who stopped to gape at owls in cages, toads sitting on the shoulders of small children, and both Max and Crookshanks, who lounged on top of the luggage on Hermione's and Harry's trolleys.

While some of the Muggle-born parents had been let through the barrier, most—it seemed—were meeting up with the M.O.P. teachers on the other side to collect their children due to the crowds. Harry saw Sally-Anne Perks reunite with her parents along with some of the others that he hadn't had a chance to know by name yet. Glancing behind him, he noticed both Hermione and Dean searching the crowd.

"Your parents said to meet them by the entrance," Remus said, smiling down at both of Harry's friends.
They continued to push the trolleys along the lines of people toward the exit, but Harry stopped short when Sirius halted his footsteps, missing hitting his godfather with the trolley by mere centimetres. "Everyone okay?"

Sirius glanced off into the distance and eventually looked back, making eye contact first with Remus and then with Harry. "Go on without me. I'll catch up in a minute."

Frowning, Remus asked, "Pads? You all right?"

"Brilliant," Sirius said with a grin before darting off toward the right, ducking in between and around groups of people before disappearing.

Harry stood still for a long moment before looking up at Remus. "Where's Grandmother?" he eventually asked, feeling bad for not realising that she wasn't there until just then. Last he heard, she had planned to meet him on the platform with Sirius.

Distracted by Harry's question, Remus blinked a few times. "Oh, umm . . . She had a meeting, actually. Says she'll see you back at home."

Nodding in understanding, Harry looked once more in the direction that Sirius had gone and then began moving his trolley forward.

Reaching the exit, Harry smiled sadly as he saw Dean's mother and someone who could only be Hermione's father waiting for them. As much as he loved Sirius and his grandmother, there was always a small pang of jealousy whenever he saw or heard about the parents of his friends. While having never met the Muggles, Harry recognised Mrs Thomas from a photograph Dean kept of her in his trunk. Hermione's father, while not having her thick hair, had her eyes and smile—which brightened significantly at the sight of them approaching.

"Princess!" the man said, opening his arms.

Harry stayed back with Dean, smiling as Hermione rushed to hug her father.

"Hey, Mum," Dean said, grimacing when the woman leant down to kiss his cheek.

"You've grown," she said with a pout, wiping at her lipstick smudge on his face. "Who said that was allowed?"

"Mother Nature?" Dean suggested cheekily, earning another kiss to his opposite cheek. "Stop!"

The woman laughed, smiling up at Remus. "Thank you again, Mr Lupin. It was a madhouse just trying to get here." She returned her attention to Dean. "Mrs Granger is watching the girls for me. Mr Granger offered us a ride home."

When her gaze finally landed on Harry, her smile softened even more. "You must be Harry."

He held out his hand to her. "Pleasure to meet you, Mrs Thomas."

Despite the softness of her smile and her gentle grip on his hand, she had a look in her eyes that meant business. Harry knew, from what Dean had told him, that she worked for a hospital in London as a nurse in the trauma ward. Despite her stylish jacket, jeans, and heeled boots, Harry could easily see the woman running around a hospital floor, shouting orders and snapping at people that got in her way. She reminded him a little of his Aunt Minnie, a beautiful woman that looked like she could eat you alive.
"Aren't you the little gentleman?" she said sweetly, her eyes sparkling. "Call me Darlene, love. I haven't been Mrs anything for a few years now, and even then I wasn't Mrs Thomas." She looked at Remus. "Thomas was my maiden name. Is, I mean," she said with a shrug. "Never got around to changing it, so I suppose it still is."

Harry looked at Dean, remembering what he'd said happened to his step-father. Harry felt prompted to say something but ultimately kept quiet. It bothered him when people offered apologies about his parents' deaths—especially when they'd never known them—so he decided not to give any to Dean's mother.

"Ready to head out?" Hermione's father asked, sparing the boys a glance. "Oh, right. Richard Granger, you can call me 'Sir'."

"Dad!" Hermione exclaimed.

The man laughed, giving both Dean and Harry a wink. "Oh, they're fine. Aren't you lads?"

Harry nodded, chuckling a bit while Dean gave him a look and then said, "Yes, sir."

"We'll see you soon, Mr Lupin," Dean's mother said.

"Remus," Remus corrected. "And Richard, always a pleasure."

"Cheers," Hermione's father said, pulling her close with one hand and taking her trolley with the other.

Sirius caught up with them just as the Thomases and Grangers disappeared. His hair was a bit messier, and he looked out of breath, bending over to inhale a few times in between laughing.

"What did you do?" Remus asked suspiciously.

Sirius continued to laugh, bracing himself on his knees. "Just running an errand for Mum that she doesn't know about. Ran into an old Muggle friend I saw a ways off."

"Friend?" Remus repeated, looking uneasy.

The grin on Sirius's face did nothing to hide the mischief in his eyes. "Not so much a friend. Just some tosser that had a little revenge coming his way."

"What'd you do?" Harry asked, trying to hide his intrigue and sound more casual about the question. Secretly, though, he was thinking about stupid Marcus Flint and Adrian Pucey and how he still wanted to punch their lights out.

Sirius patted Harry on the shoulder. "Nothing to worry about. Just thought he might've stolen my watch is all." He pulled an old pocket watch from his jacket, showing it off. Harry had seen it plenty of times before. Sirius told him that it was a gift from Harry's grandparents on Sirius's seventeenth birthday. "You can imagine my distress, seeing my precious heirloom gone. So I did what any good citizen would do. I screamed for the police and shouted that there was a thief in the train station."

Watching Remus's face, Harry could tell that he was fighting simultaneous urges to be concerned and amused at the same time. "Did you frame some poor Muggle for stealing your watch?"

Sirius shrugged. "You'd have done the same, or worse. Trust me."

Neither man said anything more, but as they moved forward, Harry glanced back at the crowd and
was almost certain that, in the distance, he could see two Muggle police officers forcefully shoving a handcuffed man who appeared an awful lot like what he remembered Vernon Dursley looked like.

POTTER MANOR

It had been a stroke of luck catching sight of Vernon Dursley at King’s Cross Station, and Sirius had not yet been able to pay the man back for taking care of Harry the way he had. The coven, he knew, spent one day a year trying to ruin his and Petunia's life, but Sirius had never been invited.

Years prior, he’d overheard the women gossiping about how they’d created a shell company in the Muggle world that ended up purchasing the company Dursley worked for, and subsequently getting the man fired. Last Sirius heard of the man, he was working at a small shop outside of London that sold tools, and he was working his way to becoming assistant manager. From the look of Dursley's bag at the station, he was selling tools door to door now.

Sirius had followed the Muggle for a short ways, wondering if years of misery and karmic comeuppance had humbled him a bit. But then he'd scoffed indignantly at a homeless woman and her child, muttering to the people next to him about the "dregs of society ruining it for the rest of us".

It was too easy to slip his own pocket watch into Dursley's jacket after Sirius had stopped near the woman, emptying his pockets of all the Muggle money he had on him. He'd never been good with the exchange, always just throwing it at vendors and shop clerks and hoping they'd give him back the right amount of change. By the look on the poor woman's face, he'd given her enough for her and her child to eat, at the very least, maybe more.

He stumbled into Dursley on purpose, drawing the man's attention and then let out a loud shout of "Thief! Thief! This man just stole my watch!"

The other Muggles stepped away quickly, clutching at their briefcases and purses, glaring at Dursley, who's moustache twitched in a rage. While there were station attendants and security nearby, Sirius thought he might've accidentally ingested some Felix Felicis when two fellow travellers happened to also be police officers.

Sirius was given back his watch, feigning relief as a surprised and bumbling Dursley was taken in hand.

He couldn't wait to tell Dorea.

They Apparated to Potter Manor from the designated point in London, Sirius opened the door and stepped into his home, Remus looking stern and responsible as ever, floating Harry's trunk into the house. Harry was rapidly telling them both all the details of the last Quidditch game at Hogwarts, and how he'd planned to practise a lot more that summer in preparation for tryouts the following autumn.

Seeing his mother sitting on the sofa looking pale with Hammond at her side, checking her pulse, had all the joy from the day instantly sucked out of Sirius's chest.

"What happened?" he demanded, rushing to her other side and dropping to his knees in front of the sofa.

"She needs a re-Sorting, is what happened," Minerva said coolly, sitting in the nearby armchair with her ankles crossed and her fingers drumming irritably on a mug in her hands. "Reckless fool."

"I'm fine, love," Dorea insisted, gently touching Sirius's cheek. "Just in need of a good cuddle is all," she added, opening her free arm for Harry, who ran forward, collapsing into her lap as though he
were still six years old. "All is well. I was just a bit under the weather after a meeting. Minerva is a fussy sort, so she fire-called Healer Dillonsby."

Sirius looked up, making eye contact with his . . . with his mother's Healer. "Is she okay?"

Hammond frowned at Sirius, looking as though he were choosing his words carefully, before clearing his throat. "She expelled a great deal of magic in a short amount of time is all. Everything looks to be normal. She'll be on her feet and conquering the world again within minutes, I imagine."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked, tilting his head to look at Hammond.

Giving the boy a stiff nod and an awkward pat on the head, Hammond said, "I promise."

"Go on, lamb," Dorea whispered to Harry. "Get all your things put away and come back to tell me everything that happened at Hogwarts. I want every single detail."

Harry looked hesitant, and Sirius didn't blame him one bit, but he eventually stood and reluctantly went off to his room.

Sirius glanced at Remus, silently asking him to follow after, just in case. Sirius would do it himself, but he felt incapable of leaving Dorea's side. Flashbacks of when she and Charlus were in St Mungo's, dying of Dragon Pox, were rare, but when the memories did surface, they had a way of making him feel like a child all over again.

"What really happened?" Sirius asked, looking up into pale purple eyes.

"It was noth—"

Minerva cut Dorea off with a loud scoff. "She put a blood curse on Hogwarts, is what she did."

"Oh, I did no such thing," Dorea remarked, glaring at Minerva. "I made a blood pact with the castle, thank you ever so much, Minnie," she snapped, using the pet name that the children had given her. "I vowed to bring hell upon anyone who stepped foot into Hogwarts and dared to harm my family. The castle agreed with me, and it just . . . A sentient building, especially one that old and large, has a way of being a bit draining when accepting someone's magic. I imagine if another bloody Death—" She stopped talking, glancing up at Hammond.

The Healer sighed, rolling his eyes. "That would be my cue to leave. Madam Potter, please, for my own peace of mind, take an Invigoration Draught in the morning if you feel at all unwell, and then send an owl or fire-call urgently if anything else happens."

"Wait," Sirius said, finally standing. "Could you stick around? For a minute?"

Shifting on his feet, Hammond eventually nodded. "I'll wait for you in the library?"

Sirius noted that Hammond did not choose the bedroom or anywhere else intimate. The library had a Floo access as well, which invited a speedy exit if needed.

Once Hammond was out of the room, Sirius looked down at his mother.

"If another Death Eater walks into that school, I could show up there and the castle would actually assist me in detaining them for capture," she finished her earlier thought.

"And torture?" Sirius prompted.

Looking aghast, Dorea shook her head. "I would never torture anyone—"
A single, pregnant pause filled the air.

"—inside Hogwarts."

"There it is," Minerva said, rolling her eyes.

Making his way into the library, Sirius paused as he watched Hammond look over an open book left on the table. Something pinched tight in his chest at the sight of the book, a momentary panic brought on from memories of discovering the truth about the coven, the Resurrection Stone, and Horcruxes.

Seeing Regulus, speaking to Regulus, had been a blow to Sirius. His aunts had taken the stone from him, along with Regulus's message, and passed it back to Dorea once she'd returned home that evening. He'd told his mother what he had overheard, followed by what he had done, and then confessed with as much maturity as he could summon—with what little courage he struggled to maintain—and asked her to tell him about the Horcruxes and the coven's involvement in destroying Voldemort.

She told him everything—as far as he knew, at least.

"Who better to keep my son safe?" James had asked him the night Harry was born. The night Sirius had become a godfather.

Sirius heard those words echoed around in his head on repeat since he'd heard the word "Horcrux".

He had done his job to the best of his ability, given the circumstances. While stupid, Sirius had thought agreeing to make Peter the Secret-Keeper was keeping Harry safe. While reckless, Sirius had thought leaving Harry in Hagrid and Dumbledore's care while he hunted down Peter was for Harry's own good. Even once being freed from Azkaban, Sirius had assumed that doing his best to keep Harry out of the public eye was the top priority in regards to the safety of his son.

But now he knew.

He'd not done a goddamned thing.

He quit his job at the museum and went in search of real work—something that still seemed to elude him as any job available was something he had no experience in or provided nothing in the way of securing a decent life for himself and Harry—and while money was never an objection, a job's location and customer base was a recurring problem. Still, Sirius continued, pushing himself with Dorea and Remus's help, all the while knowing that his priority had to be Harry.

"I should have owled," Sirius finally said to Hammond. "I'm sorry. I've just been busy."

Hammond turned around and gave a smile, but it lacked all emotion. "I understand. It's not as though the few dates we've had since, well, since . . . have been all that fulfilling. I know you're not one for small talk, so when you bring up the weather, it's a bit of a tell."

Sirius sighed and fell into the nearby leather armchair that used to be Charlus's favourite place in the library. It still smelled like cigar smoke, even more than a decade later. "To be fair, I do hate soggy weather."

Giving a chuckle, Hammond put his hands in his pockets and leant against the table behind him. "I think I made a mistake."
Swallowing down the rising emotion he knew was coming with the obvious rejection, Sirius tried to maintain an expressionless face. By the sudden look on Hammond's, he hadn't succeeded.

"Not you," Hammond said. "I think that you and I worked really well when I lived in Australia. I'd come to visit a few times a year, your mother would watch Harry, and you and I would get a room somewhere and lose our minds a little. It was fun. Easy."

"Most people think that long distance relationships are difficult," Sirius commented.

Crossing the short space between them, Hammond took the chair beside Sirius. "We weren't in a relationship, though. Not really. We weren't committed. I could go on with my eighty-hour work weeks, and you could be here for Harry as much as you needed to, completely devoted, and neither of us ever felt any of it because we only saw one another for those short moments of time." He reached out, taking Sirius's hand. "When I moved back, we jumped right into this thing without really understanding each other. Despite being a Gryffindor as well, I've never had the temper you have. Nor the recklessness."

"You put dragon blood in my mother," Sirius quipped with a raised brow.

"But I've never punched a man in the face," Hammond said. "And I've never . . . You're braver than I am, Sirius. I'm not ashamed of who I am or who I'm with, but when people know—when Muggles know—and they make comments under their breath, I just pass them by and go back to my own world in peace."

"Ignorance isn't peace," Sirius said, remembering the anger he'd felt that day in London.

"I'm not ignorant."

"No, they are." Sirius sat up, leaning forward. "I spent my entire childhood being told that anyone who wasn't a pureblood was filthy. It took James knocking my head on straight for me to see everything clearly. I fought a war, and lost almost everything, because of ignorant people. And despite how much I love Muggle culture, and the wizards and witches that come from it, Muggles are fucking ignorant." Hammond opened his mouth to speak, but Sirius put up a hand, silencing him. "They hate people like me, people like you. Hell, I've gone to Muggle pubs with Theia and Belina sometimes, and I see fat old white men giving them dirty looks. Muggle or wizard, I don't give a shit, Ham. I won't let anyone treat people like they're filthy because of something that they can't control. Blood, skin colour, or whoever they happen to like fucking."

Sighing, and looking tired, Hammond asked, "And it's your job to teach everyone? By what? Kicking their arses?"

Sirius looked down. "I know I'm reckless. But I don't have much tolerance for people who don't possess any."

Hammond cleared his throat, his eyes darting to the Floo. Sirius wondered if he was looking forward to leaving already. He'd noticed the tell months back when they'd started having little arguments. Hammond would stop making eye contact, glance at the nearest door, lift, stairway, or Floo, and within five minutes, their conversation would be brought to an end.

Sirius looked at the grandfather clock in the opposite corner of the room.

"I think you should see other people," Hammond eventually said.

Sirius shook his head and looked away. "What makes you think I'm already not?"
"Because you're loyal, Sirius. Sometimes to your own detriment," Hammond squeezed his hand and let go. "I'd still like to see you, on occasion, if you're up for it. I enjoy spending time with you, I do. But I honestly think that you need more than what I can give. Your youth was taken from you, Sirius. You deserve a chance to revel in life a little bit. I think other people would be good for you."

"I can't just bring anyone into my life," Sirius said, feeling years older than he was. "I have to think of Harry."

Hammond let out a heavy sigh of frustration. "Which is another reason why . . . Look, I know you love your son, but you need to . . . I don't know. Stop trying to settle down, would you? And if that's what your goal is, then you definitely shouldn't be settling for me. You know how I feel about kids. And you and Harry both deserve someone who can be as committed as you are."

And then Hammond stood.

Sirius glanced back at the clock. Five minutes had passed. "Time's up, I guess," he muttered as he stood.

"I do love you," Hammond whispered as he stepped closer to the Floo, never taking his eyes off of the floor. "In my own way. Which is why I want what's good for you."

Sirius rubbed at his chest, wondering why loneliness always left him feeling hollowed out. Maybe it was Azkaban; being alone and cold in a cell for years with nothing but Dementors to keep him company.

"I'll let you know if anything changes," Sirius said. When Hammond looked back at him, he cleared his throat and added, "With my mother. Her condition and all."

When the green flames of the fireplace died out, Sirius felt alone and freed in the same moment.
Down the street from the Leaky Cauldron sat a Muggle theatre. While Muggles partook of nightly entertainment, none had any idea that through a backstage door on the side of the building, a door opened into a magically expanded set of rooms, all hidden away from Muggle eyes.

Muggle-borns, however, were not only able to see the hidden door, but the rooms inside were set specifically for them.

While the coven had wanted to secure a building of their own for the Muggle-born Overview Programme, security was an issue at the start. Bringing strangers into any of the homes belonging to the coven witches was obviously not going to work, but openly purchasing a public area in Diagon Alley was just as dangerous, as it invited anyone to walk inside and potentially cause the children harm. So a witch in London, the owner of the Phoenix Theatre—and former acquaintance of Madam Crouch’s—had offered up her space for the programme.

This was the story the Muggle-borns had been told the previous summer when they'd been introduced to the magical world and the Muggle-born Overview Programme. Hermione remembered listening to the story with rapt attention, taking down notes with a pen and paper because she’d yet to go to Diagon Alley for proper school supplies.

Back in the classroom, she retook her old seat, smiling when Dean plopped into the one right beside hers. "Not too Gryffindor to sit with a Slytherin now?" she asked with a teasing smile.

He shrugged, grinning at her. "I figure if you try to curse me with all that dark snakey magic, the Ministry will snatch you up for underaged magic outside of school."

"How has your summer been?"

Several other Muggle-borns began filing into the room, most taking up seats with the Houses they'd been assigned to in Hogwarts. Hermione, the lone Slytherin Muggle-born was glad to have Dean there with her. Tracey had come to stay over at her house the weekend before, endlessly amused with all things Muggle, and even went so far as to beg her parents for a dental exam, much to Hermione's embarrassment. She had not heard much from any of her other friends since King's Cross. Millie was back in study mode, ever working hard to impress the Black Coven, and Greg had written her one letter, delivered by a black owl with moulting feathers that bit her when she tried to grab the envelope.

"Not much of a summer yet," Dean replied. "Been looking after my little sisters while Mum works. The usual. You'd think discovering I'm a wizard would at least get me out of babysitting duty, right?"

Hermione laughed, shaking her head. "If I still have to weed the garden and wash the dishes at my house, then I think it's fair to assume our magic has had little change on our parents. I wonder what the others do at home. The ones raised in magical homes, I mean. Surely they're not allowed to use magic, even at home, right?"

Dean thought about it for a moment and shook his head. "Maybe some of them. I don't see Malfoy cleaning up his own room by hand, do you?"
"Draco has house-elves. Most of my friends do, actually," she said with a furrowed brow. "I met two of them when I went to Harry's house for Yule."

Sighing, Dean pulled out a pencil and notebook from his bag and began doodling in the corners. "Disappointed that I couldn't go. My grandad had been sick. He's always sick, though."

Frowning, Hermione thought of her own grandparents. Her father's parents had moved to France recently, and Hermione missed them from time to time. Her grandfather was a great storyteller, and her grandmother had taught her how to knit. She'd stopped practising two years earlier but figured she might want to take it up again. Her mother's father, however, lived in America, and Hermione had never met him due to the distance and his illness. Her mother often said that he was just very old and his memory had been giving him problems for decades. All she knew of her grandfather was that he was a good man, a war veteran, and he'd passed down a few recipes to Hermione's mother. All she knew about her mother's mother was that she was dead. Her mum didn't like to talk about her other than to say that she could see her in Hermione's smile.

"At least you have a chance to know him?" she tried offering her friend with a sad smile.

Dean gave a half-hearted shrug. "He's not that great to know. Always makes my mum feel bad. She got pregnant with me without getting married, and then with my sisters only to marry my step-dad after. Now he's gone, and Grandad thinks she needs to find someone else. Doesn't like me much either," he said, scratching at his notebook with more force put on the pencil in his hand. "Says I'm too soft. Should take up a sport or something."

"Don't you like football?" Hermione asked, hoping to provide something to ease Dean's obvious frustration.

He laughed, genuinely, which made the tightness in her chest loosen up a bit. "If Hogwarts had a team, sure. As it is, I don't think I'm Quidditch quality like Harry and Ron."

Hermione made a face. "They're not really going to try out this year, are they?"

Dean gave her a sceptical look. "Are you taking the—? They are dead set on playing Quidditch."

Letting out a heavy sigh, she shook her head. "Well, you tell Harry Potter that I absolutely refuse to visit him in the hospital wing when he ultimately breaks his head."

"Liar," Dean said with a chuckle.

"Are the two of you an item now?" Sally-Anne Perks said as she sat behind Hermione. "That's adorable."

Dean looked absolutely horrified at the suggestion, and Hermione tried not to be too insulted over it. "Just because we're of the opposite sex and speaking to one another, does not imply any sort of romance. Girls can be friends with boys, you know."

"Don't bother, Sally-Anne," Lisa Turpin said as she sat down behind Dean. "Everyone knows that Hermione fancies Malfoy. He's always sitting near her. And I heard from some Slytherins that when she's not around, he's always asking if she's okay and being treated well."

Eyes wide, Hermione blanched as she turned to look at Lisa. "I happen to know, for a fact, that the only Slytherins who would bother to speak to you are my best friends, and they would never say such things."

Lisa's nose twitched. "I overheard Parkinson and Greengrass talking. They're very jealous, you
know. I think they both fancy Malfoy. I don't see the appeal. I think he's just a rich prat. Same as Potter."

Hermione stood, glaring down at the other girl. She remembered everything that Millie and Tracey had taught her, everything that she'd learned from watching Gemma conduct herself, all of Cassius's words of wisdom. Letting her anger cool, she folded her arms. "Aren't there plenty of boys in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw you can flirt with? Or, perhaps, rich prats like Draco and Harry would enjoy more than just having a simpering girl batting their eyelashes at them and giggling like an idiot."

"How dare—" Sally-Anne said, standing up.

"Green is for Slytherins," Hermione said, cutting the girl off. "It looks terrible on you, Sally-Anne. Clashes a bit with your complexion."

Without another word, she turned around and sat back in her seat. The entire room had gone deathly silent other than Dean trying his best to conceal his laughter. Eventually, Justin Finch-Fletchley whistled low and said, "Ten points to Slytherin. That had to hurt."

"No points to award here, I'm afraid," Mr Lupin said as he walked in, looking around the classroom, eyeing everyone with obvious suspicion. "But please be advised that all activities here in the programme are not only being reported to your parents, but to your Heads of House back at Hogwarts."

Thinking of that, Hermione sat up a little straighter, wondering if Professor Snape would be annoyed or pleased with her display. Raising her hand, she asked, "Are you reporting on our activities to all of the Heads of Houses, or just our own?"

Mr Lupin looked at her, raising a curiously amused brow. Before he could answer, however, Sally-Anne muttered, "I highly doubt that Professor Sprout gives a fig for what you do over the summer, Granger."

Without looking back, Hermione smiled. "No, but perhaps Professor McGonagall might."

Mr Lupin chuckled softly, shaking his head. "They are not even slightly prepared for you, Miss Granger. I feel I should warn some of them."

"I'm not afraid, sir."

"I can see that."

Dean raised his hand, feigning nervousness. "I'm a little afraid of her, sir. Can I move to another seat?"

Hermione gently shoved him in the shoulder, laughing. "Prat."

"All right," Mr Lupin said, shaking his head in an obvious mixture of exasperation and amusement. "I've reviewed everyone's end of year exams, and there are areas I want you all focusing more on this year. Mr Finch-Fletchley, I'd like you to focus more on your Potions please, paying special attention to the reasons behind clockwise versus counterclockwise stirring. Mr Malone, Professor Sprout says you've done exceptionally well in Herbology, and she'd like you to stretch a bit more by reading a few books this summer. They should have already been picked up by your parents."

As Mr Lupin continued to look over his list, Dean passed Hermione the paper he'd been doodling on. It was a snake with big hair, hissing at a frightened baby eagle and badger with a group of lions
cheering from the sides. Unable to stop herself, she let out a soft chuckle under her breath, pushing the paper beneath one of her books.

"Miss Perks, your Charms work needs a bit more refinement, and Miss Turpin . . . Professor Snape has sent notes that . . . well—" He read over the paper in his hand and sighed. "We'll work a bit more on your aim this summer."

He moved to stand right in front of Dean's desk. "Mr Thomas, Professor McGonagall would like you to look over your essays from this year now that you've learned more, and see where you can correct previous mistakes."

Dean sighed as he took a stack of essays from Mr Lupin. "Yes, sir."

"And that leaves Miss Granger."

Hermione knew how well she'd done on her exams, and she sat up proudly at her desk, eagerly anticipating the praise that she'd worked so hard for.

Mr Lupin knelt down and smiled. "Would you care for supplemental flying lessons."

Ego deflated, she let out an indignant huff and folded her arms. "Is flying required, sir?"

Mr Lupin grinned, his eyes twinkling with a bit of mischief. "Great work this year, Hermione. Here's a Defence book for you to read."

She took the book from his hand, examining it carefully. "Sir, this book isn't on the curriculum."

"No, you're right about that, but I had assumed you'd already read the required text. Was I wrong?"

Blushing slightly, Hermione sighed. "No, sir."

"I want to make a quick announcement for everyone," he said, standing back up to his full height. "You will have a new Theoretical Defence teacher next year. I want to firmly state that you already have all the textbooks you need for your classes. Anything that your new professor encourages you to read is not required regardless of what they might imply."

Confused, Hermione raised her hand. "Do you know who our new teacher will be?"

Mr Lupin sighed and leant back against his desk. "I do. And please remember that Theoretical Defence is an optional class."

Dean raised his hand. "What books do you think they'll want us to read?"

Looking completely unamused, Mr Lupin stiffly replied, "Fictional."

July 6th, 1992
Thomas Residence — London

"You're a wizard now." Harry flopped back on Dean's bed, flipping through some of the adverts at the end of the comic book he'd been reading. "Homework is just a given. Even during hols."

Dean looked up from his small desk in the corner of his room. They'd had to clear off countless art books, comics, and drawings that he had been working on all summer. Apparently, Harry showing up to visit had reminded Dean—or more aptly, Dean's mother—that he'd not yet finished the essay work that had been given to him during his programme classes.
"That right? You get any?" Dean asked.

Harry snorted, closing the comic book and grabbing the football at the end of the bed, attempting to spin it on his middle finger. "Not writing essays. I've been training with my dad and Remus. Even though I can't use magic outside of school, I need to... how did Remus say it? Ah, 'Attune my magic to my wand.'"

"Still acting up?"

"Not since before school let out," Harry said, losing balance of the ball and accidentally letting it drop to the floor, where it bounced and landed in Dean's open trunk. "You gonna bring a broom this year?"

"No," Dean said with a heavy sigh. "We can't afford one. Mum's been working doubles lately since another nurse had a baby two months before she was supposed to. Mum offered to take up the extra shifts thinking that I'd be at Hogwarts by then, and she'd only have to worry about Olivia and Amelia."

Harry laughed, thinking of Dean's sisters, who were just downstairs turning their Barbie dreamhouse into a haunted mansion with a box of washable markers that they'd pilfered from Dean's room when he and Harry were sorting through comics.

"You could take one of mine," Harry offered, not wanting to ask anything about Dean's mum's work. Her extra hours had been why Dean wasn't able to come to Potter Manor. Well, that, and the fact that anytime she did have time available to let him come over, the coven had rituals scheduled. Even though Harry and his cousins knew to stay inside during those times, it was summer, and he had wanted to play Quidditch, or maybe even football, with his friend. The best option appeared to be braving the Muggle world and going to Dean's instead. "Dad got me the newest Nimbus last Christmas. I still have a bunch of others. Even my old Cleansweep still works brilliantly."

Shaking his head with his attention back on his parchment, Dean muttered, "I still don't get how metal transfiguration doesn't work on money. It's just another material, right?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't think I did too well on that essay. I could always ask Sirius, though. That's mostly what he's doing at Dervish and Banges."

They'd gone up to see the shop once since Harry had been home from school. A job was apparently something his godfather had been working on while Harry was away at Hogwarts, and after trial and error, Sirius had decided to put his charm work to use fixing things with a mixture of Muggle tricks and metal charming. Harry figured that being close to Hogwarts was another reason he had so readily accepted the job. Still, it wasn't the same not having his entire family around all the time. Remus had been kind enough to take Harry to Dean's house since Sirius had to work that day.

"Forget it," Dean said, tossing his quill down with gusto. "I'm done. I'll just ask McGonagall when we get back."

"Play a game?" Harry asked, picking up the football. "It may not be while flying, but I bet I'm still faster than you."

Dean stood, grinning. "You wish, Potter."

They trampled down the stairs loudly, leaping over the bottom four steps.

"Sounds like a herd of elephants," Dean's mother, Darlene, said as they barely missed colliding with the cupboard door at the foot of the stairs.
"Sorry, Mrs Thomas," Harry said with an awkward grin. "Are elephants that loud? Never seen one in real life before."

She raised a brow. "You've never been to a zoo? Or watched them on the telly?"

"Harry's house doesn't have a telly, Mum," Dean said. "Muggle things don't work around magic."

"They do sometimes," Harry argued. "It's just that if Muggle things are enchanted to work, sometimes they kind of . . . come alive?"

Dean's eyes widened dramatically. "You oughta tell Ron that. He wrote me last week saying something about his dad working on a car."

Harry cringed. "That'll end badly."

Darlene sat at the nearby table, watching them with an amused look on her face. "Well, this is at least more entertaining than being at work."

"You're a nurse, right?" Harry asked as they approached, cringing at the sound of Dean's sisters shrieking with laughter from the living room behind them. "One of my aunts is a Healer."

"Isn't your dad's . . . you know," Dean said, looking suddenly uncomfortable.

Harry furrowed his brow. "My dad's what? Oh, his boyfriend you mean?"

He watched as Dean made eye contact with his mother.

Darlene sighed and rolled her eyes. "Ignore my son, Harry. Dean's grandfather likes to go on at length about all the things that old men don't understand, and therefore, dislike. He's a bit old fashioned."

"A bit?" Dean muttered.

"So your father is gay?" Darlene asked, looking perfectly at ease.

Harry shrugged. "Not sure. He's dated women before. There was a nice lady up in Hogsmeade. And I know he had girlfriends before I was born. I don't think he and Healer Dillonsby are still together. I only saw him once this summer, and they weren't exactly . . . I dunno. Acting like a couple. Dad's got a job now. That keeps him busy."

"I hear that," Darlene said with a little smirk. "Work definitely can keep a person too busy to have a relationship. Which is good advice for you boys. Get a job, not a girlfriend."

"Mum!" Dean said, looking mortified.

Darlene laughed into the palm of her hand, looking like embarrassing him had been the whole point. "Go and play," she said, gesturing to the back door. "But don't get too dirty. No Cleaning Charms here, I'm afraid. And I'm not letting Mr Lupin pick Harry up covered in mud and grass stains."

As they opened the back door to leave, Dean asked, "Speaking of girls, you hear from Hermione this summer?"

"Talking about girls?" Darlene called from behind them in a teasing voice.

"MUM!"
Harry laughed and closed the back door before tossing the football at Dean, who proceeded to attempt to kick it a few times in the air, trying to catch it with his foot each time. "She doesn't have an owl yet, especially since her parents are still getting used to Crookshanks. So she replies when I write her. I told her that I would've invited her to my birthday, but since my family decided to change plans and go out together instead of having a party, I couldn't."

"Bad luck," Dean said, kicking the ball to Harry. "Remember, you can't touch it with your hands."

Harry frowned down at the ball. "No flying, no hands, and only one ball? This seems too easy."

Dean grinned. "I'll remember that you said that when you're eating grass."

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**August 1st, 1992**

**Granger Residence — London**

"You really didn't need to go to all this trouble," Lucretia said with a smile as Helen Granger handed her a small plate with a beautiful pastry on it.

"Nonsense," Helen said as she took a seat on the opposite sofa with her husband after dutifully handing identical plates to Andromeda and Mary. "I enjoy baking. One of these days I'll let go of some control in the kitchen and teach Hermione. Don't let my job fool you, I'm a sugar addict. It's hereditary."

Richard Granger chuckled, chewing on a large bite of the strudel. After swallowing, he wiped his mouth with a napkin and said, "It's true. I don't run four kilometres every day to look good."

"You'd do well in the magical world," Andromeda said, bringing her cup of tea to her lips. "While I've not read any of the studies myself, because I doubt their actual existence, my husband claims that someone has proven that sugar helps aid in magical development."

Helen smiled brightly. "Your husband is quite a person, Mrs Tonks."

"Andromeda, please."

"You said hereditary," Lucretia commented after taking a bite and swallowing, holding her napkin to her lips. "Sugar addiction runs in the family?"

"Don't mind her," Mary said sweetly, putting her thumb in her mouth to suck off the crumbs. "She's mad for all sorts of history."

"Like our Hermione," Richard said.

"It's my mother's recipe," Helen said, gesturing to the strudel.

"If you think this is good, you ought to try her pączki." Richard leant forward, reaching for his cup of tea, covering it with his hand when Helen tried to sneak in an extra lump of sugar. He narrowed his eyes playfully at her before swatting her hand away.

"My father was a baker," Helen admitted. "A house doesn't smell right unless something's baking if you ask me."

Andromeda let out a short little laugh. "You'd hate my home. Even after all these years without a house-elf, I've not grown accustomed to the kitchen. My poor daughter grew up on takeaway for the
most part. It's a wonder she didn't try to stay at Hogwarts during the holidays, what with home cooked meals three times a day."

"Hermione said it's quite the feast," Richard commented. "She's loving it there. So much has happened already. She has friends and . . . just . . . thank you all so much."

Lucretia felt a warmth for the couple. "There's no need to thank us. Your daughter is a witch. It's her birthright to go to Hogwarts. What the coven does is only a means to help facilitate her entry and a concentration on her growth thereafter."

"You mentioned something about a new class?" Helen asked, refilling Mary and Andromeda's cups. "Hermione said that they don't get to choose electives until their third year. Is that correct?"

Brimming with pride, Lucretia straightened her spine. "True, and while this class is technically an elective, it's new. I'll actually be teaching it myself; a course I've been trying to get installed in the curriculum for some years now. The class is actually why we've come here today. You see, it will cover a variety of subjects, notably magical history that's not often covered in the typical sense, as well as culture in the Wizarding world for those, like Hermione, who did not grow up with it. But it will also cover things of a more delicate nature, and we've sent letters to all the parents for permission. Some, mostly purebloods, will likely opt out, but we feel it's in the Muggle-borns' best interest to take the class."

With a furrowed brow, Richard asked, "Delicate nature?"

"She means sex, dear," Helen said. Her husband sat up abruptly, and Helen made eye contact with Lucretia. "Am I correct?"

Not for the first time, Lucretia found herself quite enamoured with the Muggle. "You're very perceptive, Helen. Sex is, in fact, one part of the lesson plan. While I am quite sure all parents are capable of instructing their children on the matter, a magical child needs to know other things. Their bodies mature differently along with their magic, and there are, well . . ." She hesitated, looking to Andromeda and Mary for help.

"Consent," Andromeda clarified. "We'll go into such things in great detail. We believe, just as with every spell and potion learnt at Hogwarts, that children should be educated thoroughly in regards to the magic that can be learned from intimate connections with one another—in due time."

"A long time," Richard said under his breath.

Mary laughed. "Of course. Of course."

"There are other concerns, however," Andromeda finished.

"Such as?" Helen asked.

"Dark magic," Lucretia offered. "There is a class, I'm sure Hermione has told you, covering defence of such things, but since the coven practices blood magic, it's an area we are concerned about. While it's not very prevalent in Britain, not for several decades, there are countries with dark wizards still practising the art of—"

"It's dastardly," Mary cut in with a stern look on her face. "Which is why we want to protect the children."

Helen's eyes widened as though she understood what was not being spoken. Lucretia half wondered if she figured it out on her own. Richard, however, looked concerned and very much still in the dark.
"Virginal blood," Lucretia ventured, "is still a prime ingredient in dark potions, rituals, and the like. We mean to educate the children on how to protect themselves and learn a better respect for such things."

Bringing a suddenly shaking hand to her chest, Helen asked, "You said this doesn't happen in Britain anymore?"

Lucretia shook her head. "Mostly in America these days, but one can never be too careful."


Mary jumped in, "They're all safe at Hogwarts. We've seen to that. But—"

"I wrote a pamphlet." Lucretia pulled it from the sleeve of her robe. "It has an age containment spell on it, so Hermione will not be able to read if you decide to opt out of the course. But we highly recommend it."

Richard finished his cup of tea, looking like he wished that it had whisky in it, while Helen perused the pamphlet. "There's a lot in here," she said. "I see the boys are included in the class?"

"Some parts are co-educational and then for others, the genders separate according to where they feel most comfortable. Madam Pomfrey, the school's medwitch has also offered her assistance in speaking to the children, should they prefer a more one-on-one conversation regarding any private matters," Lucretia said. "We abhor the idea that subjects like this should be humiliating or considered shameful in nature, but discretion is sometimes required, and we understand this."

Pursing his lips in thought, Richard asked, "So it's like... abstinence? My school didn't cover much, but we had an hour-long class once. Basically told us not to do a bloody thing until marriage, of course."

Andromeda snorted, earning a look of concern from Richard.

"Forgive our frankness, Mr Granger. The children are still very young now, but they will remain at Hogwarts until adulthood blossoms. We've all lived at Hogwarts," Lucretia said with a raised brow, "and we are not so naive to believe that broom cupboards are actually used for storing brooms."

The man made an adorable little rumbling noise of discontent.

"Hush," Helen said, gently slapping his arm. "Some of the more mature subjects aren't covered in detail until fourth year. Read this." She thrust the pamphlet into his hand. "Obviously they're not encouraging Hermione to go about... you know."

"Both boys and girls are going to be taught respect," Mary said firmly. "A foundation, if you will."

Leaning back on the sofa, Richard let out a heavy, put-upon sigh; a noise only the father of a teenage girl would make. Lucretia remembered her own father making that sound when she'd come home from Hogwarts at the age of fifteen, declaring her intent to marry Ignatius Prewett, even though he was two years older than her and had no idea she even existed, let alone of her affections for him. It was the sound a man made when he realised he was no longer in control.

Standing up from her chair, Lucretia stepped around the coffee table between them, perching herself lightly on the arm of the sofa and taking Richard's hand. "She's in good hands. We'll not let harm come to her, I assure you."
"Everyone in the programme has been so very—" Helen began, but stopped when Andromeda and Lucretia shared a look. "What?"

Andromeda cleared her throat. "We offer protection and guidance to all of the young Muggle-borns, but Hermione is different. Her respect for magic and her drive for learning it are unfortunately a bit unusual compared to many of her peers. She has ambition, your daughter. There have been no decisions made, seeing as there’s still another year to think about it, but she, along with a select group of young witches, are being groomed for coven participation."

When neither Muggle reacted, looking a little confused, Mary leant forward and whispered, "It's a very big deal."

"We don't just fund the programme. The Black Coven is working to reshape Wizarding Britain," Andromeda said with a soft smile.

"A magical Britain that is safe for people like Hermione," Lucretia added, squeezing Richard's hand.

"Safe for people like Hermione and myself," Mary chimed in with a sweet smile. "She's going great places, your girl. She's very bright. And the coven, well, they . . . er, we," she corrected herself with an embarrassed little laugh, "we take very good care of our own."

Letting go of Richard's hand, Lucretia retook her seat. "And I'll guarantee her membership in exchange for this strudel recipe."

Helen let out a laugh at that, looking as though she needed the break in the tension. "Not on your life."

Richard let out a sad little smile and ran his hands through his hair. "I suppose she has to grow up sometime." He glanced down at the pamphlet. "I'd like to read more before we sign anything."

"Of course," Lucretia said.

"And, well, I guess as long as she doesn't lose her virginity beneath a full moon ritual or whatever, surrounded by bonfires," he added, trying, uncomfortably, to make a joke.

"We would never." Lucretia grinned, reaching for her cup once more.

Mary leant back in her chair, primly crossing her ankles. "Besides, the new moon is much better for —Ow!" Her gaze snapped toward Andromeda, who was innocently pretending that she had not pinched her.

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